

Adolescent Occultism and the Philosophy of Things in Three Novels

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The association of adolescence with supernatural belief is not new. Many social research texts position paranormal belief within the liminality of adolescence – something tested and later outgrown. The particularly North American phenomena of ‘legend tripping,’ for instance, where ‘to test [a] legend, legend trippers will often mark their visits [to sites of urban legends] with specific activities designed to invoke supernatural powers,’¹ is practiced primarily by older teens and college-age youths as shown by Donald Holly and Casey Cordy in ‘What’s in a Coin?’ and confirmed by Sylvia Ann Grider in ‘Children’s Ghost Stories’.² Alison Waller’s book *Constructing Adolescence in Fantastic Realism* similarly attests to the appeal of the supernatural in books written for and about young people. Criticism of these works, however, tends to sideline supernatural content as a site of inquiry and instead ‘prioritise a rational reading of the fantastic focussing on socio-physiological development of adolescents. Magic is explained away as a purely imaginative product of awakened sexuality, and ghosts are read as fabricated alter egos.’³

This paper is not interested in ‘explaining away’ supernatural tropes as projections and psychological safeguards. Rather, through an examination of three novels about adolescent experience and adolescent occultism, Sonya Hartnett’s 2009 *Butterfly*, Shirley Jackson’s 1962 *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* and Iain Bank’s 1984 *The Wasp Factory*, it aims to reveal the philosophical ‘work’ done by the narrators of these pieces of fiction. This essay demonstrates the close parallels between these novels’ fictional accounts of adolescent occultism and the materialist philosophies of Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger. Heidegger’s theories of Being, being-with, correspondence, and reference provide a structure for the discussion of the power of objects as does Benjamin’s reading of auratic objects, but neither define it. This analysis aims to revivify the potential of occult modes of thought, showing that they constitute in these novels a kind of ‘applied philosophy’ which not only reveals the machinery of memory, history and significance underlying ‘powerful’ objects but flips from a receptive to a productive system of meaning making.

Sonya Hartnett’s 2009 *Butterfly*, Shirley Jackson’s 1962 *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, and Iain Bank’s 1984 *The Wasp Factory* are diverse in both their publication dates and their settings. The novels are set respectively in 1980s Australian suburbia, a small New England town in the 1960s, and a remote Scottish peninsula in the 1980s. The protagonists of the novels, fifteen year old Plum Coyle, eighteen year old Merrikat Blackwell, and seventeen year old Frank Cauldham deal with a mixture of familiar and unfamiliar problems. Plum, given the suburban setting of *Butterfly*, is the most conventional and deals primarily with the staples of young adult literature such as peer-group pressure, puberty, and familial troubles. Frank and Merrikat are more extreme examples, growing up in isolation from wider society and without much in the way of parental oversight. That each of these protagonists, written at different times for different

¹ Donald Holly and Casey Cordy, ‘What’s in a Coin?: Reading the Material culture of Legend Tripping,’ *Journal of American Folklore* 120.477 (2007) 345.

² Sylvia Ann Grider, ‘Children’s Ghost Stories,’ *Haunting Experiences* ed. Diane E. Goldstein, Sylvia Ann Grider and Jeannie B. Thomas (Logan, Utah State University Press 2007).

³ Alison Waller, *Constructing Adolescence in Fantastic Realism*. (New York, Routledge 2009) 19.

readerships, seeks some measure of control over the world through supernatural means reveals the centrality of a certain occult thought to twentieth-century adolescence in the West. Each protagonist practices their own form of occultism. In each case, these practices are intuitive and idiosyncratic. Despite the diversity of their practices, each is grounded in familiar logic and in a philosophical appreciation of objects and their immaterial weight.

The occult elements in these novels make classification difficult. The works are clearly not fantasy, being too grounded in a common mimetic reality to support that genre. The novels may better fit the definition of the fantastic, as first described by Tzvetan Todorov.⁴ Despite later interventions and innovations in the theory of the fantastic, as mapped by Mark Bould in ‘The Dreadful Credibility of Absurd Things’,⁵ discussion of the fantastic still centres around hesitation. Fantastic novels hesitate between endorsing their protagonists’ supernatural experiences or views and undermining them in favour of mundane explanations. While the three novels examined in this paper share that hesitation, the novels lack many of the recognisable features of other fantastic literature. Whether read as a genre or a mode, the fantastic is most closely associated with nineteenth and early twentieth century writers such as Algernon Blackwood, Guy de Maupassant, and M.R. James. The works of these authors usually focus on adult protagonists fully aware of the challenge their impossible experiences pose to conventional reality. Rosemary Jackson renders this as the fantastic being ‘structured on contradiction and ambivalence’ and trading ‘in that which cannot be said, that which evades articulation or that which is represented as “untrue” and “unreal.”’⁶ As will be shown, the focus on impossibility and on the breakdown of meaning in fantastic texts does not resonate with the worlds experienced in *The Wasp Factory*, *Butterfly*, and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. If anything, meaning is over-determinate in these texts – objects overwhelmingly defined by their indexical relationship to experience and history.

