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Introduction: Bodies and Things

Katharina Boehm

What is the whole physical life . . . but a combination of natural elements to which science gives their names? But those elements, phosphorus and lime and delicate fibres, are present not in the human body alone: we detect them in places most remote from it. Our physical life is a perpetual motion of them – the passage of the blood, the waste and repairing of the lenses of the eye, the modification of the tissues of the brain under every ray of light and sound – processes which science reduces to simpler and more elementary forces. Like the elements of which we are composed, the action of these forces extends beyond us: it rusts iron and ripens corn. . . . That clear, perpetual outline of face and limb is but an image of ours, under which we group them – a design in a web, the actual threads of which pass out beyond it.

— Walter Pater, The Renaissance

In his famous ‘Conclusion’ to The Renaissance (1873), Walter Pater evokes an intricate network, a ‘web’ of endlessly extending material threads, to describe the intimate, physiological rapport that exists between subjects and objects. Departing from Cartesian dualism, the passage suggests that the shared materiality – ‘phosphorus and lime and delicate fibres’ – of the human body and inanimate matter makes it impossible to define with any precision where the self ends and the material world begins. Pater’s study frequently resolves the subject–object relationship into a universal aesthetic impressionism. However, even in instances in which

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he asserts the autonomy of the perceiving subject (‘[e]very one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation’), the subject remains so thoroughly permeated by the sensory experience of the material world that his or her whole being is determined by it: ‘It is with this movement, with the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations, that analysis leaves off – that continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves.’

The deliberate vagueness of phrase in Pater’s ‘Conclusion’ emphasizes the ambiguous positions of subject (as possessing agency) and object (as lacking in agency). In this excerpt, Pater’s syntax transforms the human self into the passive object of the sentence: ‘the elements of which we are composed’; reciprocally, the material forces that act upon the self exert an agency that seems to contradict their object status. As the subject is disassembled into fragmented material parts (‘the lenses of the eye’, ‘the tissues of the brain’), all of which blend into the physical world, the separation of self and physical matter is shown to be a mere illusion – ‘an image of ours’.

The essays collected in this volume are in sympathy with Pater’s notion of the ‘web’ that knits together subjects and objects. They explore the dynamic modes in which subjects and objects merge, exchange positions, and materially transform one another in a wide range of nineteenth-century literary and cultural contexts. They give particular attention to instances in which the human body and its individual parts take on attributes of objects, and to cultural renditions in which objects are turned into ‘things’ through their participation in practices traditionally associated with subjective agency. In doing so, they bring together a set of cultural narratives in which bodies and things mediate between subjects and objects by placing them in networked and processual relationships. The essays read works by canonical authors, such as Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, and Henry James, alongside less-studied texts, such as comic operas by Gilbert and Sullivan, life writing, scientific treatises, and late nineteenth-century narratives of book collecting. They place these works in dialogue with a variety of objects, including automata, museum exhibits, scrapbooks, Old Blue china, clothes, work-boxes, and antiques. Probing the porous boundaries, affinities, and frictions between Victorian subjects and objects, and bodies and things, this collection develops new approaches to Victorian notions of materiality, the object world, and embodied experience while also interrogating recent methodological developments in the areas of Victorian material culture, object studies, cultural phenomenology, and thing theory.
Over the course of the nineteenth century, understandings of the relationship between the self and the physical world were fundamentally reconfigured through rapidly advancing industrialization, the unprecedented growth of consumer culture, and the rise of evolutionary theories, physiology, and other biological sciences. These developments contributed to a heterogeneous assortment of literary and artistic movements which took a keen interest in inanimate objects – ranging from realism and naturalism to sensation fiction and aestheticism – and which in their turn transformed the ways in which readers thought about the object realm. The Victorians’ enchantment with the rich material culture of the period has been a central concern of interdisciplinary Victorian studies since the 1980s. Since the ‘material turn’ in the field, critics have studied the place of things in Victorian culture from a variety of angles, ranging from historicist and phenomenological to formalist and theoretical approaches. Early impulses came from social history. For example, Asa Briggs’s authoritative Victorian Things (1988) evokes Karl Marx’s tenet that ‘to discover the various uses of things is the work of history’, and Briggs amasses a wealth of historical detail about the objects the Victorians ‘designed, named, made, advertised, bought and sold, listed, counted, collected, gave to others, threw away or bequeathed’. Briggs’s empiricist exploration of the ephemera of Victorian everyday life – matches, hats, needles, coal, stamps, furniture – emphasizes consumption and spectacle as cornerstones of the nineteenth-century history of subjects and objects. Consumption and spectacle also supplied the conceptual framework for two important subsequent studies, Thomas Richards’s The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851–1914 (1990) and Andrew Miller’s Novels behind Glass: Commodity, Culture, and Victorian Narrative (1995). Drawing on theorizations by Karl Marx, Georg Simmel, Guy Debord, Anthony Giddens, and others, Richards and Miller have influentially traced the emergence of commodity culture in the nineteenth century and placed it in dialogue with new technologies of advertising (Richards) and the cultural work of the novel (Miller). Following Marx’s idea that ‘[p]roduction thus produces not only the object but also the manner of consumption, not only objectively but also subjectively’, Richards and Miller posit subjects and objects in an antagonistic relationship in which the modern subject inhabits the position of the alienated consumer while the commodified object becomes dematerialized. Recent studies such as Krista Lysack’s Come Buy, Come Buy: Shopping and the Culture of Consumption in Victorian Women’s Writing (2008) and Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin’s collection...
Women and Things, 1750–1950 (2009) illustrate that commodification and consumer culture continue to provide important contexts for the study of Victorian material culture.  

