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## **“All the Millions of Things We Possessed”: The Agency of Objects in the Family Memoirs of Shirley Jackson (*Life Among the Savages* and *Raising Demons*)**

### **Abstract**

The article analyses two memoirs by the American writer Shirley Jackson (1916-1965), *Life Among the Savages* (1953) and *Raising Demons* (1957), with regard to their depiction of material objects' participation in family life. Looking at the memoirs through the lens of nonhuman turn theories, such as actor-network theory, vibrant materialism, and thing theory, the article aims to prove Jackson's affective openness to the agency of the material, and her recognition of the possibility of a flat ontology of all beings. The Hyman family described by Jackson can be read as an assemblage of human and nonhuman actants who collectively influence each other's daily life. In reaching this conclusion, the article devotes considerable attention to Jackson's use of extended lists and her frequent personification, anthropomorphization, and objectification of humans, animals, plants, and objects. Not only do the nonhuman actants depicted in the memoirs refuse to be bound by clear ontological categories but they also function as narrative catalysts, confusing and overwhelming their human counterparts physically, sensually, and logically. In thus humorously describing her family life full of amusing mishaps, Shirley Jackson manages to craft a narrative of a more democratic distribution of agency.

**Keywords:** family memoirs, family as an assemblage, material object agency, nonhuman turn, vibrant materialism, flat ontology, onto-stories

In the opening section of her first memoir, *Life Among the Savages*, Shirley Jackson depicts her house as consisting of “two children and about five thousand books... assorted beds and tables and chairs and rocking horses and lamps and doll dresses and ship models and paint brushes and literally thousands of socks” (Jackson [1953] 2019: 1). This lengthy list of objects, which may and even should overwhelm

the reader, is followed by Jackson's assertion that "[t]his is the way of life my husband and I have fallen into, inadvertently, as though we have fallen into a well" (Jackson [1953] 2019: 1). The quote, although humoristic in nature, implicates a serious dependency which exists between the events in one's family life and the material objects in one's home. Material objects, Jackson seems to warn us, are not a mere background of symbolic decorations or useful tools which can be picked up and then put away at will; unruly and hardly calculable as they are, they tend to dictate the events, initiate them, and structure the experience of one's daily existence. As the following article is going to argue, Shirley Jackson's two memoirs, *Life Among the Savages* (1953) and *Raising Demons* (1957), reveal the author's special attentiveness to the agency of material objects and advocate an understanding of family not as a group of human individuals, but as an assemblage of human and nonhuman actors, collectively participating and influencing the stories of the everyday. For this reason, it is productive to analyse the memoirs, which have been rather neglected by the critics<sup>1</sup>, in a new light, namely that of contemporary nonhuman turn theories, with which Jackson often seems to agree and to which she can be said to contribute.

The article will begin by introducing the theoretical background. The nonhuman turn will be presented as a successor to the linguistic turn; then, the understanding of material agency will be explained as proposed by Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett; finally, the role of literary texts in capturing material agency will be elaborated on. Following the theoretical section, the article will move onto the analysis of the memoirs. The three main elements will be discussed: how Jackson problematizes language and the usage of lists in her writing, how she opposes the purification of beings into clear-cut categories, and how she presents material objects as agentic and family as an agentic assemblage to which they belong.

The nonhuman turn is a term proposed by Richard Grusin to accommodate the varying theoretical approaches in humanities which share a common goal of "decentring the human in favor of a turn toward and concern for the nonhuman, understood variously in terms of animals, affectivity, bodies, organic and geophysical systems, materiality, or technologies" (Grusin 2015: vii). The label encompasses such contemporary approaches as animal studies, affect theories, assemblage theories, and new materialisms (Grusin 2015: viii), thus also including Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, Jane Bennett's vibrant materialism, and Bill Brown's thing theory. The nonhuman turn theories oppose human exceptionalism derived from the Kantian correlationism, which is "the belief that knowledge of the nonhuman world ha[s] to be correlated with or mediated by a priori human categories" (Grusin 2015: x-xii). For too long, Bruno Latour argues in *We Have Never Been Modern*, has human thought clung onto the Modern Constitution which artificially separated all beings into "two entirely distinct ontological zones" of humans and nonhumans, thus maintaining the culture/nature, subject/object, active/passive dualism and refusing to acknowledge the existence of hybrids "in the middle" (Latour [1991] 1993: 10, 37). One such example of a hybrid would be "material culture," or objects of human production, which in the most obvious way stands in the middle between nature and culture, in itself "a matter out of place" (Olsen 2003: 96).

