

# Object Lessons

*The Novel as a Theory of Reference*

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## Gaskell's Lost Objects

In the spring and summer of 1980, before he died of lung cancer at the age of thirty-four, Gareth Evans worked to prepare his book on the philosophy of reference for publication. Chapters that were more or less written were extensively rewritten, and chapters 6 and 7, “Demonstrative Identification” and “Self-Identification,” were roughly compiled from graduate lectures given that year. Editor John McDowell, Evans’s friend and colleague, writes that much of Evans’s thinking in chapters 6 and 7 was “altogether new,” and that Evans was rushing to draft a “radical revision” of those chapters when he died in early August. Throughout, McDowell’s interpretation of Evans’s manuscript is silent; chapters 6 and 7 in particular are notes that McDowell “worked . . . up into prose,” with passages and ideas Evans was dissatisfied with revised to reflect his later views; the organization of individual sections is the product of “guesswork,” and snatches of argument that could not be integrated into the bulk of the material are sutured into footnotes and appendices. “In all this,” writes McDowell, “it seemed best to effect changes without remarking on them, rather than to burden the text with a complex apparatus of brackets and editorial footnotes.”<sup>1</sup>

Evans never titled his book, but he revised the title of a course on the philosophy of reference from “The Essence of Reference”

to “The Varieties of Reference,” on the logic that the course should provide a detailed investigation of *how* a conception of singular terms works rather than what a reference to a singular term *is*. As we will see, it is significant that McDowell is, by necessity, everywhere visible and nowhere identifiable in *The Varieties of Reference* (1982), disclosing the essence of Evans’s argument without tracking the interventions he makes. Indeed, much that is claimed for the practice of reference in Evans’s book can be usefully framed by the conditions of its publication. Moreover, the effort to produce a theory of reference that is removed from both the subject referring and the object referred to can be meaningfully unpacked by—and have powerful implications for—the structuring preoccupations of an altogether different kind of writing, the realist novel. While we know that realist novels can be cleaved off from other proximate genres because of their ability to generate references to things, often absent things, that have an order about them, what is rarely shown is that these novels are actually *about* the many *how*s of referring, the varieties rather than the essence of their references. McDowell’s phrasing is useful here: finding the lost object—in one case Evans, in another, a letter, a toy, or a cat—presents us with the burden of capturing the sense of its difference from all other things, while challenging us to say just enough about how we came to pick it out. In a review of *The Varieties of Reference*, Stephen Schiffer writes that it “is not the book that Gareth Evans would have published had he lived.”<sup>22</sup> This is the kind of sentence that would give Evans much to think about, and I believe that it could produce new thinking about the impact that referential logic has on the form of the realist novel.

The effect of McDowell’s ghostwriting is felt most strongly in chapters 6 and 7, which gave him the least amount of material to work from, and the resulting change in style creates an unsettling effect for the reader. A casual reader of McDowell’s own prose would recognize his long, heavy clauses, or notice that the chapters are twice as bulky, or that the appendices are either excerpts from previously published work or direct responses to

Evans's thinking. So much of the force and relevance of Evans's argument depends upon the ideas presented in those chapters that it seemed to MacDowell appropriate to try to capture their argument without "excessive reverence" for the contours of their fragments (Evans, *VR*, v). This is somewhat uncanny, since the thoughts about particular, external objects that have dominated the argument of the book until chapter 6 (thoughts that Evans calls "this'-thoughts") turn to thoughts about self-identification in chapters 6 and 7 (thoughts that Evans calls "I'-thoughts"), and when Evans makes this turn, what he is in effect saying is that an idea of oneself must be built of the same stuff as an idea of an external object. Evans writes that a subject "must have the idea of himself as one object among others; and he must think of the relations between himself and objects he can see and act upon as relations of exactly the same kind as those he can see between pairs of objects he observes" (Evans, *VR*, 163). If somehow we were reading these lines without thinking of Evans himself as an object in relation or without thinking of Evans thinking of himself as such an object, he makes his position explicit:

"I"-thoughts are not, as is sometimes suggested, restricted to thoughts about states of affairs "from the point of view of the subject." Nor can the thoughts I have been discussing be hived off from genuine self-conscious thought, for example by suggesting that by "I will die," I mean that Gareth Evans will die. Not at all; there is just as much of a gap between the knowledge that Gareth Evans will die and the self-conscious realization that I will die as there is between any thought to the effect that  $\emptyset$  is  $F$  and the self-conscious thought that I am  $F$ . It is not wholly inaccurate to say that I grasp such an eventuality by thinking of myself in the way that I think of others; this is just another way of saying that the fundamental level of thought about persons is involved. But it is of course essential that I am aware that the person of whom I am thinking *is myself*; certainly I must have in mind what it is for [ $\emptyset$  is dead] to be true, for arbitrary  $\emptyset$ , but I must also have in mind what it is for [ $\emptyset = I$ ] to be true. (Evans, *VR*, 210)