However, during the last decade a number of new methodologies have emerged which take nineteenth-century thing culture beyond established concepts of consumption and commodity fetishism. Like human subjects, objects have been found to possess complex biographies and histories, social and cultural lives. Theorists have attributed ‘agency’ and ‘animation’ to them. According to Alfred Gell, ‘[t]he ways in which social agency can be invested in things, or can emanate from things, are exceedingly diverse’, and Andrew Jones has remarked that ‘we treat objects as social in the same way we treat people as social. Objects are always bound up in the social projects of people, and it is this that makes them animate.’ The contributions to this volume build on these recent interventions. In particular, they are in dialogue with Bill Brown’s widely discussed thing theory, first outlined in a special issue of Critical Inquiry (‘Things’, 2001) and in A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature (2003). Thing theory interweaves psychoanalytical and phenomenological approaches to ask how things ‘become recognizable, representable, and exchangeable to begin with’ as well as ‘why and how we use objects to make meaning, to make or re-make ourselves, to organize our anxieties and affections, to sublimate our fears and shape our fantasies’. It reads interactions between subjects and objects in relational rather than oppositional terms. Investigating primarily nineteenth-century American literature, Brown argues that ‘fiction demonstrates that the human investment in the physical object world and the mutual constitution of human subject and inanimate object’ exceed ‘commodity relations’. Drawing on Heidegger’s distinction between objects and things, Brown holds that ‘objects’ become ‘things’ when they stop working for us: . . . when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested . . . The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject–object relation.

Interest in the ‘thing’ as a mediator of subject–object relations has been constantly growing in Victorian studies. Arguably, however, the implications of thing theory have not yet been addressed with a critical
force that matches, for instance, the intense debate about thing theory in the field of eighteenth-century literature and culture. Critics such as Lynn Festa, Mark Blackwell, Cynthia Wall, and Julie Park have advanced sophisticated readings of eighteenth-century objects ‘secur[ing] personal and intellectual identities in the face of commercial and imperial expansion’, of the emotional attachments and rhetorical strategies that invested objects with agency, and of the epistemologies of eighteenth-century empiricism that drew attention to the materiality both of the object world and of human experience. The discourses mapped by these and other eighteenth-century scholars – the vogue for collecting and exhibiting objects, imperial exploitation, newly emerging philosophical and scientific concepts of selfhood – feed directly into the nineteenth-century cultures and debates that are discussed in the present volume. The essays collected here take up Brown’s notion of the ‘thing’ as an intermediary between object and subject, and they often discuss it in conjunction with the mediating functions performed by the human body.