It is tempting to follow those critics described by Waller in considering how the supernatural flourishes in these novels as merely the imaginative product of adolescents. It is possible to do so – each of the texts restricts its supernatural elements to the protagonists’ interpretations. There are no fireballs, goblins, or other impossible material eruptions to force the texts out of alignment with mimetic reality. Only partial and potential supernatural foretellings, protections, wards, and curses overlay the novels’ recognisable material realities with occult importance. To surrender these texts wholly to their protagonists’ sole subjectivity, however, would rob the texts of their complexity and deliver them into the ‘embrace of madness, irrationality, or narcissism’⁷ to which some literary critics have previously consigned the fantastic as a whole.

The occult is both of, and not of, the world, and this is significant because it changes the relevance of the supernatural to the text. The actions do take place and the objects do exist in the brute materialism of the texts. The actions of occult practice occur even in a material, rationalist interpretation of the plots where the protagonists are deluded and their actions ineffective. These kinds of actions are part of material reality. Even in ‘rational’ Western nations, magic continues to influence and describe the relations of contemporary peoples. The supernatural has penetrated both cultural text and language – people are still routinely charmed, enchanted, and cursed. This nascent supernaturalism, however, is not well recognised. As Donald Holly and Casey Cordy close their article on legend tripping:

⁵ Mark Bould, ‘The Dreadful Credibility of Absurd Things,’ *Historical Materialism* 10.4 (2010).

⁶ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion* (London, Methuen & Co 1981) 37.

⁷ Jackson 172.

While we are quick to acknowledge magic in other societies, we tend to attribute the same in our own society – rabbit’s feet; lucky numbers; four-leaf clovers; things old and new, borrowed and blue – to mere amusement. But what is magic if not a wish made with the toss of a coin into standing water – or over the shoulder in the direction of a vampire’s gravestone?⁸

In the novels to be examined, the occult is not a metaphor. If the occult symbols and actions resonate in such a way, it is in the same manner that the conventional objects and actions of realist drama are read metaphorically. These are mimetic realist texts that depict adolescent consciousnesses that intuitively invest the material world with immaterial significance. The world which the adolescent protagonists seek to control and ward against through occult arrangements of material objects is recognisably the world of the reader. Similarly, the actions they undertake and the objects which they collect and use do exist – their subjectivity does not undermine the realism of their setting, but only its potential meanings – that is, whether their actions and their sensitivity corresponds to real events and real knowledge or not. In this sense, the books posit not alternate fictional realities, but a particular philosophy of materiality – a way of reading the material world sympathetic to the projects of Heidegger and Benjamin.

Benjamin has long recognised the fascination children have for *things*. In his entry *Untidy Child* from *One Way Street*, he pictures the child in ways that recall these novel’s protagonists:

Untidy child – Each stone he finds, each flower picked and each butterfly caught is already the start of a collection, every single thing he owns makes up one great collection. In him the passion shows its true face, the stern Indian expression which lingers on, but with a dimmed and manic glow, in antiquarians, researchers, bibliomaniacs ... He hunts the spirits whose trace he scents in things; between spirits and things.⁹

These ‘traces’ are the invisible and immaterial value of things: the scents of meaning above and beyond what is raw and material. In these occult texts, the protagonists go one step further, not only ‘scenting’ the spirit in things, but attempting to wield and use that spirit for their own protection and betterment. The occult, in this sense, is the application rather than mere curation of the trace.