During the reign of the so-call textual turn of the twentieth century, material culture came to be treated "as metaphor, as symbol, icon, message, and text—in short, as something other than itself" (Olsen 2003: 93-4). The language analogy forced material objects to only carry the symbolic meaning inscribed

1 The few articles that have been published mainly look at the memoirs as expressions of Jackson's Gothic writing, especially in terms of their depiction of the female role in the household. See, for instance: S. T. Joshi's "Shirley Jackson: Domestic Horror" (2005), "Eric Savoy's Between as if and is" (2017), Bernice M. Murphy's "Hideous Doughnuts and Haunted Housewives" (2020).

in them by humans, which was based on an unspoken assumption that meaning exists in an entirely separate realm "detached from matter," generated prior to human's first interaction with the material surroundings (Olsen 2010: 3). Such is the underlying basis of Roland Barthes' semiology, which equates material objects with speech acts and disregards materiality for the sake of identifying human ideological intentions (Barthes [1957] 1972).

In response to this limiting approach to objects, nonhuman turn theories try to bring them to the fore by proving that they are never simply "frames, scenes, or background for our actions," but "are intrinsically and indispensably involved in enabling those very actions" (Olsen 2010: 8). Such is the goal of Bruno Latour's actor-network theory: "assembling the collective," tracing the associations between all members of a more broadly-understood society, and identifying the previously ignored connections in a network (Latour 2005: 50). To oppose the Modern Constitution, which renders all objects as inert matter with no capacity for creativity, Latour dismantles the subject/object division altogether by propagating a new basic unit of participation, which applies to humans as much as to objects. An "actor," or an "actant" (Latour 2005: 54), is understood by Latour "not as the source of an action but the moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it" (Latour 2005: 46), or: "*any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference" (Latour 2005: 71). Actor is a term that simultaneously implies agency but also "the uncertainty about the origin of action," because the exact causation is never singular and never easy to pinpoint (Latour 2005: 46). Contemporary sociology, which is the field of studies Latour addresses in *Reassembling the Social*, fails to account for the variety and interdependency of actants participating in the formation of the "society," because it follows the Western philosophical tradition of maintaining the "asymmetry among human intentional action and a material world of causal relations" (Latour 2005: 76). Latour opposes such a narrow understanding of "action" and suggests instead extending it to include other beings. He does so by emphasizing the gradience of agency; there is no singularly defined agency but "many metaphysical shades between full causality and sheer inexistence" (Latour 2005: 71–72). Because objects "might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid and so on," they should be considered as actors (Latour 2005: 72) and their capacities should be captured in an adequate analysis instead of "a bad textual account ... [where] only a handful of actors will be designated as the causes of all the others, which will have no other function than to serve as a backdrop" (Latour 2005: 230).

Jane Bennett also addresses this long neglected material agency in her *Vibrant Materialism*, giving it the name of "vitality." Vitality, elsewhere in the book called "thing-power" (Bennet 2010: 6), is "the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and design of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (Bennet 2010: viii). What is important for Bennett, as it was for Latour, is the relationality of all beings. An individual object's powers should not be denied; they are, however, best activated when "distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field" called an "assemblage," term which Bennet borrows from Deleuze and Guattari (Bennet 2010: 23). An assemblage is where productivity is generated, and this kind of "effectivity proper to the grouping as such" differs significantly from an individual's capacities in isolation; agentic properties of an assemblage are "distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone" (Bennet 2010: 24). Importantly, there is no "head" to an assemblage which could dictate the functioning of all of its parts and determine the final outcome of an activity; thus, the "emergent properties" of an assemblage, born out of the variety of its elements, can create novelty in an unexpected way (Bennet 2010: 24). The pleasant surprise connected to a sense of "mobilizing rush,"

which such hybrid assemblages can produce, is what Bennett sets forth as the essence of “enchantment” of the material world as a world of “virtual possibilities” (Bennet 2001: 104).