The contributors to this volume approach the human body as an assemblage of matter, embodied perception, and lived experience that links the object world and the self. This perspective often dovetails with phenomenological concepts of the body, most notably with the thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. For Merleau-Ponty, subjects and objects constitute one another in a relationship characterized by ‘reversibility’ and ‘intertwining’: ‘I become involved in things with my body, they co-exist with me as an incarnate subject, and this life among things has nothing in common with the elaboration of scientifically conceived objects.’ He describes the body, through which we perceive and interact with the object world as

a being of two leaves, from one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees them and touches them; we say, because it is evident, that it unites these two properties within itself, and its double belongingness to the order of the ‘object’ and to the order of the ‘subject’ reveals to us quite unexpected relations between the two orders. It cannot be by incomprehensible accident that the body has this double reference; it teaches us that each thing calls for the other.

As the essays gathered here show, this notion of the body’s simultaneous enmeshment in the domain of the subject and in that of the object was anticipated in nineteenth-century renditions of embodiment, ranging from scientific and social to literary, artistic, and
popular fields of cultural expression. Rapid advances in the emerging
discipline of biology – including the rise of cell theory, embryology,
and evolutionism – furnished a growing body of evidence for the
material basis of all mental and physical processes. The passage from
Pater’s *Renaissance* evinces the influence of physiological accounts of
the human organism and human psychology which were regularly
featured in the periodical press and popularized through the works of
Herbert Spencer, George Henry Lewes, William Carpenter, and others.
As Nicholas Dames has shown in *The Physiology of the Novel* (2007),
physiological ideas also influenced theories of reading practices and
aesthetic perception as embodied experiences that work on the nervous
system of the audience.18 Phrenology, physiognomy, animal magnet-
ism, and other fringe sciences with a broad appeal for lay audiences
provided further forums in which selfhood was constructed in material
terms.

Accelerating industrialization and new modes of production focused
attention on the materiality of the worker's body and its ‘mechanization’
through factory routines, as well as on the commingling of human
bodies, machines, and raw materials in the manufacture process. Another
consequence of industrialization, the availability of an enormous vari-
ety of commodities and the growth of the mass market introduced a
host of novel entertainments, fashions, and everyday practices which
fostered affective, prosthetic, or even parasitic relationships between
subjects and objects. These relationships, as well as the cultural fascina-
tion with the body’s materiality, were reflected in popular amusements
of the period such as marionette theatres, music hall performances,
exhibitions of moving automata, popular anatomical museums, wax-
work shows, and mechanical toys. Throughout the nineteenth century,
the body and its individual parts were given object-status when they
were sold, bought, exhibited, collected, and exchanged. These processes
have been studied, for instance, in the contexts of ethnological shows
and the traffic in anatomical exhibits, of debates about labour power
and the body as property, of body-snatching by professional grave rob-
bbers, of prostitution, and of colonial exploitation.19