Several of these phrases cut too close to the bone to be ignored: “eventuality” and “realization” are dramatic examples, and the transition of the “ $\emptyset$ ” to “I” visually encodes the self as an empty set. But the phrases “I am *F*” and “arbitrary  $\partial$ ” are equally brutal, simply in virtue of their being such acute and dispassionate registers of Evans’s own “state of affairs.” The movement of Evans’s prose supports this affective engagement; the force of his italics at the end of “the person of whom I am thinking *is myself*” knocks us over, and the neatly tucked-in “from the point of view of the subject” is flattened out into the word “Nor.” (Evans often uses this bratty construction to break a discredited view.)

He turns himself into a case study more than once in the text, in sections he both rewrote and compiled, so we should be confident reading these references as Evans’s way of incorporating—in the most literal sense—a lost thing into his logic, an incorporation that is deliberately in line with the self-presenting structure of his theory of reference. Evans earlier unpacks the demonstrative identification statement “That player will die of cancer” (Evans, *VR*, 148), and when he illustrates the idea that we can grasp propositions about ourselves even if we are “incapable of deciding, or even offering grounds for” them, he offers up some visceral cases: “I can grasp the thought that I was breast fed, for example, or that I was unhappy on my first birthday, or that I tossed and turned last night, or that I shall be dragged unconscious through the streets of Chicago, or that I shall die” (Evans, *VR*, 209). The “will die” and the “shall die” in these cases offer some narrative closure for the reader who is holding a posthumously published book, but they also reflect the meanings of sentences whose referents are unstable. When we read the embedded, anonymous “player” as actually picked out of his game to die “of cancer,” this reading embraces “of” as a sign of both derivation and distance. And to say that the I that is unhappy, or tossed, or dragged, or a baby, or a bad sleeper, or in Chicago, “shall die,” is a choice that refuses to conceptually delimit “shall,” since it rings of intentions, plans, and expectations, which does

the work of making it a proposition that can take more than one object, which Evans obviously intends.

Thus, we can read Evans's discussion of "I"-thoughts as the most trenchant iteration of the argument at the center of *The Varieties of Reference*, as well as its inevitable vanishing point. We have learned that what Evans calls the gap "between the knowledge that Gareth Evans will die and the self-conscious realization that I will die" is transferable to thoughts about being unconscious, being asleep, and being dead, in that we can offer no "grounds" for our ability to think them. We have learned that contending with this gap requires a conceptual "grasp" of the conditions under which we could think about them and of what it would mean to be able to satisfy those conditions. And we have learned that we therefore grasp an eventuality of the kind "I will die" by forming knowledge "at a fundamental level" about what it would mean for another person, an arbitrary  $\partial$ , to die, which, in turn, enables us to plug ourselves and others into an infinitely combinable series of discrete propositions. Once we possess the *concept* of death, in other words, we can make all kinds of projections that involve it. Evans calls this condition on reference the "Generality Constraint": If a subject can entertain the thought  $a$  is  $F$ , then she must have the conceptual resources for entertaining the thought that  $a$  is  $G$ , in however many ways of being  $G$  she can come up with: "Thus someone who thinks that John is happy and that Harry is happy exercises on two occasions the conceptual ability which we call "possessing the concept of happiness." And similarly someone who thinks that John is happy and that John is sad exercises on two occasions a single ability, the ability to think of, or think about, John" (Evans, *VR*, 101). The Generality Constraint is a kind of emplotment, in that it is built of a set of abilities rather than elements. If you understand that  $a$  is  $F$ , you can generate lines of thought like  $a$  is  $G$ , and  $a$  is  $H$ , but also that  $b$  is  $F$  and  $c$  is  $F$ , and so on. "This  $a$  is  $F$ " is a commutable point on a graph. And holding a posthumously published book by a writer who refers to his own death explicitly performs that commutability.

In order to understand why Evans's self-implicating use of the Generality Constraint is interpenetrated with the work that realism does in the novel, we must understand the intervention he is making. Evans is trying to account for how we intuitively understand propositions about empty singular terms, a class that entails fictional referents. We accept as intelligible the statement, "That novel that Jami has been analyzing sure sounds fascinating," even though, so far, "that novel that Jami has been analyzing" doesn't exist. Frege and Russell came to two complementary conclusions about the way propositions like this work, both of which Evans finds untenable.