It is necessary, many of the nonhuman turn theoreticians would argue, to “relearn to ascribe action, goals and power” to more beings than simply the human subject (Olsen 2003: 89). One way of doing so is through the means of writing, unlikely as it may sound. Latour writes that “[e]very single interview, narrative, and commentary, no matter how trivial it may appear, will provide the analysis with a bewildering array of entities to account for the hows and whys of any course of action” (Latour 2005: 47). He goes as far as to say that literature and film in particular should be considered a rich source of data and a methodological inspiration for the sociologists following the actor-network framework of thought (Latour 2005: 54-55). That is because arts, throughout history, managed to capture the various inter-playing actants in our everyday experiences. Not only can written texts be an ally on the quest towards a more democratic perception of agency (Olsen 2010: 17, 55), writing, as Bennett advocates, should become a consciously used political and ethical “project” of finding new techniques and rhetorical strategies capable of expressing a different set of ontological and epistemological beliefs (Bennet 2015: 225). In this understanding, art creations are “bodies that can light up, by rendering human perception more acute, those bodies whose favored vehicle of affectivity is less wordy: plants, animals, blades of grass, household objects, trash” (Bennet 2015: 235). Such texts can detect thing-powers and assemblages, translate them into words, and create in their readers “an aesthetic-affective openness to material vitality,” a kind of new “regimes of perception,” which would be a starting point for new ways of interacting with nonhumans (Bennett 2010: x, 180).

*Life Among the Savages* (1953) and *Raising Demons* (1957) both chronicle the humoristic adventures of Jackson’s fictionalized family consisting of her husband Stanley, four children (Laurie, Jannie, Sally, and Barry), four cats (Ninki, Shax, Yain, Gato), a dog by the name of Toby, rats, bats, and many uncannily active material objects (houses, furniture, kitchen utensils, a fridge, a furnace, a car, just to name a few). The narrative of Jackson’s memoirs is formed in an episodic fashion, allowing the reader to recognize the sometimes heavily edited versions of the original stories published in women’s magazines (Joshi 2005: 187), such as *Charm*, *Collier’s*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Harper’s*, *Mademoiselle*, *Woman’s Day*, and *Woman’s Home Companion*<sup>2</sup>. The episodic structure impacts the narration in a twofold way: it allows for large time jumps and thus creates a broader perspective on the dynamic life of the Hyman family; moreover, it emphasizes the co-dependency between various, broadly-understood members of the family. Starting approximately in year 1946 and ending around 1956, the memoirs span over ten years and include major life events, such as the family’s moving out, or the birth of Jackson’s two youngest children. It is, however, the events which appear minor and scarcely important in the grand scheme of things that are often at the heart of the episodes: a trip to a shopping mall, the loss of a sneaker, the breaking down of a furnace. The mundane is what gives rise to the funniest anecdotes which Jackson shares with her, especially at the time of publishing, largely housewife audience<sup>3</sup>.

2 The Penguin edition of *Raising Demons* from 2019 notes some of the original titles of the stories, such as “The Sneaker Crisis” or “The Clothespin Dolls.”

3 Nancy Walker identifies Jackson’s memoirs as part of the women’s humor writing, popular at that time in American history. As she writes, it is “the sub-genre of domestic humor that shows women interacting more often with Girl Scout cookies and mateless socks than with ideas” (Walker 1988: 10).

As previously noted, the memoirs commonly employ the technique of cataloging items, and the most obvious reason for that is the creation of a sense of realism in the depiction of the 1950s white suburban household, which Jackson's contemporary female readers could relate to. Lists, however, are a subject of reflection on their own. In one of the episodes, Jackson's narrator problematizes the very form of a list by arguing that it is a necessary step in the organization of a housewife's family if she wants to give it any sense of order: "the idea of a series of items ... forms the only possible reasonable approach to life if you have to live it with a home and a husband and children, none of whom would dream of following one another docilely" (Jackson [1953] 2019: 74). Ironically, however, what the creation of lists leads to is the exact opposite of order. The chaos-inducing capacity of lists is present throughout the memoirs, for example in the following instructions which Jackson's narrator prepares for her husband, Stanley, as she leaves to visit a friend:

Laurie lunch at Rob's, Jannie at home. Milk in refrigerator ... Sunday afternoon, supper, fudge, ICE SKATES, SWEATER. Home bedtime, school night, check homework, jellybeans. Barry Sunday breakfast cereal, bottle, lunch applesauce, cats milk Sunday morning ... Cube steaks in refrigerator ... DOZEN EGGS, LB. BUTTER, COTTAGE CHEESE. (Jackson [1957] 2021: 75–76)

By simplifying the message to its bare minimum in an attempt to facilitate her husband's understanding of it, Jackson's narrator ends up creating a chaotic, rushed list which conflates all types of categories: children, pets, food items, even time and space specifications. When everything in the house demands attention, there is no possibility of constructing a hierarchy of importance with regard to the household chores; all that we are left with is a multidirectional sense of urgency.