By building on the assumption that the human body, like objects
turned into ‘things’, is a site where subject and object positions are
hybridized, the essays of this collection propose that the dynamics
between subjects and objects should be understood as continuously
evolving networked associations and shifting alliances, ‘processual in
nature rather than static or fixed identities’.20 This critical perspective
is in dialogue with Michel Serres’s and Bruno Latour’s influential
rejection of binaries such as human/non-human and subject/object. Serres famously explained the terms ‘quasi-object’ and ‘quasi-subject’ by turning to the internal structure of a ball game during which the positions of subject and object are constantly exchanged. When the player holds the ball, his or her identity as subject and the ball’s identity as object are reciprocally constituted by the distribution of agency: ‘A ball is not an ordinary object, for it is what it is only if a subject holds it.’ However, the moment the ball is tossed the player’s identity fuses into the collectivity of the team. As the teams gather around the ball, following and responding to its movement, the ball itself becomes the subject of the play. ‘Like the goal and the ground’, Brian Massumi notes apropos of Serres’s model, ‘the ball as a substantial term doubles the subject of the play, which itself is invisible and nonsubstantial, the catalyst-point of a force-field, a charge-point of potential’. In We Have Never Been Modern (1993), Latour evokes Serres’s notion of ‘quasi-objects’ and ‘quasi-subjects’ to suggest that all attempts to divide nature and culture into symmetrically opposed entities are undercut by the relational networks that operate between them. According to Latour, modernity, the onset of which he dates around the time of Hobbes and Boyle, made a false and artificial distinction between two ‘ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of nonhumans on the other’. He argues that this ‘seventeenth-century distinction becomes a separation in the eighteenth century, then an even more complete contradiction in the nineteenth’, yet all the while ‘hybrids’ that belong to both zones ‘continue to proliferate: those monsters of the first, second and third industrial revolutions, those socialized facts and these humans turned into elements of the natural world’. These quasi-objects – which Latour understands as the intricate intersections between the (illegitimately) constructed poles of the ‘human’ and the ‘non-human’ – render the boundaries between subjects and objects negotiable and permeable.

Serres’s and Latour’s formulations resonate with many of the essays presented here. Kirstyn Leuner’s contribution, for instance, explores the flexible assignation of subject and object positions in networked relations between the human and non-human inhabitants of Mansfield Park in Jane Austen’s novel. Challenging critical traditions which regard the ‘objectification’ of the subject as coercive and disempowering, Leuner argues that ‘[object]hood does not constrain Fanny to the disenfranchised life of a servant-cousin at Mansfield, but rather privileges her to belong to, and circulate within, the Bertrams’s society’ (46). In a similar vein, Muireann O’Cinneide investigates ‘patterns of absence,
substitution, and/or transformation’ (84) in the circulation of bodies and things in the travelogues of Florentia Sale and Harriet Tytler. Isobel Armstrong’s essay focuses on moments in the nineteenth-century novel in which ‘things act as a third term’ (36). As ‘a world between’ that is both social and material, things do not ‘place objects and subjects in antagonistic opposition, but [are] actually the means by which relationships are bridged’ (24).

As ‘quasi-objects’ in Latour’s sense, bodies, too, can function as a ‘third term’. Latour has observed that quasi-objects are much more social, much more fabricated, much more collective than the ‘hard parts’ of nature, but they are in no way the arbitrary receptacles of a full-fledged society. On the other hand, they are much more real, nonhuman and objective than those shapeless screens on which society – for unknown reasons – needed to be ‘projected’.25

Archaeologists have been among the first to apply Latour’s concept fruitfully to the human body. For the archaeologist Joanna Sofaer, the concept of the ‘quasi-object’ captures the ‘complexity, instability and contingency of the archaeological body’.26 However, the analogy between the body and the ‘quasi-object’ is of interest also to literary and cultural studies, offering a potential way out of the impasse between views of the body as a mere social and cultural construct (notably Michel Foucault’s and Judith Butler’s influential formulations) and perspectives which locate a measure of agency and resistance in its recalcitrant materiality. It provides a framework for thinking about the body as relational, processual, and ‘in-between’; as an interface between what we have come to understand as ‘culture’ and the ‘object world’ that opens up non-hierarchical and non-dualistic vistas on the relationship between these entities. By tracing a historical configuration of such a notion of the body, Kate Hill’s contribution to this volume examines how the exhibition of human relics and bodily objects in late-Victorian and Edwardian museums unsettled the ‘modern intellectual framework wherein the clear distinction between subjects and objects was key’ (154). Catherine Spooner’s essay on masculinity and the body in the nineteenth-century Turkish bath suggests that the (semi-)nude male body’s interaction with a range of things cast the intertwined material and social components of the body into sharp relief: ‘The male body is rendered a site of unease, mediated through performative codes and subjected to punctilious self-scrutiny as well as
that of other men. . . . It becomes impossible to divest oneself entirely of material culture, as the outside world follows one into the baths and the experience of nakedness is framed and commoditized’ (81).

