

“How to do words with things”: on Dawn Raffel’s *The Secret Life of Objects*

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The title of my paper revisits the famous title of J. L. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* (1955) by playfully inverting the main terms. Austin’s focus on performativity in language is here shifted to suggest the linguistic and discursive potential of “things” understood as objects that surround us in our everyday lives, spaces and rituals. Austin’s speech act theory went beyond the binary categorization of true/false sentences in order to foreground the ability of utterances to actually perform what he called “things,” that is certain kinds of actions. I would like to start from Austin’s title in order to explore a different version of “things” (objects rather than actions) and their resonance in discourse, their potential for stimulating stories and storytelling. Austin’s title will serve as a basis for an investigation of the aesthetics of objects and the role objects play in the affective and artistic economy of the memoir *The Secret Life of Objects* written by contemporary American writer Dawn Raffel, with illustrations by Sean Evers, published by Jaded Ibis Press in 2012. Dawn Raffel had published three books of fiction prior to *The Secret Life of Objects: In the Year of Long Division* (a collection of short stories published by Knopf in 1995), *Carrying the Body* (a novel published by Scribner in 2002) and *Further Adventures in the Restless Universe* (collection of short stories published by Dzanc Books in 2010). Dawn Raffel went on to publish another book of non-fiction in 2018, *The Strange Case of Dr. Couney. How a Mysterious European Showman Saved Thousands of American Babies* (Blue Rider Press, 2018), which tells the story of a pioneer of American neonatology who used incubators to save premature babies.

The Secret Life of Objects, together with *The Strange Case of Dr. Couney*, are Dawn Raffel’s most accessible books to date, in contrast to her more

demanding and challenging works of fiction, which can be traced back to a certain modernist tradition of “difficult” and “unreadable” writing that continued well into the 20th century. The relative accessibility of Raffel’s works of non-fiction demonstrates the versatility and range of her writerly skills. Raffel’s memoir and her fiction explain and illuminate each another. For instance, a vignette from the *The Secret Life of Objects*, entitled “The China Tree That Looks Like My Grandfather’s China Tree,” explains that her grandfather chose to display a Christmas tree in the shop he was running, although he was Jewish, justifying it as a “business decision” (31). The short story “Our Heaven,” included in *Further Adventures in the Restless Universe*, explicitly refers to this situation and uses the same expression, “a business decision” (29). Further intersections between Raffel’s fiction and non-fiction can be identified, suggesting an operation of fictionalization of real life situations at work in the former and a laying bare of original contexts in the latter.

The Secret Life of Objects offers a series of descriptions and reflections on the affective, mnemonic, narrative and symbolic significances that can be attached to objects, that can attach us to objects. The book deserves to be embedded in a larger reflection on the meanings of objects in literature and more generally in art, and the ways in which they function as extensions of the self and connectors between people, generations and time periods. Dawn Raffel’s book about what she calls in an interview “simple possessions suffused with memory”¹⁾ calls to mind other works of fiction or poetry, artistic projects and historical narratives that build on the stories and memories of objects: for instance, Sergei Dovlatov’s *The Suitcase*, a novel published in Russian in 1986, whose content and structure is inspired by eight objects Dovlatov took with him when he left the Soviet Union for the United States at the end of the 1970s, or Aanchal Malhotra’s *Remnants of a Separation. A History of the Partition through Material Memory* (2017), about

1) Interview with Dawn Raffel conducted by Jennifer Haupt, *Psychology Today*, 2012: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/one-true-thing/201206/qa-dawn-raffel-the-secret-life-objects>

the belongings carried by refugees on either side of the border during the partition of India in 1947.²⁾ If Dovlatov and Malhotra insist on the relation between people and objects in specific historical contexts, other projects reconstruct much larger histories, for instance *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, a programme produced by BBC Radio 4 and the British Museum, which resulted in a companion book written by Neil MacGregor.³⁾ Raffel’s title is also reminiscent of the title of a survey catalogue of the work of contemporary American artist Annette Lemieux, *The Strange Life of Objects*.⁴⁾ Lemieux creates configurations of everyday objects in exhibition spaces that function as complex and meticulous installations. Hats, lamps, mirrors, toys are juxtaposed to form patterns that articulate an artistic discourse.