Frege created a puzzle for himself in claiming that, because the referent of "That novel that Jami has been analyzing sure sounds fascinating" is coextensive with that of "That fictitious prose narrative that Jami has been discussing sure sounds fascinating," then these statements have the same meaning. But clearly, these statements can be differently understood; their "mode of presentation" is different. Since Frege's project is to define the shape of a public language, he had to revise his theory to incorporate the condition that in order to understand an utterance containing a singular term like *novel*, a person must not only think of a particular object, but think of it in a particular way. This way of understanding *novel* must be embedded in *novel*, it must travel with *novel*, and it must be the condition under which *novel* is understood. Frege calls the way we understand a term its "sense," and he comes to the conclusion that if we are going to have a thought about an utterance containing the term *novel*, then we have to understand its sense, so it must be this sense that *novel* refers to. The problem with this, as Evans sees it, is that Frege isn't telling us *how* we acquire a sense of things in the first place, and so proper names like "Urizen" may contain and communicate a sense without referring to anything. Frege tries to account for this with a theory of fictionality: thoughts about fictional, or "mock" objects produce "mock" thoughts. Such terms have a sense, but not the same kind of sense. This move is hedgy, if not fundamentally contradictory. The Generality Constraint gives us

an airtight *process* of referring, so that a name can be descriptively introduced to us—“Urizen, according to Wikipedia, is the embodiment of conventional reason and law”—and then made available to any and all other thoughts that include “Urizen.”

Russell did not believe that sentences like this one about Urizen are fictional; he thought they were “nonsense,” by which he meant that they said nothing at all. This stringent criteria for the meaningfulness of propositions is entailed by Russell’s more fundamental belief that in order for someone to have a thought about something, he or she has to know which particular thing in the world he or she is talking about. Russell’s Principle stipulates that there are two ways of maintaining contact with such an object: either one is directly, or has a memory of being, acquainted with it (“demonstrative identification”), or one can think of it as uniquely satisfying a description (“descriptive identification”). Obviously, the idea that empty singular terms generate “nonsense” or are “fictional” is complicated for Evans by exactly the self-referring cases above: one can grasp a proposition about oneself such as “I will die” without being able to have grounds for it.

This leads Evans to two interrelated conclusions. The first he pulls from Frege: descriptive identification *cannot* satisfy Russell’s Principle, because even if a singular term like “Urizen” is empty, the term may still have a sense, and the description that attaches to it may be understood. The second he finds in Russell: because the intention to use a demonstrative singular term cannot exist in a vacuum, the term must also engage a “demonstrative thought” in the listener. This means that the well-grounded utterance of the statement that “*a* is *F*” requires an audience who hears “that *a* is *F*, is what the speaker is saying” (Evans, *VR*, 306). The listener’s thoughts *are* Russellian in that they must depend on her perceiving the object, too, but in order for her to think of the object in the particular *way* that the speaker presents it (Frege’s point), she needs to have a discriminating conception of that object (Russell’s Principle). This selective combination of criteria galvanizes “I will die” as crucial to Evans’s thinking, and

may be extended to any understanding of ungrounded references. The only way that Evans can understand the proposition that he will die is to be able to track the movement from knowing that *a* is *F* to knowing that *a* is *G*; “I will die” can be reliably projected if he is acquainted with a series or combination of concepts, so even if they are not directly visible to him, he can have thoughts about them. It is important that we see Evans’s argument in *The Varieties of Reference* coming from the larger theories of Frege and Russell, because then we can see what he leaves out: Evans refuses the idea that we can have a theory of singular terms that ignores *how* we have them. We can’t scapegoat fictionality: we can’t rely on the truth-values of descriptive identifications when the descriptions themselves may do some of the work of referring just fine, and we shouldn’t ignore the idea that thoughts can make connections in the same ways that demonstrative identifications can. The sequence from *a* to *b* to *c* and *F* to *G* that underwrites the Generality Constraint illuminates the fundamental ground of difference between objects in the world and the conditions under which they can be understood. So Evans says, yes, if we want to refer to something, we have to know which thing it is that we are referring to, but the way we know that is by *knowing what it means for a proposition about that object to be true*. And the Generality Constraint is built to show us that.

Thus far, I have taken the position that Evans’s argument is about tracking ungrounded references, and yet the title of this chapter promises something slightly more literary in the finding of lost things. The case for that drama is made, I think, in the examples Evans gives of his own death, which are not only moving in their implications, but are folded into a book that contains references to those implications on every page. The last sentences of Evans’s introduction suggests that the study of self-identification in which the references appear was an initial gesture toward a broader investigation of what things are, such that they could be lost. Evans writes that, “like a cautious builder,” he tried to make the work comprehensive, but goes on as follows: “However, there is one important limit that I have observed: I have ignored ques-

tions of *ontology*. I have not enquired into what it means to say, or how one might establish, that speakers have an ontology which comprises this or that kind of object. I have supposed myself to be working within a scheme of interpretation for the language which fixes the interpretation of, and hence fixes the objects capable of satisfying, its predicates; the questions which I want to discuss arise after these decisions have been made” (Evans, *VR*, 3).