Butterfly is the story of Plum Coyle ‘aged nearly fourteen, waylaid monstrously on the path to being grown.’¹⁰ Unhappy, struggling with her fractious and often vicious friendship group, and fearing ‘the womanly hurdle that still awaits her, the prospect of which occurrence makes her seize into silence,’ Plum turns to her grown neighbour, but also the solace of things to protect and change her (B 1). Beneath her bed she keeps a briefcase:

She gazes upon the case’s contents with an archaeologist’s eyes: here lies her treasure, her most sacred things. She has lined the suitcase with lavender satin and provided several bags’ worth of cottonball cushioning so that each token sits within its own bulky cloud, untroubled by her manhandling of the case. Plum brushes the items with her palm, incanting as she does

⁸ Holly and Cordy 350.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, ‘One-Way Street,’ *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London: Verso 1979) 73.

¹⁰ Sonya Hartnett, *Butterfly* (Camberwell: Penguin Group 2009). 2. Subsequent references to this work are included in the text as marked B.

so a string of whispery words. The glass lamb. *I belong*. The Fanta yo-yo. *I fear nothing*. The Abba badge. *You don't touch me*. The brown coin. *I fear nothing*. The dainty wristwatch. *I am more than you see* (B 13).

Plum, recalling Benjamin's *Untidy Child*, regards her treasure with an archaeologist's eye – lit, the reader may imagine, by a manic glow. The objects are a strange assortment of weighted icons and the obviously commercial. The atypical nature of the collection (in *The Wasp Factory* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* are far more traditional occult objects) does not reduce its power in Plum's mind. The objects are not simply repositories for memory, or feeling but active, totemic objects that can be invoked and incited to action. While never directly stating as much, it is clear that Plum sees this collection as the tools of witchcraft:

'Lovely things, lovely things, I am near; see me, hear me, need me, do as I say.' If she were in a movie, there would be a pentacle painted on the floor in blood or red paint, a creaky tome opened on a stone altar, and candles burning everywhere. In a movie, her words would cause a gale to blow, send ravens cawing into the sky. All this is lacking, but Plum closes the lid satisfied, and shunts the briefcase under the bed (B 49).

Plum's appreciation for objects is extreme as is her faith in their power. This object-focus, however, is not alien to the suburbs or to her family. Both of her parents are antiquarian in the traditional sense, attracted to the old and venerable:

The Coyle house is big, and humiliating. The staircase down which Plum runs is gloomy with pastoral paintings, hazardous with piled books. Nothing in the house is new: indeed, the more elderly an object, the more Mums and Fa must possess it. On weekends they trawl antique shops, returning with chairs and statues and complicated wooden boxes (B 3).

Plum herself now has distaste for the house and its old furnishings, it being 'unfair that she must endure timber and stone, when all her friends know the joy of plastic and smoked glass' (B 3). Despite this, the novel still establishes a lineage between Plum's unreasonable occult fascination with trinkets and the broader more respectable affection of adults for objects with history.

Objects with history also form the backdrop of the Blackwood family home in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. Though now reduced to only Merrikat, her older sister Constance and the disabled Uncle Julian, the house itself is an accretion of family history.

We rarely moved things; the Blackwoods were never much of a family for restlessness and stirring. We dealt with the small surface transient objects, the books and the flowers and the spoons, but underneath we had always a solid foundation of stable possessions. We always put things back where they belonged.¹¹

Merrikat and Constance maintain the house almost religiously, cleaning and washing each room and keeping the house as it was before the family's death. Merrikat adds to the house environment with her own collection of 'safeguards' with which she claims and wards the house and land:

¹¹ Shirley Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (London: Penguin Books Ltd. 2009) 1. 2. Subsequent references to this work are included in the text as marked WH.

On Sunday mornings I examined my safeguards, the box of silver dollars I had buried by the creek, and the doll in the long field, and the book nailed to the tree in the pine woods; so long as they were where I had put them nothing could get in to harm us (WH 41).

Frank in *The Wasp Factory* similarly identifies with explicit supernatural imagery. Castrated by a dog attack as a child and raised in isolation by a demanding father, Frank considers himself a shaman who polices and maintains the security of his home through the manufacture of totems and the performance of elaborate rituals centring on the titular Wasp Factory. The island is warded with Sacrifice Poles:

I had two Poles on the far face of the last dune. One of the Poles held a rat head with two dragonflies, the other a seagull and two mice ... They were my early-warning system and deterrent rolled into one; infected, potent things which looked out from the island, warding off. Those totems were my warning shot; anybody who set foot on the island after seeing them should know what to expect.¹²

These poles are composed of the bodies of deceased animals, and Frank's own 'precious stuff' – filth harvested from his own body. He also attempts to predict the future, and take advice from the Wasp Factory itself – a death-trap for wasps built from an old clock whose twelve methods of termination communicate the future.