Similarly, many of the objects Raffel discusses are not noble, precious, particularly memorable or recognizable as cult design objects.⁵⁾ Instead, the book showcases vases, mugs, recipes, a sewing box, a rug, a lock of hair. This absence of material value or nobility of matter does not prevent these objects from acquiring value as mementoes of dead people or friends. It can be argued that the promotion of the banal object to the status of carrier of tremendous symbolic meaning becomes forcefully manifest with Surrealism.⁶⁾ André Breton’s celebration of the Cinderella spoon in *L’Amour fou* (*Mad love*, 1937) photographed by Man Ray is a case in point.⁷⁾ The simple

2) Sergei Dovlatov, *The Suitcase* (1986), tr. Antonina W. Bouis, London: Alma Classics, 2017. Aanchal Malhotra, *Remnants of a Separation. A History of the Partition Through Material Memory*, New Delhi: HarperCollins India, 2017.

3) Neil MacGregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2012.

4) Lelia Amalfitano and Judith Hoos Fox, *The Strange Life of Objects. The Art of Annette Lemieux*, Krannert Art Museum, 2010.

5) As far as cult design objects are concerned, see Christine Sievers and Nicolaus Schröder, *Objets. Les objets cultes du XXe siècle*, tr. Didier Debord, Paris: Editions de la Martinière, 2007.

6) For a collective investigation of the role of objects in literature, history and the arts that goes beyond Surrealism, see Marta Caraion, *Usages de l’objet. Littérature, histoire, arts et techniques XIXe-XXe siècles*, Champ Vallon, 2014.

7) See Didier Ottinger, *Dictionnaire de l’objet surréaliste*, Paris: Gallimard/Musée

wooden spoon with a boot at the tip of the handle found at the flea market transforms itself, under Breton's gaze, into an object that reminds him of Cinderella returning from the ball. Moreover, it was precisely the kind of object (or sculpture) Breton had asked Giacometti to make for him, to no avail. The utilitarian function of the spoon is no longer relevant, supplanted by the projection of a fairy tale metamorphosis performed by the onlooker and owner of the object, and also associated with the fulfillment of an already existing desire to possess such an object. Within Surrealism, objects can be roughly divided into two categories: objects that besot us and induce us to meaninglessly accumulate them and objects that wake us up and shake us to meaning (even if the latter often remains obscure).

In a quite different vein of studied objectivity, Francis Ponge, a poet on the fringes of Surrealism, celebrates banal things such as an orange, an oyster, a crate or a candle in the collection of narrative poems *Le Parti pris des choses* (*Partisan of Things*, 1942), but contrary to Breton, Ponge does not indulge in operations of fairytale transformation. Also, contrary to Dawn Raffel's objects, Ponge's are not personal possessions that resonate with memories of loved ones. Ponge does not put forward the subjectivity of perception, creating the illusion of a quasi-scientific point of view on the things that are described. Inspired by Lucretius's *De rerum natura*, Ponge's poems suggest that things need to be reinvented and reassessed in language and also through the renewal of perspective: looking at them anew to rediscover their potential. A recent example of objects revisited in literature can be found in François Bon, *Autobiographie des objets* (*Autobiography of Objects*, 2012), which is a literary catalogue of objects from the author's youth in France between 1950 and 1980. The use of "autobiography" in the title is misleading: what these objects construct is the author's autobiography rather than their own. This insistence on the personal dimension of things and on the genre of autobiography is what brings *Autobiographie des objets* close to Raffel's memoir. The two works also share a nostalgic undercurrent that takes the form of a lament over the obsolescence of certain objects: in Raffel,

national d'art moderne-Centre Pompidou, 2013, 44-46.

the dictionary as material object is threatened by new digital dictionaries and pushed to the brink of obsolescence. It becomes, according to Raffel, "a relic of a world from which everyone roughly my age lives in exile" (155).