If we characterize the question that ultimately eludes him as, What constitutes the object that can generate all of these propositions in the first place? we can see that what Evans fails to do is look at the “gap,” the negative space between *a* and *b* and *c*, as possessing the capacity to meaningfully delimit *a* and *b* and *c*. The rest of this chapter posits that a study of that gap shows us how self-presenting objects associated through the Generality Constraint actually *are*. But by way of managing expectations, I should acknowledge that all of the readings of the gap that I initially considered and discarded are the ones my readers might be looking forward to. These readings include the following: reading gaps as necessarily positive (if they can’t be negative); reading gaps as constitutive of the things they separate; and reading gaps as narratives that tell us of how particular objects get semantically grouped. Like Evans, I found that none of these readings actually tells us much about how we refer. Gaps are gaps, and we should leave them as they are. But novels can be *about* the gaps, and the cases they present have the particularity and concreteness of a case study. As such, they offer readymade what Evans worked to theorize: a “constraint” on generalities.

Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford*, which was published sporadically in Charles Dickens’s magazine *Household Words* from December 1851 to May 1853 and then released as a single volume in June 1853, is currently everywhere. Since 2005, *Cranford* has been the focus of about fifty articles, dissertations, and book chapters, and the five-hour BBC series *Elizabeth Gaskell’s Cranford* that aired from November to December 2007 was so popular that it produced a two-hour sequel, called *The Cranford Christmas Special* that aired in December 2009. *Cranford’s* investment in

the nature of projectable things seems to have made it intensely available to two specific occasions: Christmastime, and the rise of thing theory in literary criticism.

The first episode of the novel appeared in the Christmas issue of *Household Words*, and generally speaking, the novel has a holiday spirit. As a compassionate portrait of old-fashioned women in a rural town, whose struggle with “elegant economy” necessitates descriptions of the stuff of domestic decorum,<sup>3</sup> *Cranford* traffics in the disposable markers of the passing of time that you see shot through something like “A Christmas Carol.” In fact, the first episode ends with a character reading “A Christmas Carol” “for a good long spell” just because it was “left on a table” (22). The repetition of time-sensitive routines like reading, dressing, knitting, letter-writing, and the conspicuous consumption of lots of tiny food measures the novel out in large, relatively interchangeable chunks, although we may agree with Andrew Miller that the repetition of habits in *Cranford* generates the movement of its two larger, linear plots. These plots are also about objects: one is about the failure of a bank, and one is a detective story involving a lost brother. Miller argues that “the indeterminate narrative structure which emerges from the juxtaposition of these linear and recursive forms” produces characters who “oscillate between two models of identity, one conventional and the other idiosyncratic.”<sup>4</sup> This entailment is common for readers of sentimental novels, but it is also ultimately a little incomplete: objects that are threatening to become more than objects by potentially destabilizing the narrative’s teleology are often ascribed “identities,” and the fluctuations are thereby incorporated and understood as innately human. For example, one of Dickens’s Christmas stories is called “Somebody’s Luggage.” This luggage—which is picked out for us simply because it belongs to nobody in particular and is neither discernibly singular nor plural—projects such a surfeit of associations that one wonders if tracking the misadventures of “the luggage that is somebody’s” could lead us to a razor’s edge between the unfamiliar and the intelligible. (It doesn’t.)

The last line of *Cranford*—“We all love Miss Matty, and I

somehow think we are all of us better when she is near us” (160)—shows us how an opening premise like “the luggage that is somebody’s” can get nailed to an occasion in a way that complicates our efforts to account for its instability. *Cranford* walks just a step or two ahead of the object it is memorializing here; the infinite sequence of possibilities open to it is tossed into “somehow,” and therefore the question of *how* we refer that Evans would say undergirds the entire sequence of gaps and thoughts produced by a demonstrative identification is dismissed by an umbrella term, “nearness.” The associative tracking of an object that gets aligned with everyday habits in *Cranford* is stuck to the kind of late-breaking gratitude characteristic of holiday fiction, and the result is a fuzzy claim about essences that self-presents as transitory and contingent. Unpacking this claim is the project of thing theory in literary criticism, an approach that would say that sentimentality is a criteria for and a condition of Miss Matty’s place in the text. This final description of her as a “near” thing, according to thing theory, cashes out the habitual actions that mark time in the novel in favor of a quasi-memorialization that engorges the space and time between things in order to fill it in.