Unlike Plum and Merrikat, Frank's supernaturalism is in direct opposition to his father and the broader world. His father has no such faith in objects, despite his almost monomaniacal control of the inside of the house. The house is mapped and remapped constantly in brute material terms. The house has been measured and catalogued:

Ever since I can remember there have been little stickers of white paper all over the house with neat black-biro writing on them. Attached to the legs of chairs, the edges of rugs, the bottom of jugs, the aerials of radios, the doors of drawers, the headboards of beds, the screens of televisions, the handles of pots and pans, they give the appropriate measurement for the part of the object they're stuck to (WF 11).

The philosophy of Frank's father admits no immateriality, and inside the house Frank cannot practice his shamanism. He is able to do so at all only because his father's reach is limited by a knee injury which demands the use of a cane. The cane is a site of direct contestation, demonstrating the difference between the two men: Frank wonders 'if my father had a name for that stick of his. I doubted it. He doesn't attach the same importance to them as I do. I know they are important' (WF 16).

Not one of the protagonists is educated in the supernatural. Rather, these intuitive systems recall magical practice because of the essential 'thingliness' of their practice. Holly and Cordy indicate a similarly intuitive supernaturalism to the practice of legend tripping, where material is taken from graveyards and other significant locations by young trippers:

¹² Iain Banks, *The Wasp Factory* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks 1998) 7, 10. Subsequent references to this work are included in the text as marked WF.

Much of this behaviour – whether intentional or not – also conforms to principles of magical practice that are quite widespread. Human bones, hair, fingernails, and other body parts, for instance, are common ingredients in magical rituals, as they are widely believed to contain the essence of the individual from whom they are taken.¹³

Young, untrained protagonists are approximating traditional magical practices because both practices are grounded in an appreciation for the invisible, immaterial qualities of things. These young adults in their occult systems are offering a philosophy that centres on and emphasises the significance of objects' correspondences and analogies. In effect, they are embracing what Benjamin describes in 'On the Mimetic Faculty' when he writes: 'clearly the perceptual world [*Merkwelt*] of modern man contains only minimal residues of the magical correspondences and analogies that were familiar to ancient peoples.'¹⁴ These magical relationships that the protagonists pursue are not radically divergent from pre-existing modes of thought – rather they are a revivification of the 'minimal residues' of mainstream culture as even within their own narratives their object fetishism is only a particularly exaggerated version of a mature, adult appreciation for things.

Just as Plum's parents and the Blackwood ancestors sought to enrich their houses with the gradual accretion of objects, Plum, Frank, and Merrikat attempt to enrich themselves and their surrounds through the collection and dispersal of supernaturally charged objects. Merrikat carries out this action deliberately, burying things throughout her life to increase her connection to the land and to bind it to her:

All our land was enriched with my treasures buried in it, thickly inhabited just below the surface with my marbles and my teeth and my coloured stones, all perhaps turned to jewels by now, held together under the ground in a powerful taut web which was loosened, but held fast to guard us (WH 41).

In the occult system, objects become a way of claiming space. Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey have highlighted the relevance of claimed spaces in mourning and grief related physical culture, demonstrating how certain objects like clothes, toys, and so on become irretrievably linked to the deceased's self. This, they argue, stems from the fact that 'social interaction with and through material forms tend to destabilise subject/object boundaries such that material objects can become extensions of the body and therefore personhood.'¹⁵ This extension differentiates between biological and social death in that: 'the social lives of persons might persist beyond biological death, in the form of the material objects with which they are metaphorically or metonymically associated in social processes of meaning making.'¹⁶

In Heidegger's philosophical terms, the extension of self recalls a fusion of being-with and totemism. To demonstrate being-with, Heidegger uses the example of a boat, explaining 'the boat anchored at the shore refers in its being-in-itself to an acquaintance who undertakes his voyages with it, but as a "boat strange to us," it also points to others.'¹⁷ The 'others' in the

¹³ Holly and Cordy 347.

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, 'On the Mimetic Faculty,' *Selected Writings* / Walter Benjamin ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press 1996) 720.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey, *Death, Memory and Material Culture* (Oxford: Berg 2001) 43.

¹⁶ Hallam and Hockey 43.