By examining literary renditions of fluid subject–object relationships as mediated by bodies and things from the early to the late nineteenth century, the authors of this collection make a case for the historical, social, and geographical rootedness of subject–object networks. In doing so, they offer detailed explorations of the modes in which literary writings of various genres – including the realist novel, decadent poetry, sensation fiction, travelogues, and life writing – intervened in the emergence of these networks; for instance, by providing forums in which different concepts of materiality and embodiment could be hashed out, by dramatizing the affective currents between subjects and objects, and by offering glimpses of a utopian future in which the distinction between subjects and objects will have ceased to exist. However, the present inquiries into nineteenth-century literature and culture also speak to theoretical preoccupations that transcend Victorian studies and are currently debated in fields such as gender, queer, and posthuman studies.

Critics have long discussed the interplay between historic commodity cultures and the formation of specific notions of gender. Shifting attention away from commodification and consumption, this volume offers detailed studies of other forms of subject–object interaction that allow for the exploration and articulation of diverse gender identities. The contributors foreground questions of gender and sexuality in an array of cultural and material contexts, ranging from the collecting habits of female aesthetes to the celebration of gender fluidity in the late-Victorian music hall, and from the sensual pleasures of homo-social bibliophiles to Victorian albums as erotically charged signifiers of embodied middle-class femininity. Their shared focus on gender as transient configurations of bodies performing with and within the material world allows them to refine existing readings of nineteenth-century masculinities and femininities. O’Cinneide’s essay, for instance, revisits well-known critical accounts of the rhetoric of sexual violence in British narratives about the Indian Uprising of 1857. O’Cinneide concentrates on previously neglected discourses of maternity, charting the textual presences and absences of pregnant female bodies that are ‘insistently absent entities . . . substituted for by a multiplicity of things’ (87).

Victoria Mills’s essay on late-Victorian phenomenologies of homoerotic book collecting engages with Sara Ahmed’s recent call for understanding ‘the question of the “orientation” of “sexual orientation” as a
phenomenological question’. Studies such as Holly Furneaux’s *Queer Dickens* (2009) and William A. Cohen’s *Embodied* (2009) have framed discussions of the ‘queer touch’ in the context of gentleness, restoration, and affect. By contrast, Mills argues for expanding the kinds of sensory experiences we study in the context of queer phenomenology, as well as for giving eroticism (rather than affect) a more central place in discussions of literary representations of tactile bibliophilia. Stefania Forlini’s contribution on the blurred distinction between human performers and performing objects in late-Victorian culture shows that nineteenth-century discussions about the ontological status of humans, inorganic matter, and machines live on in assessments of our own ‘posthuman condition’. With the emergence of new technologies, the rise of the Digital Age and the proliferation of virtual forms of human interaction it has become necessary to re-think materiality itself. By investigating late-Victorian automaton theory and the decadent cult of artifice, Forlini suggests, we can gain both historical perspective and an awareness of the continuities between the uneasy machine dreams of the Victorians and our own.

The book is divided into three thematic sections that focus, respectively, on the spaces, practices, and performances in which bodies and things bring subjects and objects into intimate proximity, or begin to render their positions reciprocal and interchangeable. The collection opens with an essay by Isobel Armstrong which queries Marxist traditions of viewing subject–object relationships in dualistic terms. Armstrong draws on Hannah Arendt’s phenomenological arguments about the fundamental changes in nineteenth-century understandings of the human body as property that were caused by industrialization and the growth of mass society. Armstrong examines the displays of the Great Exhibition of 1851 alongside a range of novels ‘in which the mapping of new subject–object relations is at stake’ (27). Nineteenth-century figurations of bodies and things, Armstrong argues, often blur the boundaries between the two entities and thereby interrogate the separation between objects and subjects, as well as what it means to be animate or human in the first place.