Is the rise of thing theory really comparable, as an occasion, to the coming of Christmas? Consider a story Bill Brown tells at the beginning of *A Sense of Things* about being in a poetry workshop: “Then—honestly—I started to write a poem, a Christmas poem: a joke, composed as a child’s letter to Santa Claus that asked for things with ideas in them. The poem closed with the image of a small boy wildly unwrapping a package, then unwrapping the thing within the package, tearing away layers of plastic, wild-eyed to get to the idea.”<sup>5</sup> The “occasion” is consistent with the objective behind this joke—“no ideas but in things” is something you *do*, and, like a joke itself, it is something that is done *to* you. Brown turns to a passage from Mark Twain’s *Autobiography* to illustrate that finding the historical ontologies of things is structurally like an interpersonal encounter that, like the child with a gift, involves a slip from possession to identification. In

this case, the *Autobiography* gives us a “textual occasion wherein, rather than bequeathing his house to his daughter, Twain grieves her loss through its loss”:

A man's house burns down. The smoking wreckage represents only a ruined home that was dear through the years of use and pleasant associations. By and by, as the days and weeks go on, first he misses this, then that, then the other thing. And when he casts about for it he finds that it was in that house. Always it is an *essential*—there was but one of its kind. . . . It will be years before the tale of lost essentials is complete, and not till then can he truly know the magnitude of his disaster.<sup>6</sup>

It is the *essential* quality of the lost object apprehended in the occasion of its magnitude that is most salient for Brown, as Twain “continues to identify with his daughter as the lost object, unwilling to detach himself, and he becomes increasingly aware of what within the object he has lost.”<sup>7</sup> Twain is memorializing, melancholic, and is, like Brown himself, trying to find things to think with. For Brown, this occasion reveals to us a power in objects that can't be entirely epistemological.

John Plotz will direct this point at the Victorian novel in *Portable Property* (2008), arguing that the novel is full of “properly doubled” objects, which are sentimentalized because they possess both a fiscal and transcendent value, rendering them “resonant but potentially marketable.”<sup>8</sup> He uses *Cranford* to explain: “[Here] we find a novel defined by a virtual armory of objects moving readily between and among rival schemes of value, objects whose status as both commodities and inalienable possessions marked them out not as spoiled hybrids, but as ideal sites of sentiment. Two questions shape *Cranford*: first, what sort of possessions are endowed with the most sentimental meaning? Second, what relationship do such objects have to the dangerous world of promiscuous circulation?”<sup>9</sup> The “sentimental energy” of objects in *Cranford* is predicated on a meaning that is both particular to someone and capable of circulating as reified value, but the energy itself is largely produced in the process of gifting

things that carry auras, “by association,” with the people who left them. Plotz calls this a “public form of portable privacy,”<sup>10</sup> and *Cranford* doesn’t let us forget the privation in that privacy, the absent thing, or person, or event that invested the thing with value. Christina Lupton responds to Plotz, as well as similar work on things in *Cranford* by Adela Pinch, Elaine Freedgood, Hilary Schor, and Talia Schaffer, in an effort to mobilize a reading of *Cranford* as “a test case for thing theory . . . because of its willingness to be read like the papers and fabrics that defy a distinction between sign and message at the level of its plot.” She argues that the novel is an emergent “technotext” in that it speaks to its own materiality as a thicket of paper that is cut up, touched, and taken seriously in its material form.<sup>11</sup> This materiality, though it is said to “get beyond the dichotomies of sign and essence; depth and surface; metaphor and metonym,” ultimately depends on viewing the surface of paper as an essence itself.<sup>12</sup> Lupton is taking up the point that history, consciousness, and subjectivity happen in contact with surfaces and textures. *Cranford*’s failed banknotes are examined and passed around, “the hard reminder of failures of semiotic signification.”<sup>13</sup> It is again the encounter with things that pulls the novel up against its own materiality as a social text and pulls readers into its narrative as characters themselves.

Evans’s problem with ontology is not that it is indeterminate—things may be like humans and humans may be like things—or that some things can acquire a certain kind of conceptual “status” that makes them representable or exchangeable. Rather, Evans believes that all thinking that relies on ontological claims has limitations, and that any attention to spatiotemporal particulars should begin with “a scheme of interpretation for the language which fixes the interpretation of, and hence fixes the objects capable of satisfying, its predicates” (Evans, *VR*, 3). His approach isn’t a rejection of the idea that objects can be interpreted as conveying different kinds of meaning (Frege’s position is that objects can be differently meaningful given the different propositional attitudes of the speakers who are encountering them), and it certainly isn’t a rejection of the idea that one can

think of oneself as an object among other objects (we've read "Gareth Evans will die" in this way). Rather, what Evans means is that when an object has a property like "sentimental," or "lost," it only has that property because it is distinguished from other objects via some ground of difference appropriate to that property. Because the space between subjects and objects is so fluid in thing theory—Brown says that we are "possessed by our possessions"<sup>14</sup>—the encounter that arrests our attention to and fixes our interpretation of the objects that are capable of satisfying predicates like "is lost" or "is sentimental" often skirts the question of how we are able to refer to those objects in the first place. This is a serious problem for historical ontologies, especially if the objects that are the most available for that analysis, or are the most enthralling to its practitioners, are of a sort that lingers long after an occasion without being directly perceivable.