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit* (New York: State University of New York Press 1996) 111.

example of grief culture are the deceased. The biologically dead are endlessly recalled by the correspondences and references between themselves and the remaining material world. Heidegger argues that in the magic of fetishism in 'primitive cultures': 'the sign is still completely absorbed in the being of what is indicated so that a sign as such cannot be detached at all'¹⁸ and that 'the sign has not yet become free from that for which it is a sign.'¹⁹ As fetishism acts, in Heidegger's view, as an absorption of the sign by the signified, in the case of these occult arrangements, the material markers come to be overwhelmed by their correspondence to the protagonists of the fictions.

In the case of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, *Butterfly*, and *The Wasp Factory*, the characters consciously 'farm' these connections, seeking to extend their social selves through the objects they have assembled. In a sense, they invert Heidegger's model. Rather than engaging with those 'strange to us' through objects, they enter into relation with those objects in the present. They produce a new fetish of which they are the subject and actively *claim* rather than passively *receive* as Heidegger and Benjamin do. Unlike either of these philosophers, or the grieving uptake or similar ideas, Frank, Plum and Merrikat's collections do not speak of the dead and departed of their still living creators and collectors. Frank explicitly relates his occult assemblages to his body: 'my dead sentries, those extensions of me which came under my power through the simple but ultimate surrender of death, sensed nothing to harm me or the island' (WF 20). He also mingles the objects of his practice with his own physical material, marking these extensions with toe-jam, ear wax, and dead skin. The extended bodies of Frank and Merrikat are made of 'simple' objects that derive their power either from their preciousness (in the case of Merrikat's silver dollars) or their taboo nature (the animal skulls and 'precious stuff' harvested from Frank's body).

Butterfly's Plum, both less isolated and more socially engaged than either Merrikat or Frank, does not claim land through the spread of potent objects, but even she fantasises about the growth and power of her collection:

now that Plum thinks on it, there's no reason why the collection should not grow as large as the briefcase allows, assuming she can find enough suitable objects. She's stopped going to church, she's changed her name: maybe the collection should likewise evolve. The idea fills her with a blur of excitement. She imagines the briefcase packed to bursting, glowing like lava or a UFO, emitting a humming tone (B 49).

While less explicit in relating these objects to her body and self than Frank, it is clear that Plum sees her collection as an echo of herself, something that must change as she does. Plum's collection also differs from those of Merrikat and Frank in that it consists of objects that are, for the most part, neither precious nor taboo.

The occult economy of *Butterfly* is not one interested in intrinsic properties. Instead, the potent objects of the narrative derive their charge from their connection to memory. Objects have a well-recognised place within memory studies with numerous works relating the function of memory and memorial to both deliberate and accidental material processes. One critic operating in the area, Deborah Lupton, writes in *The Emotional Self* that:

¹⁸ Heidegger 76.

¹⁹ Heidegger 76.

Personal possessions can act as the repositories of memory, standing as a tangible record of personal achievements, successes, relationships with others. Virtually any object can play this role: photographs, greeting cards, letters, furniture, clothing, jewellery, kitchen utensils and crockery, records and compact discs, scents, theatre programs and books may all be associated with past people or events or places in which each individual has lived or has visited.²⁰

These repositories of memory are those collected and curated by Plum. At the centre of the book, the Coyle family's contemporary narrative is interrupted by several pages of description which detail the histories of the objects she has collected. Two particular examples, her brown coin and her jade pendant, emphasise the objective worthlessness of the object. Each object is kept based on its sentimental value:

The man in the coin shop said it has no value whatsoever; but it is worth something to her. It was found by her uncle on the day she was born – she doesn't know what he was doing under the house, but when his kneecap detected something inflexible and, investigating, he excavated a penny which, by coincidence, had been minted exactly fifty years earlier, it seemed as good a gift as any to present to his new niece. History in the shape of a disc. The first time she'd pressed it to her lips, she discovered old metal was warm (B 79).

The coin is bestowed with power because it is, as the narrator notes, 'history in the shape of a disc.' It has been enriched by a coincidental, historical link between itself and its recipient. In comparison, the jade pendant has no interesting origin but derives its own charge through its presence during particular events and memories:

It is nothing but a trinket for a tourist lacking taste. But it was her first and only holiday overseas, and she'd worn the necklace throughout the trip – swum with it, sunbaked with it, hiked a volcano while wearing it, so it slithered across her sternum slick with sweat – and it has value beyond its worth, because of these memories (B 78).