Elsewhere in the memoirs, when Jackson writes such passages as "children with pressing problems in elementary reading, and dishes on the table waiting to be washed, and dogs and cats clamoring for their supper" (Jackson [1953] 2019: 77), or "with the bacon in the pan in the house ready to fry and the coffee by now probably boiled dry, and my husband peacefully asleep" (Jackson [1957] 2021: 91), humans, animals, and material objects end up side by side, together belonging to a single mix with no differentiation of kind and degree, brought together by their shared goal of attracting the housewife's limited attention. As a result, one might go as far as to say that Jackson's heterogeneous lists tend to introduce a certain ontological flattening of beings. The world of Jackson's memoirs is one with no hierarchy and no pre-organized schedule, only a constant flow of "too much stuff" (Jackson [1957] 2021: 6), which rarely allows for contemplation, preferring feeling and immediate action instead. Even when contemplation is performed and lists are created as a result, they inevitably end up "logical, if ineffectual" (Jackson [1953] 2019: 75). Making a list, for instance, does not help in localizing a lost object in the blanket puzzle episode:

Laurie, in the top half of the double-decker, had my glass of brandy and my cigarettes and matches and the baby's pink pillow. The dog had my white pillow and my ashtray. Jannie in the guest room had one white pillow and one blue pillow and two glasses of fruit juice and my husband's cigarettes and matches and ashtray and Laurie's hot milk, besides her own hot milk and coffee cake and her father's onion rolls ... The puzzle is, of course, what became of the blanket from Sally's bed? (Jackson [1953] 2019: 136)

The reader cannot avoid the feeling of confusion upon reading such passages, which appear in the memoirs repeatedly. It is as though Jackson's realistic descriptions with their utmost attention to the material detail consistently fail at proving something necessary which is out of reach of the describing mind. No matter how accurate a description becomes, the extent to which everyday objects structure

reality and their capacity to creatively exercise agency always remains unimaginable and overwhelms linguistic tools. The blanket puzzle remains unsolved because the list does the opposite of organizing the objects: it exposes their inherent unruliness and their independence from language.

In his work titled *Alien Ontology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing*, Ian Bogost proposes that lists constitute one of the most effective ways of capturing the great multitude of beings when released from the shackles of anthropocentrism (Bogost 2012: 38). He chooses the term “ontography” to name “a general inscriptive strategy, one that uncovers the repleteness of units and their interobjectivity,” wherein “units” is Bogost’s neutral term equivalent to Latour’s actors (Bogost 2012: 38). One such example of using lists is “Latour litanies,” which connect great numbers of objects of strikingly different kinds by the mere use of commas (2012: 38). As Bogost explains, “[o]ntographical cataloging hones a virtue: the abandonment of anthropocentric narrative coherence in favor of worldly detail” (Bogost 2012: 41–42). Unlike some of the more “artificial” literary techniques, which arrange objects according to categories or causal chains, a list “disrupts beings, spilling a heap of unwelcome and incoherent crap at the foot of the reader” (Bogost 2012: 41). The commas in a list do not aim at cohesiveness and instead value the specificity of individual items. However, unlike Bogost’s lists which emphasize the “inherent partition” between “isolated, mutual aliens” (Bogost 2012: 40), Jackson’s ontography insists on the vibrant connections that remain present despite the initial moments of surprise and incoherence. Rather than isolation, it is the assemblage which informs Jackson’s lists; each item in a list impacts the others, even if only through their common connector: Jackson’s narrator. That is why, when she fantasizes about purchasing the perfect “demitasse cups,” she creates a list which inevitable circulates from the cups, through specific times of the day, rooms in the house, children, pets, and finally local people coming over for a visit (Jackson [1953] 2019: 77–78). Jackson’s narrator is aware that the mere act of acquiring such an object as a set of demitasse cups would impact her life in a manifold of ways, and her list, like an assemblage, provokes a creative potential that immediately spills out, causes unexpected change, and involves more and more actors.