Raffel is remotely indebted to the Surrealist celebration of objects, but her focus is on the affective and social dimension that characterizes our relationship with certain objects and on the role the latter play in the construction of identity and memory. Personal identities and histories are seen as intertwined with and inferable from the familiar objects that surround us or have been passed on. The object as psychic mediator, as Serge Tisseron calls it in *Comment l'esprit vient aux objets* (which can be tentatively translated as *Making Sense of Objects* or *How Objects Make Sense*), acquires literary expression in Raffel's memoir. Tisseron argues that certain objects in our environment are not simply prolongations of the self, but rather modifiers of the perception we have of ourselves, our place within the family and the groups we belong to (Tisseron, 9). Tisseron claims that it is reductive to understand the formation of personality only in terms of human relations and to discard or belittle the role that objects play in this process. Such an interpretation brings nuance in what we could call "the contemporary quarrel over objects," which has led to overwhelmingly negative assessments of consumer culture and consumerist attitudes, in which the possession and acquisition of objects is emblematic of wastefulness and useless accumulation. Blogs and social media figures conduct campaigns in favor of decluttering or celebrate the "zero waste home" which is also synonymous of a minimalist interior.

Raffel's book does not put forward a strong binary opposition between animate and inanimate, or persons and things. Things belong or used to belong to persons and persons animate things, retrospectively, but there is no danger of mistaking one for the other.⁸⁾ A certain ambiguity characterizes certain objects, in particular the lock of hair from Raffel's son's first haircut

8) As Barbara Johnson points out in *Persons and Things*, the binary opposition between things and persons is fraught with ethical difficulties, which arise in particular from treating persons as things. Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008, 2.

("The Lock"). Here, the distinctions between thing and person are less clear. Certain objects are forever marked by their role in personal events and in the consecration of affective relations, like for instance "The Frogs," a very short vignette made up of three sentences: "My husband saw me looking in the window of a store at five wooden Balinese frogs, each playing a musical instrument. A week later, on our anniversary, those frogs were on our bed. This is why we're married" (53). The gift becomes a token of affinity and affection that consecrates the future of a relationship.

Raffel acknowledges the psychic relevance of objects through the medium of language and writing. The implicit effect of *The Secret Life of Objects* is the production and transmission of a personal and family narrative reconstructed fragmentarily through the history of various objects that belong to the author, which she salvaged or received from family members or friends. Other objects that have no connection with the family circle but carry special significance are also included. The memoir is dedicated to Raffel's two sons, Brendan and Sean, who are often mentioned. Sean is the author of the many illustrations that feature alongside some of the vignettes. Sean also made the cover illustration for Raffel's *Further Adventures in the Restless Universe*. The book thus reflects on what filiation and genealogy mean by using objects as a starting point. The stories of objects are also stories of the persons that owned them. Thus, objects are transmuted into stories, circulated and transmitted through linguistic and symbolic mediation, and stories are inseparable from the objects that inspired them in the first place.

Images, artwork and visuality are prominent in the book, suggesting that objects resonate as constructs of memory and discourse, but also as visual representations. This multilayered insistence on the multiple media in which objects are disseminated is central to Raffel's understanding of the multiple lives of objects and, more generally, the plurality of representation. The book cover designed by Debra Di Blasi (founder of Jaded Ibis press) shows a yellow vase on table, with water pouring into it (or out of it) from above. It puts forward the idea of fluidity in connection to objects, suggesting that the latter are fluid in themselves, continually shifting and mutating

on a metaphorical level, resonating with meanings and memories.⁹⁾ The interaction of texts and images was central to the publishing policy of Jaded Ibis until 2016, when the press took a new direction under new leadership. When Dawn Raffel published her book, each of the titles of Jaded Ibis included visual art by a notable artist or artists and an audio track or tracks of music, spoken word or sound art. It is important to keep in mind the prominence of visual and artistic representations in this memoir because the philosophy of objecthood it develops stands at the intersection of text and image, discourse and visuality.