The chapters in the first section, ‘Spaces’, reflect on the ways in which the dynamics between subjects and objects, and the mediating functions of bodies and things, are shaped by different locales and played out in spatial strategies. Building on the theorizations of Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, and Latour, the essays brought together in this section approach space as socially constructed networks of material and semiotic relations in which subject- and object-status is assigned in
relational and shifting manner. Leuner looks at dressing rooms in the novels of Jane Austen, particularly in *Mansfield Park* – a novel that is also discussed by Armstrong. Leuner approaches the dressing room as a ‘gendered space of social and sexual negotiations in which the rhetorical and literal boundaries between the subject and the object world are particularly fluid’ (45). She reads the social fabric of Mansfield Park as a network of flexible subject and object positions in Latour’s sense and proposes that the object-relationships cultivated in Fanny’s dressing room teach her to position herself successfully within Mansfield Park’s economy.

While Leuner’s interest lies with the feminine-coded space of the dressing room, Catherine Spooner turns to Anthony Trollope’s fascination with the all-male sphere of the Turkish bath in which the unstable boundaries between bodies and things contribute to the destabilization of social and national identities. Spooner explores Trollope’s engagement with the conventions of the sensation novel, particularly the sensation trope of the working-class subject who uses clothes and other manufactured objects to masquerade as a socially superior individual. She reads Trollope’s rendition of the Turkish bath as a heterotopic space and examines how the identity of the male subject is mediated – in potentially treacherous manner – by the movements of his semi-naked body and the things he interacts with, most notably the checked towels offered to bathers. O’Cinneide’s essay, which concludes this section, explores two remoter locales – the mid-Victorian imperial conflict zones of Afghanistan and India. O’Cinneide’s reading of the travel-memoirs of Florentia Sale and Harriet Tytler takes stock of the prominent place which thing theory has recently gained within postcolonial studies. She makes a case for the continued significance of phenomenological approaches which shed light on the ‘experiencing subject, and the experiential valence of bodies, in relation to imperial things’ (100). In Sale’s and Tytler’s works, O’Cinneide shows, the female subject’s relation to an object world thrown into turmoil by warfare is negotiated by a heightened attention to things: ‘objects have by no means been forgotten, instead becoming things through [Tytler’s] narration of their loss; their existence, loss, and on-going textual existence metonymically transfer bodily loss and destruction into the realm of material things’ (97).

The second section, ‘Practices’, investigates a range of nineteenth-century phenomenologies of collecting, circulating, and exhibiting material artefacts and human relics. The section begins with Samantha Matthews’s essay on Victorian manuscript albums, which incorporated
a wide range of souvenirs, autographs, pictures, letters, and literary texts and were traditionally kept by young women. Nineteenth-century authors and modern critics alike have tended to denigrate these albums as ‘low’ literary commodities evidencing the feminization of literary culture. By looking at a range of actual albums and at literary representations of album keepers by George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and others, Matthews proposes a recuperative reading of the album as embodied text and ‘intermediary’ (114) between the members of the owner's social circle. The mediating function of the album, Matthews points out, depends ‘on the material text's capacity to record and preserve traces of the body, and to substitute for the inscribing body in its absence’ (114). Matthews shows that literary writers often represented this process in ambivalent terms; because the album could embody a variety of disparate biographical moments and affective relationships, the subjectivity of the owner that it signified also remained elusive and unstable.