Savoy suggests that “in the sheer compositional excess of Jackson’s catalog of household objects,” there exists a kind of “dark potentiality” which is “always already *just about* to spiral into the monstrous in a vividly imagined and not-so-distant futurity” (Savoy 2017: 840). Such an interpretation of the memoirs readily brings to mind Bill Brown’s conception of “thingness,” which is a sort of “potentiality” that inheres within any material object, a kind of “vitality” that can transform the object into a “thing” (Brown 2015: 5). Thingness, according to Brown, irrupts in the “momentary encounters—scenes of accident, confusion, emergency, contingency” when the object can “elicit your attention, interrupt your concentration, assault your sensorium” (Brown 2015: 32, 24). This happens most noticeably when the objects “stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy” (Brown 2001: 4). In other words, this hidden potency of an object suddenly reveals itself when the object loses its functional value, either manual or symbolic; that is when the additional “aspects of an object—sensuous, aesthetic, semiotic” become apparent (Brown 2015: 51). In the Latourian terms, it is in such moments of breakage, confusion, and uselessness that objects exhibit their most striking agency, which proves their role as “mediators” in the functioning of an entire network (Latour 2005: 81).

Always in flux, unpredictable and messy, playful or dangerous, endowed with intentions and feelings, the objects depicted in Jackson’s memoirs readily become Brown’s “things.” Many of the episodes have for their catalysts exactly such irruptions of thingness that are discussed by both Brown and Latour: when the alarm clock fails to wake Shirley up to prepare her children to school; when the furnace stops functioning and Shirley, home alone, is too scared to attempt fixing it; when the car breaks down, not

allowing Shirley to drive her children to school; or, when Laurie's sneaker goes missing, forcing Shirley to clean the entire house—these are some of the most striking examples. The way Jackson expresses the gothic character of objects' cunning, mysterious agency can at times bring to mind Latour's own sentiment and prose: "But if you are mixed up with trees, how do you know they are not using you to achieve their dark designs?" (Latour [1984] 1988: 194). Jackson's narrator is always mindful of the hidden capacities of objects, like "fuses and motorcycles and floor plugs and lightening rods and electric drills," which are all "hazardous appliances" that she has to approach with caution (Jackson [1953] 2019: 142). After all, how can Jackson's narrator know that her possessions are not secretly planning some great acts of mischief or violence? What if her car is able to "go out of control and rocket madly off the road" (Jackson [1953] 2019: 100)? What if the shopping mall escalator is "a machine ... intent upon trapping small unwary feet or, preferably, well-shod maternal feet" (Jackson [1953] 2019: 116)? What if the "villain refrigerator" makes "a kind of excited cackle" because it enjoys leaking poisonous gas (Jackson [1953] 2019: 190, 187)? Because of this frame of thinking, the Hyman family live in an environment of constant enchantment, and the narration is full of affective intensity of which Bennett writes in relation to onto-stories emphasizing the vibrant matter (Bennet 2001: 15). Interactions with objects, especially those most common and familiar, always entail strong sensations: confusion, fear, surprise, longing, amusement, irritation, as exemplified in the abovementioned quotations. That is why the idea of moving out makes the narrator sincerely and emotionally admit that "[t]he stairs and the walls and the positions of the light switches and the crack in the glass of the front door all became affectionate and familiar to us" (Jackson [1957] 2021: 2).

To the overall sense of ontological flattening equally contributes the personification of objects and animals, and the objectification of humans. In other words, beings tend to exhibit the properties which we do not typically attribute to their respective category, the most common case being the anthropomorphization of objects. Jackson's pieces furniture, for instance, "knew their way, fell naturally into good positions, as though snatching the best places before the city furniture could crowd in" (Jackson [1953] 2019: 17). The house into which the narrator's family eventually move looks so miserable before the renovation that "even the fences on either side and along the front leaned a bit away from it, without actually renouncing it, as though they deplored it privately" (Jackson [1953] 2019: 12). Describing her fictionalized car, Jackson writes: "I have been patient with my car through many of its moods, and there is little that we do not know about each other by now, the car and I" (Jackson [1953] 2019: 145–146). Elsewhere in the memoirs, a car is described as giving the "impression of deep embarrassment" and the salt and pepper shakers become "appalled" while observing her family's bickering at the kitchen table (Jackson [1957] 2021: 84, Jackson [1953] 2019: 185). Numerous other examples could be given, leading to the same conclusion: in the world of Jackson's memoirs, objects can have intentions, preferences, memories, dispositions, and feelings, just like humans do. Personification is extended to the animals as well, most notably Jackson's cats and dog, but even the mouse she catches by the tail is given the following description: "he hung head down, cursing and waving his fists at me" (Jackson [1957] 2021: 250).