The idea of writing this book was born when Raffel’s mother died unexpectedly and her daughter had to sort through a house full of objects, of which she kept only a few. A large amount of objects and artwork (her mother was a sculptor and visual artist) was thrown or given away, but the objects that the daughter decided to salvage provide the basis and structure to the book. Each object is described in a vignette of one to four pages, and there are fifty vignettes all in all. Before arriving at a meaningful and minimalist selection of objects she decided to keep for herself, the daughter is overwhelmed by the sheer clutter of a house filled to the brim and that needs to be emptied of its contents:

Then I dispersed the glass paperweights my mother had collected, abstract worlds caught in globes, molten bubbles, veins of dye, nothing so overt as a scene. I gave away the tables and the chairs, their cushions stained; the beds, the lamps, the art supplies, some still untouched:

9) Debra Di Blasi’s cover art made me think of other examples of visual works of art that present objects from which water flows, such as Dali’s *Necrophiliac Fountain Flowing from a Grand Piano* (1933) or that play with the optical illusion of water falling, such as Escher’s lithograph *Waterfall* (1961). The whole setup of the book as a collection of vignettes that describe objects brings to mind Joseph Cornell’s boxes that are made up of objects and images. As John Ashbery puts it, Cornell’s objects are “toys or bits of junk, or cloth perhaps, maps, illustrations in encyclopedias that we pore over, realizing that they are ‘too old for us’ but which nevertheless supply us with the vital information of a sort their makers never had in mind.” John Ashbery in Joseph Cornell, *Theater of the Mind. Selected Diaries, Letters, and Files*, ed. with an introduction by May Ann Caws, foreword by John Ashbery, New York and London: Thames and Hudson, 1993, 10.

brushes and gessoes and paints and craypas – most to my sister, some to my younger son who went to art school – papers and rags; four closets full of clothing, plus still more: old crinolines and plaids and silks and tablecloths folded over rusting metal hangers in the basement. I took the shoes nested in tissue in their cardboard boxes; they fit me exactly, vintage, scarcely worn. My mother and I had the same feet. Our faces were similar enough to startle her friends, though hers held a different expression – a kind of openness that drew the attention of strangers. Our bodies were different – hers voluptuous, mine diminutive. I took the smaller jewels, necklaces in boxes, in plastic bags, strewn; and earrings, pins, and loose beads.

With my tiny aunt, I threw out drawers and shelves' worth of medicines – six or seven bottles of Tylenol, each with only a few pills gone, three or four bottles of Pepto Bismol, years-old prescriptions and current prescriptions – for high cholesterol, migraines, high blood pressure, thyroid, Leiden 5 clotting factor, pain, the inability to sleep. Those were just my mother's. My stepfather had pills too, and he had morphine: wrappers from something lay on the floor. My aunt held a black Hefty trash bag while I threw in medicinal casings, rubber gloves, ruined towels. Lotion. Mints. Toothpaste. Dessicated tissue. Lists, receipts. Pencil stubs, hair. In the drawers: bras, panties, hosiery, socks and peds, some never worn. (...) By the time we entered the kitchen with its food that was old now, its condiments and spices, its plastic ware and Tupperware and pots and pans and plastic bags and tin foil and napkins, I wanted the haulers to haul it away, as they would, in its entirety, the metal shelving unit in the garage with its used tools, turpentine, half-cans of paint, stained spades, nails, screws, the broken parts of things. (14-16)

A gradual and unsentimental process of casting off is described through the recurrent use of enumerations, short nominal sentences and the expression of a parallelism between mother and daughter, as if by listing certain objects (the shoes) the daughter tried them on and appropriated them

mentally. Various categories of objects are mentioned: art supplies, jewelry, clothes and shoes, medicine, kitchenware, tools, all traces of the dead mother and her interrupted life. The first vignette is called "The Mug" and presents the first object which comes the daughter's way thanks to the aunt, who singles it out from the chaos of objects that fills the house and imposes it on her:

"Take it," she said.

"I don't need it," I said.

"Take it," she said.