*Cranford* has been asked to map too many encounters with things to deserve a fresh inventory of its cups and saucers, so we will limit ourselves to some balls. About halfway through the novel, in a chapter disarmingly called "The Panic," a couple of robberies rock Cranford, and the women spend their evenings walking one another home and making regular expeditions around their kitchens with pokers, brushes, and shovels. One particularly candid evening, they share their darkest fears and the precautions they take to combat them. Our narrator, Mary Smith—who, as J. Hillis Miller has noted, capriciously widens and narrows the focus of her authority from "we" to "she" to "I"<sup>15</sup>—is afraid of "eyes—eyes looking at me, and watching me, glittering out from some dull flat wooden surface; and that if I dared to go up to my looking-glass when I was panic-stricken, I should certainly turn it round, with its back towards me, for fear of seeing eyes behind me looking out of the darkness" (98). The novel is obviously demonstrating a sensitivity to the way that perception works here, perhaps a way that implicates the commitments of its narrative voice—but there is a striking ground of difference between eyes "glittering out from some dull flat wooden surface" and eyes "looking out of the darkness," one pair

in front, one behind. It is suggested here in the shared preposition *out*—why not *at me?*—that the gesture internal to Mary’s story, turning the mirror to look away from the one who is looking, will only produce another set of eyes that glitter out at her through the back of the mirror, dull and flat though it is. It is suggested that the gap from one ground of difference to another, the gap whose mutually deterritorializing content is found in the “out” of something that we spin our mirrors to traverse. The route from the dull and flat to the darkness, from *a* to *b*, takes us through “out,” through a mirror that, because its use is to expel the concept that one is being looked out at, to expel the “I” that looks at “me,” is good for nothing *but* outs.

One of the reasons why we have to reject the idea that we could come to see these gaps as positive rather than negative spaces, or as narratives that tell us how particular objects get semantically grouped, is that here we have a gap unlike that between “Gareth Evans will die” and “I will die,” or between “I will die” and “I will live.” What we have instead is an irrational fear (that is not a hallucination) that doesn’t demonstratively identify anything except maybe “my looking-glass,” which is undone as a well-grounded identification even as it is uttered by the syllogistic “if I dared . . . I should.” And yet the novel asserts that this fear has a very real semantic structure, hinged on the preposition “out,” that enables us to imagine associations and to project the specific contingency that eyes could surface on the back of the mirror. But, crucially, Mary does not make that leap; we cannot be secure in the prediction that she has the ability to understand “indefinitely many” statements about this mirror, given the qualities she has attached to it. And this is a very strange claim, since “seeing eyes behind me” is so proximate to “seeing eyes behind my mirror,” when “me” and “my mirror” are connected by the mirror’s “back” and my “behind.” The speaker is standing in the gap between these two eventualities, and yet when she grasps the mirror, it is only really “grasped” for us as a logical bridge between these two grounds of difference.

It should be said that the question of fictionality is largely im-

material for Evans. He treats novels in *The Varieties of Reference*, but he doesn't treat them as exceptional cases of demonstrative identification, where someone engaging in a conversation about what happens in a novel needs to have an understanding of the identity-conditions of its objects. For Evans, an utterance about what happens in a novel is just another site where one's ability to understand a proposition is projectible, given a set of objects and ideas about them (including, of course, the idea that one is reading a novel). This should inoculate us against the concern that the conditions of our applying the Generality Constraint to fictional texts are founded on or constitute some hideous misconstrual. But it does enable us, in the same way that holding Evans's posthumous work enables us, to consider objects as lost in a particular way—not, that is, as things that possess us with our own investment in them, but as objects we can have thoughts about that include “there is a gap *here*,” which let us know what it means to think those thoughts.

The description of Miss Matty's fear is even more specific, and her precaution is not only strange, but strangely projected in the novel. It will be productive here to take in the sequence as a single example, because fundamental identifications can only be made if an object is identified on a cognitive map that represents, simultaneously, the spatial relations of all of the objects constituting the frame of reference within which that identification is made. And as we have seen, the causal structure of precautions goes a long way toward revealing that frame of reference. After our narrator's confession, Miss Matty nerves herself up for her own:

[E]ver since she had been a girl, she had dreaded being caught by her last leg, just as she was getting into bed, by some one concealed under it. . . . [I]t was very unpleasant to think of looking under a bed, and seeing a man concealed, with a great fierce face staring out at you; so she had bethought herself of something—perhaps I had noticed that she had told Martha to buy her a penny ball, such as children play with—and now she rolled this ball under the bed every night; if it came out the other side, well and good; if not, she always took care to have her hand on the bell-rope. (98)