Another swapping of identities that reappears in the memoirs is that of humans becoming likened to animals and objects. In the episode of catching the rat hiding in their house, Stanley grows so annoyed with the cats' inability to remove the intruder that he decides to take things into his own hands: "For the better part of a Sunday morning [Stanley] crouched dangerously at the open cellar door, waiting for the rat ... Our two excellent cats were also staying inside, sitting complacently and with some professional interest directly behind my husband" (Jackson [1953] 2019: 30). On fewer occasions human characters

are confused with objects. The narrator's daughter treats her as "an additional fixture to the car, a sort of extension of the steering wheel" (Jackson [1953] 2019: 169); elsewhere in the memoir, a nurse grabs the narrator's arm like a tool: "the same arm everybody else had been using that morning" (Jackson [1953] 2019: 66). Especially immune to the purification of ontological categories seem to be Jackson's children, who gladly identify with various objects in the recurring episodes of playfulness: "Sally sang, 'I'm a honey, I'm a popcorn, I'm a potato chip'" (Jackson [1953] 2019: 172), "I'm a rat and you're a fish," Sally sang" (Jackson [1953] 2019: 169), "Barry began to make a noise like a dump truck" (Jackson [1957] 2021: 259), "the same big box, full of something which giggled and kicked around considerably" (Jackson [1953] 2019: 206). Such instances of anthropomorphized objects, humanized animals, and objectified humans can be better understood in terms of the Latourian process of hybridization, but also through what Bennett calls "crossings." Crossings are those beings which, by their very nature, undermine the existence of clear-cut ontological categories, in marvellous and enchanting ways pointing to the creativity that results from the inter-species morphing within an assemblage (Bennett 2001: 30, 96).

Another prominent list of items appears at the start of *Raising Demons* when the Hymans are forced to move out of their current place of living by the sheer amount of their possessions. The hoarders that Shirley and Stanley appear to be, they do not part ways with their things easily; the lack of workable space comes to them as a surprise but also with "a strong sense of the inevitability of fate" (Jackson [1957] 2021: 3). Unable to choose what is worth keeping and what is not, they end up accidentally transferring such useless objects as empty crates, cakeboxes, and pieces of canvas which the storage company discovers in the "hidden lairs of junk" (Jackson [1957] 2021: 21). In this way, they expose their own inability to categorise and order the material. Perhaps, as Bennett writes of hoarders, their perception is skewed towards vibrancy and not instrumentality; they are "bad at subtraction / good at reception" and their "perceptual filter is unusually porous" (Bennet 2012: 246). When Mr. Cobb provides them with an analytical list of all of their possessions, the Hymans learn that their identification is nearly impossible when devoid of the everyday context and only being offered the limited categories, such as "Large Green Chest ... Scratched and Marred" (Jackson [1957] 2021: 21). Playing a guessing game with her husband and children, the narrator comes to realise that the material context and the agency within an assemblage are crucial elements of an object's identity: "Whenever I tried to picture the items on Mr. Cobb's list, think concretely of, say, the ashtrays and metronomes and bed tables and kitchen chairs, they fell automatically into place, as they had stood for so many years" (Jackson [1957] 2021: 24). Pondering on the things, Shirley reconstructs entire scenes from the past, narrating interactions that happened step by step. This is also the general function of the memoirs: it is an attempt at re-structuring the assemblage that is Jackson's family, an attempt at re-tracing the events and ascribing the agency which leads to each surprising and funny outcome. In the end, however, the household items always defy categorization and expose the inefficacy of language in capturing the materiality of objects.

When being mindful of the nonhuman turn theories, one may notice the often subtle ways in which Jackson gives voice to the complexity of the material objects as members of the family. As presented in the two memoirs, they are always a mediating presence, shaping the human subjects, transforming their agentic surroundings, and establishing the possible directions of events, often to the point of assuming the role of their initiators. Despite the human characters' attempts at listing, naming, and organizing them, the household items remain uncontrollable, thus challenging referentiality of language and defying the Modern Constitution that expects them to be passive and uncreative. The episodes that form the memoirs



hint at a more democratic ontological stance and can be perceived as “onto-stories” which help their readers detect and appreciate the object agency, through many scenes of ontological confusion, irruptions of thingness, and intense emotional engagement.

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Received:  
30.11.2023  
Reviewed:  
19.05.2024  
Accepted:  
21.06.2024

