

THING *AS* THEORY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE LONDON SCHOOL

STYLISTICS: A PROLEGOMENA TO A LONGER

NOTE.

As a phrase, 'a sense of things' can designate the sensation of thingness. It can also designate meaning, or the understanding (often the intuitive discernment) of an existing set of relations ("Sir, do you have a sense of things" "What's your sense of things?"). It is the convergences of, or the disjunctures between, that sensation and that understanding (between the senses and our cognitive sense-making) that serve as the focal points of my reading (Brown 17).

In an earlier paper, Brown raises the question of the need for theory: "Do we really need a theory of things like we need a theory of narrative, cultural theory,, queer theory or discourse theory"? (Critical Inquiry 28, 2001, 1-22). Like many other fugitive categories we use in literary criticism, "irony," "meaning," "genre," and the like I would suggest that the usefulness of a theory for "thing," for the reader/critic, must first be constrained by a clear definition, a distinct context, and some way to deal with the problems with the verb "is" (or one of its other forms).

May the facts be with us.

What I propose here is an suggested addendum to the current understanding of ThingASTheory, also its paradoxes, by first a look at some of the implications of Brown's statement that "thing" can be seen as "the understanding (often the intuitive discernment) of an *existing set of relations* ('Sir, do you have a sense of things' "What's your sense of things?"). By "set of relations" I take to mean typically the contexts we can expect "thing"

to be at home in—in both a syntactical and semantic sense and as well in a congruent ontological one.

The contexts I have in mind are 1) The London School Stylistics; 2) Proper Function; 3) Private/Public; 4) Wittgenstein's theory of "family resemblance"; 5) The language of economics—or a brief thought experiment on a possible context; 6) There is no reason to look, as we have done traditionally—and dogmatically—for one, essential core in which the meaning of a word is located and which is, therefore, common to all uses of that word. We should, instead, travel with the word's uses through "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing" (*PI* 66). Family resemblance also serves to exhibit the lack of boundaries and the distance from exactness that characterize different uses of the same concept. Such boundaries and exactness are the definitive traits of form—be it Platonic form, Aristotelian form, or the general form of a proposition adumbrated in the *Tractatus*. It is from such forms that applications of concepts can be deduced, but this is precisely what Wittgenstein now eschews in favor of appeal to similarity of a kind with family resemblance.

reference to salient concepts employed by London School Stylistics, namely (1) negation in both the realm of language and non-existence in the realm of things; (2) "motivated prominence," or the identification of what's at stake with this or that use (or absence of use) of ThingASTheory in any given context—all this by a close reading of its grammatical structure; (3) ThingASTheory in the context of proper function, a normative concept of what "thing" *should do*, as opposed to what it can, and does, do—a plow can,

for example, function as an ornament in one's front lawn but that is not, obviously, its proper function in performing the act of turning the earth to prepare it for seeding.

The first problem, it seems to me, with "thing theory," as a lexical set with ontological critical implications, is the presupposition of "as," "thing AS theory." A solution to the problem of how "thing" might, in all cases, refer to the same thing as "theory" is either fuzzy, or lacking altogether. It is lacking because we take typically the reference of "thing" as being to physical, concrete objects, and "theory" as referring to mental events, like metaphors and analogies, as an understanding of referring to the existence, an 'is,' of something perceptual, findable, verifiable. If X and Y refer to the same thing, then isn't it true to say that X and Y converge on the same thing? The answer, of course, is no. We may know that there is some kind of convergence going on between X and Y, but we may have no idea how or why they converge. The awesome representative power of "is" (as well as the other forms of "to be) can mislead us in the same way the ancient mind:body relationship problem does or the problem of God, as both *ens* and *essentia*, existence and essence, knowable in itself or by the "account" of the other (Aquinas).

A second problem, or aporia, with any lexical set, like ThingASTheory, two or more words, is the liminal space between "thing" and "theory." As we cross from one space, that of thing to that of theory—as we do in crossing the threshold of a door—we alter our perception, the movement of our body (hands, face, posture) and most of all our awareness of *difference* in all its forms as the effects of negation, what is not there; what could be there (expectation) what was remembered there and so on. The effect is not unlike the narrative of *The Odyssey* in which Odysseus exits, and later enters, the

everyday (to him) life of Ithaca as well as (during his journey home) the liminal spaces leading into the alien, fantastic and virtual (?) spaces of Circe, Cyclops, Land of the Lotus Eaters, Calypso and others. Time, movement, change are all the substance of liminal spaces, in language, perception of difference and the noticed and unnoticed transformation of things in everyday life.

Here we might want to call on the help of etymology, or origin (if known) and the history of "thing" and "theory" as well as that of "definition." It will perhaps turn out that the reader doesn't see much help here in making what is aporetic into making it "porous," or possibly transparent. But she or he might find, as I do that etymology has pedagogical value in opening students minds to a seldom taught "Thought-Category" and neglected heuristic (Curtius; see also Buck)

With "definition" we are always in its "shadows," a definition of "definition." One of these shadows is the etymology of "definition." The etymologies of certain key terms appear, for example, when Odysseus, after twenty years of roaming, see his old father again, he tells him that he comes from a "field of woe" (Alybas); that his name is Eperitos (struggle, or strife) and that he is the offspring of *Apheidas Polypemonides*, a "hard-scrabble life." Pindar interprets Themistios as *themba ispia*, or "sailspreader" and Aeschylus reads Helen's function in her name. In the *Cratylus*, Plato raises the question: do names have a "natural," by nature name," or do they originate by convention? With Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, we assume that "Tristram" refers to "sadness" and with Gulliver to "gullibility." Walter, the father of Tristram wanted the name of his newborn son to be "treismagistus," or thrice great. But Susannah, charged to carry the name to

Tristram's christening, inadvertently delivered it to the priest as "Tristram." (Curtius 495-97).