"You'll enjoy it," she said. "You will." (16)

The simplicity and brevity of the exchange opposes use and enjoyment, utility and experience. The mug is reluctantly adopted and becomes part of a routine, but its usefulness is supplanted by the belated realization that the Picasso painting represented on the mug shows two birds, one big and the other small, who are read retrospectively as mirror images of the mother and daughter. The object that becomes revelatory of a concealed meaningfulness and patterning, in a way that is reminiscent of the revelations provoked in their owners by certain Surrealist objects:

Every morning I drink coffee from a mug that I took from my mother's house. It is a blue mug from the Milwaukee Art Museum where my mother was a docent during the last years of her life. The image is of Picasso, a bird. (...) The lines around my mother's lips have formed around my own. The blue mug – I use that every morning, drink my coffee before I wake my children up and set about to work.

My mother was visual; I am not. It took me years to notice that next to that triumphant fractured blue bird, Picasso had painted a smaller bird, close enough to feel the larger's heat. (13-17)

Unknowingly and uncannily reproduced on the mug is the proximity and intimacy of mother and daughter, a closeness which is not simply genetic. The visual transposition of the relationship between mother and daughter in Picasso's birds reproduced on the mug is further transposed

into words by the daughter. The mother is visual, while the daughter “is not,” we are told. Instead, the daughter has the gift of words, and thus the mug becomes “a clay-based receptacle for stimulant, for memory, for story” (11). The mug thus stands between the visual and the verbal, between the mother and the daughter, between usefulness and symbolism, as a bridge of various potentialities. In spite of its base physical quality (“a clay-based receptacle”), the mug is transfigured, just as it transforms the perceptions and understanding of the one who ponders its meanings. Raffel’s objects are much more than what they seem to be: “Objects are intractable. We own them. We don’t” (11).

This fundamental ambiguity of possession and dispossession of the objects is mirrored in the ambiguity of presence and absence that characterizes the representation of the persons that once owned the objects, deceased or no longer around, who are revived and brought back to memory by the objects themselves, through writing. In Raffel, objects are impregnated with the persons to which they once belonged and function as landmarks in the attempt to retrieve their memory. This operation is similar to Barthes’ well-known passages in *Camera Lucida* in which he talks about the death of his mother and his efforts at “finding” her by looking at photographs. He expresses doubt that photographs of her “would speak,” but it turns out that the objects belonging to his mother and visible in the photographs do provide ephemeral instances of “resurrection”:

In order to ‘find’ my mother, fugitively alas, and without being able to hold on to this resurrection for long, I must, much later discover in several photographs the objects she kept on her dressing table, an ivory powder box (I loved the sound of its lid), a cut-crystal flagon, a low chaise which is now near my own bed, or again the raffia panes she arranged above the divan, the large bags she loved (whose comfortable shapes belied the bourgeois notion of ‘handbag’).¹⁰⁾

10) Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, tr. Richard Howard, New York: Hill and Wang, 1981, 63-64.

The connection with Raffel's book is striking, but the relationship to objects that the two books describe is more heavily mediated in the case of Barthes, who mentions objects as seen in photographs, whereas in Raffel objects are held, touched and owned in a more concrete way (although they remain fundamentally ungraspable). Objects for Raffel and photographs for Barthes are carriers of what Barthes calls "biographemes" (30), that is details of a person's life that can be grasped through observation and recollection.

Barthes insists on temporal distance and absence as prerequisites of the constitution of memory and history itself. We can only look at history when we are excluded from it:

Thus, the life of someone whose existence has somewhat preceded our own encloses in its particularity the very tension of History, its division. History is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it – and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it. (...) No anamnesis could ever make me glimpse this time starting from myself (this is the definition of anamnesis) – whereas, contemplating a photograph in which she is hugging me, her child, against her, I can waken in myself the ruffled softness of the *crêpe de Chine* and the perfume of her rice powder.¹¹⁾

The sensory nature of the contact with the mother (the rustle of her clothes and her perfume) can be recovered only by looking at representations belonging to the past, to which we have access because we are no longer there. These musings help Barthes elaborate an understanding of photography as an articulation between past and present, the sign of something that "has been" which is contemplated in the present moment. Raffel's take is similar in certain vignettes, but others are more constructive, although marked by ellipsis and ambiguity. In a short vignette about a metal sculpture of a Mexican fisherman offered to her by her father as an "appeasement gift" when he left her mother, Raffel ends abruptly by simply reminding us of the death of her parents and expressing her fondness for