When the robbery panic has subsided, Matty turns the ball into a gift for the child of a famous magician. Matty is found “covering her penny ball—the ball that she used to roll under her bed—with gay-coloured worsted in rainbow stripes,” and when asked why she is giving it to the magician’s child, she says, “Although her father is a conjuror, she looks as if she had never had a good game of play in her life” (105). While she knits the ball over, she tells this story:

“My father once made us,” she began, “keep a diary in two columns: on one side we were to put down in the morning what we thought would be the course and events of the coming day, and at night we were to put down on the other side what really had happened. It would be to some people a rather sad way of telling their lives” —(a tear dropped upon my hand at these words)—“I don’t mean that mine has been sad, only so very different to what I expected. . . . [D]o you know, I dream sometimes that I have a little child—always the same—a little girl of about two years old; she never grows older, though I have dreamt about her for many years. I don’t think I ever dream of any words or sound she makes; she is very noiseless and still, but she comes to me when she is very sorry or very glad, and I have wakened with the clasp of her dear little arms around my neck. Only last night—perhaps because I had gone to sleep thinking of this ball for Phoebe—my little darling came in my dream, and put up her mouth to be kissed, just as I have seen real babies do to real mothers before going to bed. But all this is nonsense, dear! (107–8)

The ball rolled under the bed to mark the space where a man would be is covered in stripes for the child of a conjuror by a woman who conjures her own child, the child itself the trace object of a projection about Matty’s life that is measured backwards, by her father, in columns. I might have found a way to say that more directly, but not much more directly, because even if there were a linear chronology to be sketched, the correlations within it that make it about one object do so in virtue of the gaps that exist between them—and the ball is tracking and measuring that gap.

Matty's diary frames the entire sequence as an exercise in referring to that which did *not* happen to her—there is no man under the bed, or under the sheets, and there is no child, no mouth, and no arms—but these lost things, lost as surely as anything else we have read, gain something by never having had a voice of their own, once they were predicated in the diary. The child's ball that disappears under the bed is so like the child's mouth put up to be kissed, just as the concealed man who might have given Matty a real child is mapped onto her dead father, and this connection is literally represented as a juxtaposition by the diary columns, one of the form "I will *x*," and one of the form "I did *y*," and by the ball, whose layered striping draws attention to it as an object that stood in for a leg by measuring the space under a bed, and now reveals "play" to a child, just as the column revealed wishes. These objects associate with one another via a sequence of propositions that is literally encoded in the text by a shifting interrelation of points on vertical and horizontal axes. The ball under the bed is overlaid with stripes; the columns are spliced with a horizontal narration of events that are both quotidian and monumental, or monumental because they are quotidian; the memory of the father's disenchanting frame of reference is occasioned by the wholeness of a ball whose stripes make it even more legible as round and full; and the sequence of events written into the diary have semantic organization that speaks the whole of their content (such that objects like the child will never speak). Obviously these constructions are founded on broader conceptual entailments about parents and children, visuality and tactility, and, generally speaking, the linguistic habits of Cranfordians. But the novel is content to ferment inside a gap between, say, "what we thought would happen in the course of a day" and "a good game of play," and pulls our attention toward the ways in which the conceptual apparatus that underlies the search for lost objects can itself be mobilized to tell a story.

There is a passage of Evans's that is irresistible to me, a passage that beautifully, sadistically explains what is at stake in these

kinds of associative flights, because it is similarly built on another's expectations and disappointments. Imagine, he suggests, that on one day, a subject (let's call her Matty) briefly observes a wooden ball suspended from a crane, rotating around a fixed point, and on another day, she sees a different wooden ball suspended in the same place, rotating around the same point. She doesn't distinguish between the two balls—who would?—and then suddenly she falls down a flight of stairs, experiences a localized amnesia, and can't remember the first of the two days. Many years later, she reminisces about “that wooden ball” that she saw so long ago, but when pressed for discriminating information that would pick out the ball she saw, she is crushed to admit that she didn't know there were two. On the one hand, Matty is acting as though she subscribes to Russell's Principle, in that she thinks she has been in contact with a particular object and can pick it out; if she were informed that there were two different balls, she would obviously stop reminiscing about “that ball” as if she knew which one she meant. She would stop trusting herself to make that discrimination. And yet, says Evans, “it would certainly be quite natural, in view of the facts, to say that she was *thinking of* the second ball, or that she had the second ball *in mind*, or, if she spoke, that she *meant* the second ball” (Evans, *VR*, 90). The whole point of Evans's Generality Constraint is that we can retain the truth of our intuitive claim about what Matty has *meant* by establishing the several different relations in which subjects stand to objects, and unifying them via an associative sequence of concepts. And this can happen, crucially, even when the subject does not properly understand what she means because the object she is referring to is lost to her.