Names, in short, can potentially speak of the history, experience, and essence of he, she or what bears the name. So, with "definition," we can read (or let it speak) of "setting of boundaries," from Old French *definicion*, from Latin *definitionem* (nominative *definitio*), noun of action from past participle stem of *definire*. from 1640s; meaning "a statement of the essential nature of something" is from late 14c.; the special focus on words developed after c. 1550. Meaning "degree of distinctness of the details in a description or picture" (OED. See also "definition" in Online Etymological Dictionary. On a closer reading, *de-* speaks of "out of," "get rid of," "away from," etc. and "finish," "put an end to," "aporia," "blockage," "stoppage," etc. Expressed as a game, "definition" characterizes the difference between a finite and an infinite event. A finite game, for example, has a beginning, middle and end and employs players who freely enter the game with the purpose of winning. An infinite game has players. But they don't play to win. They only play to continue to play in a boundless, open, space. (Carse).

Existence and essence, in brief, can, in part, be known by the origin (if known) of a lexical set.

The etymology of "thing" is from the Proto-Germanic **thingam* "assembly" (source also of Old Frisian *thing* "assembly, council, suit, matter, thing"; through Middle Dutch *dinc* "court-day, suit, plea, concern, affair, thing," Dutch *ding* "thing," Old High German *ding* "public assembly for judgment and business, lawsuit" terms presupposing "affair, matter, thing," Old Norse *þing* "public assembly"). The Germanic word is perhaps

literally "appointed time," from a PIE *tenk- (1), from root *ten- "stretch," perhaps on notion of "stretch of time for a meeting or assembly."

"Theory" is said to be from Late Latin *theoria* (Jerome), from Greek *theoria* "contemplation, speculation; a looking at, viewing; a sight, show, spectacle, things looked at," from Greek *theorein* "to consider, speculate, look at," from *theoros* "spectator," from *thea* "a view," possibly from PIE root *wer- (4) "to perceive"

To see, in the sense of an epistemic belief, the potential in something, the capacity to become actual. .

ding an sich Kant. The thing cannot be solely understood by perception or reason. it can only be known, like God, the Soul, Consciousness, through faith.

I contradict myself? Well, the

But first a brief look at the aporetic, fugitive, nature of ThingASTheory.

here is a modified *reductio ad absurdum* on thing AS theory, one which takes the form of exhibiting the self-defeating character of functions of things. You think, don't you, that I am thinking of Occam's Razor, don't you? No chance. Well, maybe.

A procedure I find useful, at least in a pedagogical context, is initially taking a negative approach to "thing," asking what the term cannot perform as a lexical set. This, in essence, equates with identifying what context "thing" cannot occupy, what is unacceptable. So please consider the following sequence: "The thing is..."; "the things things say," (Lamb); "things things do"; "the things things feel";

n I contradict myself. Walt Whitman.

A second, more substantial, "shadow" of "definition" is context, the container of the object contained.

itself often a fugitive concept, and the impossibility of determining how, and why, distinct concepts, expressed as lexical sets (mind/body; truth/falsity; feel/see and the like) converge on the same object.

I begin with writing the first sentence—and trusting to Almighty God for the second (Tristram Shandy 8:540)—in this case, the first, next paragraph and the next after because, in part, I write with a computer not a quill pen.

I propose we do a London School Stylistics close reading of Sterne's 226 uses of "thing" (I take a peek at the 107 uses of the plural "things" at the end of this essay)—the purpose being to discover, or stumble upon, the name and nature of the convergence, and later emergence, of the purpose of thing as theory.

Brown's question, "why do we need theory," is a good one, even given the pluripotency of the term. We get a 'feel' for its significance by considering its etymology

(as a thought-category), its function in the dual realms of negation in language and in the realm of non-existence—that is, what is not theory? What does it not refer to?

So what is the London School Stylistics?

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Miller, John William. *The Definition of the Thing with Some Notes on Language*. New York: W.W Norton 1987. See also Miller's *The Paradox of Cause and other Essays*.

ⁱ There is no reason to look, as we have done traditionally—and dogmatically—for one, essential core in which the meaning of a word is located and which is, therefore, common to all uses of that word. We should, instead, travel with the word's uses through “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing” (*PI* 66). Family resemblance also serves to exhibit the lack of boundaries and the distance from exactness that characterize different uses of the same concept. Such boundaries and exactness are the definitive traits of form—be it Platonic form, Aristotelian form, or the general form of a proposition adumbrated in the *Tractatus*. It is from such forms that applications of concepts can be deduced, but this is precisely what Wittgenstein now eschews in favor of appeal to similarity of a kind with family resemblance.