What becomes apparent is that the occult is not fundamentally a different type of thought or a radically different philosophy of matter; rather, it is that which governs other forms of real-world object engagement. In these cases, it is precisely the objects' indexical relationships with certain events that qualifies them for fetishism.

The heart of *The Wasp Factory*'s occult arrangements is an altar where the 'precious substance' of the narrator's body is intermingled with objects that similarly derive their charge not from intrinsic properties, but from an indexical relationship to historical events:

I set the jar on the altar, which was decorated with various powerful things; the skull of the snake which killed Blyth ..., a fragment of the bomb which had destroyed Paul ... a piece of tent fabric from the kite which had elevated Esmeralda ... and a little dish containing some of the yellow, worn teeth of Old Saul (WF 119-120).

History is maintained and called forward by the presence of these 'powerful' things. Frank's collection is deliberately narcissistic, composed of objects of personal relevance. The altar is

²⁰ Deborah Lupton, *The Emotional Self* (London: Sage Publications 1998) 148.

fringed by objects which have either harmed Frank (in the case of Old Saul's teeth) or which have been instruments of harm. As with Plum, Frank has collected items which derive their power not from some pre-existing essence but from their relationship (that is, their references and correspondences) with past events.

Merrickat also reveals her supernatural system to have similar complexity. One safeguard in particular reveals a similar appreciation for the individualism of objects. Amongst the silver-dollars and blue marbles that have been buried, one of the wards is a book nailed to a tree. This book is described in terms which explicitly link its nature to its use:

My book nailed to a tree in the pine woods had fallen down. I decided that the nail had rusted away and the book – it was a little notebook of our father's, where he used to record the names of people who owed him money, and people who ought, he thought, to do favours for him – was useless now as protection. I had wrapped it very thoroughly in heavy paper before nailing it to the tree, but the nail had rusted and it had fallen. I had better destroy it, in case it was now actively bad, and bring something else out to the tree, perhaps a scarf of my mother's, or a glove (WH 53-54).

The book is useable as a ward because it corresponds to debts and favours owed. Its history of use directly influences its supernatural capacity. Rather than a purely symbolic gesture such as the hanging of a horse shoe or four-leaf clover, Merrikat's use of the book is based on a philosophy that privileges the individualism and ontological history of the object.

Each of these potted histories recalls Benjamin's object-centred writing throughout *One Way Street* and the rest of his oeuvre. These passages are devoted to the fascination of objects and the world of immaterial meaning held beneath the skin of raw presence. The young adult protagonists of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, *Butterfly*, and *The Wasp Factory* are both untidy children and redeemers of objects. Writing on Benjamin, Esther Leslie argues in 'Souvenirs and Forgetting' that 'the redeemer of objects strips them of their commodity character by possessing them and removing them from the normal circuits of exchange and use.'²¹ The sorcerous intent with which Plum, Frank, and Merrikat assemble their collections is nothing less than their recognition of the object as *more* than commodity. Leslie explicitly calls up the language of magic when she describes Benjamin's collector, writing 'the collector, caressing his objects ... is like a sorcerer who squints though them into a distance, called history.'²²

For the objects to be used sorcerously, however, they cannot be only subjective reservoirs of memory. These objects cannot be significant only to their possessors if they are to gesture outwards. That is, as in Heidegger's theory of being-with or *mitda-sein*, its references and correspondences must exist independently of any singular mind. This is particularly true in the case of Plum Coyle's collection. It is revealed late in the story that not one of these objects is originally Plum's. The coin, yo-yo, badge, glass lamb, watch, and pendant which are joined over the course of the story with a charm bracelet have all been pilfered. The histories to which readers are treated are not histories in which Plum was an active participant. She has stolen each of these objects from her friends – the immaterial qualities, to her mind, being likewise transferable. When this theft is revealed on her fourteenth birthday her friends have a similarly

²¹ Esther Leslie, 'Souvenirs and Forgetting' *Material Memories* ed. Marius Kwent, Christopher Breward and Jeremy Aynsley (Oxford: Berg 1999) 113.

²² Leslie 119.

intuitive response to the object's theft. Plum attempts to excuse her theft, saying "It's just junk" and "You didn't need it," but the other girls are no less sensitive to the power of things saying "You stole a bit of each of us" (B 149).