11) Roland Barthes, *op. cit.*, 64-65.

the artefact: "Now they are both dead, my father and my mother. And I still love that fisherman, waiting for the catch" (51). The "love" for the fisherman who is waiting for something that will never come (a figure of absence and unfulfillment) is ambiguously and even incongruously juxtaposed to the dead parents, suggesting a compensatory effect.

In other vignettes, Raffel's approach is more speculative: rather than acknowledge the impossible retrieval of what "has been," she attempts to reconstruct fragments of the past even when she has no access to them. This creative approach to the past is visible in the last but one vignettes in the book, entitled "Garnet Earrings." The garnet earrings were bought by the author at a resale store in New York as a token of future (but quite uncertain) success, and they were indeed followed by a series of successful events. The end of the vignette attempts to imagine, through a series of interrogations that remain unanswered, who the previous owner of the garnet earrings had been: "I wear the earrings often. They belonged to a woman I know nothing about. I have sometimes wondered whether her features and her coloring were anything like mine, and how she dressed, how old she was and who she loved, and whether she thought she was lucky" (154).

The short vignette called "The Dress" highlights a barrier between past and present which is reminiscent of Barthes's reflections about photography as a representation under the sign of "has been":

The sleeveless jersey dress is far beyond repair. It's stained. It doesn't fit. The fabric has faded. Goodwill would not want it. I keep it in my closet because it holds in its weave the summer of 1984: the heat, my young body, the necklace – all hearts – that I wore with it that broke, our rooftop in twilight, the city below us, the promise of the life I planned to live. That dress was so green.¹²⁾ (71)

The force of the vignette lies in what it implies more than in what it

12) The last sentence is very similar to the last sentence of the vignette that follows "The Dress," called "Mr. and Mrs. Buttercream": "The dress is discolored. That dress was so white" (73).

explicitly states. The final sentence is terse and cogent, suggesting a correlation between the color green, youth, and promises for the future, all of which belong to the past. The nostalgia is perceptible but kept in a subdued mode of understatement. In Raffel's memoir, doing "words with things" is as much a matter of what is left out and signifies in an implicit way as it is a matter of what is explicitly offered to the reader. The adjective "secret" in the title can be applied to the regime of writing that is privileged by Raffel, in which the secrecy of implied meanings constitutes a rich lining to the various vignettes. At times, implicit meanings verge on impenetrability. At the end of the vignette entitled "The Lady on the Vase," which describes a vase offered to the author by her grandfather, Raffel reflects on the secret messages that objects seem to carry but that remain opaque and hermetic in certain cases:

The vase sits on the top shelf on my floor-to-ceiling bookcase – too high to reach, or break. Every day I see that face (of a lady painted on the vase), surrounded by luminous blue. The woman is serene, young; her brown curls lustrous, falling as they may. Above a diaphanous gown, her bosom swells. She gives away nothing. (25-26)

Precisely because of its impenetrability, the lady on the vase is a source of contemplation and recollection. Its constitutive secrecy stimulates self-scrutiny and reminiscence. Similarly, a jacket that had belonged to the dead mother reduces the daughter to tears and reminds her of something that remains undefined and undefinable: "I can't even say what it made me remember" (68).

Raffel's choice of objects intertwines the personal value of the object (gift, heirloom) with the histories of family members and friends, but other frameworks are brought into play, most notably that of religion. Part of Raffel's family is Jewish and their coming to America confronts them to anti-Semitism and to situations of cultural compromise (for instance, setting a Christmas tree set in the shop as a "business decision"). Raffel's father had difficulties finding a job although he was a trained engineer in aeronautics with high qualifications (38). The father's uncle, we are told, decided to hide the fact that he was Jewish and kept it a secret to his family. Religious objects