In different ways, the essays by Victoria Mills and by Kate Hill think about the ways in which the relationship between past and present can be mediated through things and bodily objects, and about the alternative histories and genealogies that the individual’s affective investment in these artefacts may recover. Mills's essay explores eroticism and a range of sensory responses to books in late-Victorian representations of bibliophilic dandy-aesthetes in works by Oscar Wilde, J.-K. Huysmans, George Gissing, and others. Her phenomenological perspective on the book-lover's corporeal experience of his library highlights the interplay of the senses as instrumental in the construction of masculine identities. While bibliomania is often pathologized and placed in relation to debates about heredity, degeneration, and contagion in fin-de-siècle literature and medial debates, Mills draws attention to a range of texts in which the tactile erotics of book collecting are represented in affirmative terms as curative, nostalgic, and yet also forward-looking. She suggests that a study of homosocial practices of circulating and bequeathing books can open a window unto heterodox narratives of literary heritage: ‘the tactile relations between men and their books demand that connections be made between a history of male intimacy and notions of literary heritage, between politics and affect’ (147, emphasis original). Hill, by comparison, examines the collecting and exhibiting practices of late nineteenth-century local museums, including literary house museums, with collections of bodily objects, such as locks of Coleridge’s and Edward II's hair, human remains from the Anglo-Saxon period, and the mummified hand of a murderess. Informed
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by recent developments in the fields of museology and memory studies, Hill’s contribution approaches the relation of visitors to museum displays as a phenomenological and embodied experience. She shows that popular investments in these artefacts – particularly if they were linked to literary authors – troubled the ‘subject–object duality’ (160) which canonical museums sought to highlight in their displays. As an important site for affective encounters with the past, Hill suggests, relics and bodily objects ‘produced a new subjective and objective relationship with the past’ while resisting dichotomies such as ‘subject–object, culture–nature, body–thing’ (170).

The essays in the final section, ‘Performances’, explore how nineteenth-century understandings of bodies and things, and subject–object relationships, are shaped by cultural concepts of artifice, performance, and theatricality on and off the stage. As the contributors to this section show, ontological definitions of subject- and objecthood became ambivalent in music halls and the stylized House Beautiful of the late-Victorian aesthete. The section opens with Anne Anderson’s contribution on female aesthetes and the comic figure of the ‘High Art Maiden’ in late-Victorian plays, newspaper articles, and Punch cartoons. Anderson explores the collecting habits of female aesthetes. She argues that these women sought to distance themselves from commodity culture and the burgeoning marketplace by investing in rare and curious objects, treating their antiques as ‘extension or expression of [their] subjectivity’ (180). However, critics of Aestheticism often turned the female collector into an object of derision and suggested that her interest in antiques was an artificial pose. In parodic attacks – including cartoons by George du Maurier and plays by W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan – ‘women caught up in life-style aestheticism were often depicted as prisoners of a fad, their life-style play-acting’ (189). In these satirical renditions, both the rarities that the High Art Maiden collects and her own body are rendered as fetishized commodities, ready to be bought and consumed by deceitful male aesthetes. Like Mills, Anderson takes a keen interest in the phenomenology of collecting practices and her focus on feminine collectors supplements Mills’s essay on collecting and the construction of masculine identity.

The decadent cult of artifice also provides the vantage point for Stefania Forlini’s discussion of performing bodies and bodily objects in late nineteenth-century conscious automaton theory and the aesthetic movement. A widely disseminated physiological doctrine, conscious automaton theory insisted on the material basis of all aspects of human existence and suggested that the subject can be
materially transformed through interacting with objects. Forlini traces points of contact between conscious automaton theory and the works of Arthur Symons and Oscar Wilde, arguing that these and other decadent writers engaged critically with the ‘dehumanizing findings of scientific materialism’ and emphasized instead ‘an aesthetics and politics of an embodied, distributed, and ontologically indeterminate human subject’ (199). Focusing in particular on Symons’s renditions of music hall performances and of performing objects such as mechanical ballet dancers and singing automata, Forlini calls for new attention to the fin-de-siècle’s fascination with the ‘interrelatedness of materially instantiated subjects and objects in a shared sphere of performance’ (204).

The collection closes with an epilogue essay by Bill Brown that traces the legacy of nineteenth-century figurations of bodies and things in twentieth-century philosophy. Brown turns to Ernst Bloch’s famous meditation on the pitcher in The Spirit of Utopia (1923) where subject and object ‘participate’ in one another, the subject enacting an ‘exchange of bodies with the object at hand’ (223). This interpenetration of body and thing, Brown suggests, is facilitated by the idea of the self as a ‘body in pieces’ which enters into unexpected and organic relationships with the object world – a notion that is anticipated in Pater’s ‘Conclusion’. Building on Latour’s concept of a utopian ‘democracy of persons and things’, Brown calls for a ‘democracy of bodies and things, their very imbrication promising the novelty, the difference, of sustaining both’ (227).

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