This last application of the Generality Constraint is a companion to the limit cases that Evans provides about his own death, since the subject under examination is unaware that she is exploiting a linguistic device she doesn't understand, as opposed to grasping a proposition about herself that she is “incapable of deciding, or even offering grounds for.” She may, of course, be in the latter position once she learns she has been incorrect, but

obviously there is a gap between them. There is a moment when Matty links up her thinking about the child and the ball by saying, “—perhaps because I had gone to sleep thinking of this ball for Phoebe—” and these dashes visually position her thought inside of a gap between the “perhaps” of her columned diary and the half-sleep, the “gone to sleep,” of an ungrounded proposition. (Evans, we remember, offers the example “I tossed and turned last night” as just such a proposition.) The narrator’s statement, “—perhaps I had noticed that she had told Martha to buy her a penny ball, such as children play with—” marks an important difference here, because it lacks the entailment “because.” We have seen that the narrator has been incapable of grasping propositions like “back” and “behind,” that depend on her separation between them, and here we could read her “had noticed” as a kind of incomplete attempt to insert herself between Matty, who “had told,” and Martha, who had been told. The narrator’s lost account of Martha’s “been” is the place where we should end the study of gaps in *Cranford*, because to grasp what it means to refer to the thing we are referring to is to account for the fundamental ground of difference between things. It is to track the sequence of associations that tells us where we are in virtue of where we have been.

28. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 105; Evans, *Varieties of Reference*, 153–54.
29. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 117.
30. Ibid.
31. Evans takes his conception of the sufficient conditions for being able to distinguish an object from all other things from Peter Strawson's account in "Identifying Reference."
32. Evans, *Varieties of Reference*, 151.
33. Ibid., 152.
34. Ibid., 43.
35. Ibid., 89.
36. Ibid., 108.
37. Michael Dummett, *Frege* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 227.
38. For a useful account of the stakes, structure, and logics of Evans's argument, see R. M. Sainsbury, review of *The Varieties of Reference*, by Gareth Evans.
39. Bertrand Russell, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 169–70.
40. Ritchie, introduction to *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon*, xxxv–xxxvi.
41. Evans, *Varieties of Reference*, 17.
42. Sean Dorrance Kelly, *The Relevance of Phenomenology to the Philosophy of Language and Mind*, 67.

#### CHAPTER THREE

1. Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, vi. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as (Evans, *VR*, [pg. no.]). (Evans, *VR*, )
2. Stephen Schiffer, review of *The Varieties of Reference* by Gareth Evans, 33.
3. Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford*, 3. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number.
4. Andrew H. Miller, "The Fragments and Small Opportunities of *Cranford*," 92.
5. Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things*, 6.
6. Ibid., 49.
7. Ibid., 50.
8. John Plotz, *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move*, 1.
9. Ibid., 10.
10. Ibid., 11.

11. Christina Lupton, “Theorizing Surfaces and Depths: Gaskell’s *Cranford*,” 237.
12. *Ibid.*, 236.
13. *Ibid.*, 244.
14. Brown, *Sense of Things*, 5.
15. J. Hillis Miller, *Reading Narrative*, 165.

## CHAPTER FOUR

1. Iris Murdoch, “The Idea of Perfection,” 13.
2. Martha Nussbaum, “Faint with Secret Knowledge: Love and Vision in Murdoch’s *The Black Prince*,” Peter Lamarque, “Truth and Art in Iris Murdoch’s *The Black Prince*.” For a deeper and more capacious theorization of translation as a moral act, see Valeria Wagner, *Bound to Act*.
3. Peter Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: A Life*, 263. As of this writing, Murdoch’s diaries remain unpublished; all entries quoted from her diaries are found in Conradi’s work. For a literary critical approach to much of the biographical content, see Conradi’s *The Saint and the Artist*.
4. Conradi, *Iris Murdoch*, 266.
5. Iris Murdoch, *Nuns and Soldiers*, 3.
6. Murdoch, “Idea of Perfection,” 15.
7. Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 280.
8. Iris Murdoch, *Under the Net*, 238. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as (Murdoch, *UN*, [pg. no.]).
9. Iris Murdoch, interview by Michael O. Bellamy, 132.
10. Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 283.
11. Iris Murdoch, “Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee,” 7.
12. Murdoch, interview by Bellamy, 138.
13. Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 25–26.
14. For an illuminating and, I think, sympathetic take on the translation of meaning or signification in language as “transcoding,” see Algirdas Julien Greimas and Paul Ricoeur, “On Narrativity.”
15. Iris Murdoch, “Vision and Choice in Morality,” 40–41. See also Lawrence A. Blum, “Iris Murdoch and the Domain of the Moral”; and E. W. Denham, “Envisioning the Good: Iris Murdoch’s Moral Psychology.”
16. Iris Murdoch, “The Sublime and the Good,” 43.
17. Frank Kermode, “The House of Fiction,” 63–64.
18. Iris Murdoch, “The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited,” 262.