feature in several vignettes: a Bible received by Raffel's mother when she got married, a prayer book having belonged to the father who had received it for his Bar Mitzvah, a glass angel. Found after the father's death in a drawer with his "private stuff," his prayer book becomes an enigma for the daughter, who had thought her father to be an atheist who believed in science only ("a born-again atheist," as he had described himself, 59). The mere presence of the prayer book in the drawer with the father's personal things becomes the premise of a questioning of the latter's professed atheism: "And yet, for all his distaste for organized religion, I don't think he could ever be shut of his blood, of his bones, his genes" (58-59). Thus, an object that is posthumously found modifies the daughter's perception of her father and opens up new possibilities of understanding him that go against the grain of his explicit self-fashioning.

These explorations of objects and memory are scattered with interrogations that carry vast philosophical implications, sometimes couched in an aphoristic style: "Why do we cling to the body's pieces, as if they can tell us who we are, and what was lost, and how time passed?" (63). Such questions go beyond the level of personal and family significance to suggest a much larger and more general endeavor. Although the ostensible purpose of the book is describing and narrating a family history through objects, Raffel formulates important existential questions about temporality, death, emotion and what keeps us bound to the living and the dead:

I wonder sometimes what we'd have said to each other if we'd understood that it was the last time, just as I wonder how it would have been if I had known that rushed phone call while I was trying to put dinner on the table on a Monday night would be the final time I spoke to my father, or if I had recognized the night – I can't even remember it – that was the last time I would pick up one of my sleeping sons and carry him to bed. Sometimes things shatter. More often they just fade. (8)

Objects are the premise of a philosophy of memory and affect, arguably of a metaphysics in which objects transport us to a different level of reality and

connect us emotionally to others. In a passage from *Camera Lucida*, Barthes shows great kindness to Flaubert’s characters Bouvard and Pécuchet (whose inability to fully comprehend the multitude of projects they undertake is an object of mockery) by suggesting that the questions that two characters ask are legitimate and relevant, the ultimate questions that should be asked:

Flaubert derided (but did he really deride?) Bouvard and Pécuchet investigating the sky, the stars, time, life, infinity, etc. It is this kind of question that Photography raises for me: questions which derive from a simple or “stupid” metaphysics (it is the answers which are complicated): probably the true metaphysics. (84-85)

Along these lines, Raffel’s *Secret Life of Objects* can be qualified as a literary attempt at a “simple” metaphysics that attempts to both formulate questions and give partial and tentative answers. Remotely inscribed in the Surrealist aesthetics of objects with a potential for mystery and personal awakening, Raffel transposes objects into discourse in a more coherent and logical (though fragmentary) manner than that commonly associated with Surrealism. Raffel highlights the discursive and mnemonic power of objects and invites us to think about how we can do “words with things,” that is start from objects as psychic mediators in order to perform a linguistic exploration of memory, temporality, self and intersubjectivity.

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Abstract

This article offers a reading of contemporary American writer Dawn Raffel's memoir entitled *The Secret Life of Objects*, published by Jade Ibis Press in 2012, focusing on the affective, mnemonic, narrative and symbolic significances that it attaches to objects. My reading seeks to embed Raffel's book in a larger reflection on the meanings of objects in literature and more generally in art, and the ways in which they function as extensions of the self and connectors between people, generations and time periods. The article draws on the history of objects in art in order to understand the specificity of Raffel's approach. Surrealism appears as an important landmark due its promotion of the banal object to the status of carrier of tremendous symbolic meaning. Raffel is remotely indebted to the Surrealist celebration of objects, but her focus is on the affective and social dimension that characterizes our relationship with certain objects and on the role the latter play in the construction of identity and memory. Personal identities and histories are seen as intertwined with and inferable from the familiar objects that surround us. The object appears as a "psychic mediator" (Tisseron) that stimulates reminiscence and storytelling. The title of the article (an inversion of Austin's well-known *How to Do Things with Words*) captures precisely this discursive and mnemonic potential of objects in Raffel's text. Raffel invites us to think about how we can do "words with things," that is start from objects in order to perform a linguistic exploration of memory, temporality, self and intersubjectivity.