In each of these texts, the power of objects, if not objective, is at least intersubjective. If it were not, the characters' curation would only be narcissistic. As it is, the objects yield their immaterial aspects to their possessors. It is useful to think here of Heidegger's 1950 essay 'The Origin of Work of Art'. Heidegger dwells on a pair of peasant's shoes. These, he argues are: 'pervaded by uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menaces of death.'²³ In art, these immaterial qualities pervade the image of the object. Without ever experiencing the narratives which form the power of the peasant's shoes, audiences are nevertheless susceptible to it. Benjamin similarly depicts the power of indexical relationships. Here, Benjamin writes of photography rather than art – the index of the image shored up by the literal impression of light:

No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully poised his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it.²⁴

The long forgotten moment is what animates the occult economies of the three novels discussed here. The reality of objects and their histories outstrip their symbolic function. The objects are chosen not because of what they represent, but because of the correspondences and references they have picked up by existing within the world.

It would be a mistake to consider Benjamin and Heidegger primary and these novels as secondary. While both philosopher's attempt to lay out categories in which to philosophise the value of material, ontological presence, arguably they do not capture the power of things, except when they recreate novelistic techniques. Neither Benjamin nor Heidegger fully acknowledge their role, or for that matter the role of the antiquarian, archiver, or ragpicker, in the creation of auratic objects. Leslie detects this in Benjamin in particular, arguing that:

The materials and images presented by Benjamin (the arcades, the interior, the flâneur, the ragpicker, the collector, the gambler) remain opaque and impenetrable if they are not mediated, i.e. accompanied by a theory that would break the spell of their mere immediacy.²⁵

For Leslie, this mediation comes in the form of memoir. Within the three novels, the adolescent protagonists create what memoir captures. They produce in their occult assemblages a way of articulating and reading out those encoded histories. These fictional stories use their narrators to 'break the spell' and communicate the worth of objects in occult terms. While Heidegger can outline in general terms the kinds of relationships that underlie this thinking in order to

²³ Martin Heidegger, 'Origin of the Work of Art,' *Basic Writings, From Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)* ed. David Krell (New York: Harper and Row 1977) 163.

²⁴ Walter Benjamin 'A Little History of Photography' *Selected Writings / Walter Benjamin* ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press 1996) 510.

²⁵ Leslie 187.

communicate anything specific, he relies on the same narrative structures and techniques as these novels as can be seen in his attempt to communicate the value of the peasant's shoes. Though he constructs himself only as a stand-in for any audience, it is only in the specificity of his writing that the representation of the object (its description within his work) can partake in the qualities of the object itself. These communications then can only ever be fractious, multiple, and incomplete. Each 'system' modelled in these tales of adolescent occultism adds to and augments a body of literature that is intuitively philosophical – demonstrating, if perhaps in an extreme form, the continued relevance of materiality and ontology to contemporary thought and philosophy. While Heidegger has offered a rationale through which to read these connections – as extensions of reference and correspondence for example – their *power* is realised only in the idiosyncrasies of particular representations.

Butterfly, We Have Always Lived in the Castle, and *The Wasp Factory* are not unthoughtful endorsements of occultism. Rather, these texts model a particular mode of thought – keeping in mind the potential missteps and dangers of this kind of object focussed philosophy. Neither Merrikat nor Frank are role models, and Plum is ultimately betrayed by her collection – its discovery marking the destruction of her friendship group:

Later she will be struck by how meagre the objects had looked, lying there in their beds of silk and cottonball. Such gewgaws could never have given her what she needs, she should have known they would leave her falling with nothing to break her fall (B 148-149).

Despite the death of her personal faith in objects and their power, this kind of material thinking lives on within memory and grief culture. Where these texts differ is in their uptake of the occult as the *application* of this philosophy, *Butterfly, We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, and *The Wasp Factory* feature not only a sensitivity to trace and immateriality but the deliberate use of those traces and immaterial qualities in service of the protagonists' needs. While readers may doubt whether the totems, wards and gewgaws of the text actually work and see the texts as implicitly cautioning against this kind of extreme involvement, its adolescent protagonists and their occult systems draw awareness to the power of things within even conventional thought.

In this kind of narrative, the spell of immediacy is broken and the connections, correspondences, and references which render an object potent revealed to witnesses. Novels of the occult challenge readers by drawing on existing modes of thought in order to confront readers with a reality in which these connections and correspondences become potentially charged with supernatural effect becoming powerful influences, at the least, on the lives of the young men and women who curate and desire them.

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