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# Things Are in People, People Are in Things: A Phenomenological Approach to H.D.'s *HERmione* and the Modernist Prosthetic Body

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“Things Are in People, People Are in Things”: A Phenomenological Approach to  
H. D.’s *HERmione* and the Modernist Prosthetic Body

Alison Stone Roberg

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### “Things Are in People, People Are in Things”: A Phenomenological Approach to H. D.’s *HERmione* and the Modernist Prosthetic Body

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H.D.’s autobiographical novel *HERmione* is phenomenological in texture. It portrays both sides of a dynamic process: the individual “creates” the world by adjusting a “psychic lens,” projecting a mental space in which objects can appear; yet at the same time, the world imposes itself on the sensing subject. The framework within which this dynamic process occurs is the body; as the novel portrays, the body is the site of juxtapositions and transformations as it comes into contact with the world.

In this article, I discuss the ways in which H.D. explores the boundaries and intersections between the human body and the world around it. I will draw on several influential feminist critiques of the novel, exploring how these critiques illuminate the social and sexual forces at work behind Hermione’s experiences, and I will in turn introduce phenomenological theory to expand upon the prevailing critical view of the novel. I assert that Hermione’s body is both the setting and the subject of *HERmione*. Even as she is objectified by both specific individuals and by the social forces at work in her world, her body reacts in unique ways to counteract this tendency. Her body transforms, and her perceptions blur the lines between subject and object, person and thing. As Hermione begins to develop an understanding of the way she encounters the world, she also develops the ability to act within it. Her body becomes prosthetic, encompassing otherness and ultimately allowing her to move beyond the relationships and expectations which threaten to confine her in a solely “decorative” life.

Keywords: H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), *HERmione*, phenomenology, thing theory, body

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“THINGS ARE IN PEOPLE, PEOPLE ARE IN THINGS”: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL  
 APPROACH TO H. D.’S *HERMIONE* AND THE  
 MODERNIST PROSTHETIC BODY

In the opening pages of H.D.’s *HERmione*, a woman takes a walk in a Pennsylvania forest. This cinematic and often disorienting sequence initiates the reader into the consciousness of Her Gart:

Her feet had automatically started, so automatically she continued, then stumbled as a bird whirred its bird oblivion into heavy trees around her. . . . Her eyes peered up into the branches. The tulip tree made thick pad, separate leaves were outstanding, separate bright leaf-discs, in shadow. Her Gart peered far, adjusting, so to speak, some psychic lens, to follow that bird. She lost the bird, tried to focus one leaf to hold her on to all leaves; she tried to concentrate on one frayed disc of green, pool or mirror, that would refract image. (4-5)

Here, and throughout the rest of the novel, H.D. offers a view of the world that is unabashedly filtered through Hermione’s consciousness; by making no effort to distinguish “how things really are” from how her character experiences them, H.D. implicitly establishes the world as Hermione sees it as the “true” world.

The texture of the novel is therefore phenomenological, as it portrays how one person experiences the world. Phenomenology, as conceived by its founder Edmund Husserl, explores the “lived point-of-contact between mind and reality” as the self encounters its surroundings (Cazeaux 66). Taking up this project, *HERmione* vividly portrays both sides of a dynamic process—the individual “creates” the world by adjusting a “psychic lens” (as H.D. describes), projecting a mental space in which objects can appear; yet at the same time, the world imposes

itself on the sensing subject. The framework within which this dynamic process occurs is the body<sup>1</sup>; as the novel portrays, the body is the site of juxtapositions and transformations as it comes into contact with the world.

Critical attention has not primarily been focused on this aspect of *HERmione*; since the book was posthumously published in 1981, the novel's feminist implications have been richly mined by critics such as Susan Stanford Friedman and Rachel Blau DuPlessis. Such a perspective is a natural fit for the story, which describes a young woman's search for creative fulfillment and sexual identity during the early years of the twentieth century (a journey which mirrors H.D.'s own experience). This criticism delves into the novel's interpersonal relationships—Hermione's romantic relationships with her fiancé George Lowndes and her female friend Fayne Rabb, her negotiations of her role as daughter to her mother and father. But while these relationships do form the impetus for the plot of the novel, a relationship that is perhaps even more fundamental is that of Hermione (and her body) with the world. The novel's "love plot," with its heterosexual and lesbian relationships and its final-act love triangle, might be at home in a pulp novel (although it certainly seemed more daring in 1927 than it does today). But what ultimately makes *HERmione* fascinating is not the mechanics of the plot, but rather the way H.D. gives the reader such a vivid picture of those events *as Hermione experiences them*.

In this article, I will discuss the ways in which H.D. explores the boundaries and intersections between the human body and the world around it. I will draw on several influential feminist critiques of the novel, exploring how these critiques illuminate the social and sexual forces at work behind Hermione's experiences, and I will in turn introduce phenomenological theory to expand upon the prevailing critical view of the novel. I assert that Hermione's body is

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<sup>1</sup> This idea is especially central to the work of French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which I will explore later in this article.

both the setting and the subject of *HERmione*. Even as she is objectified by both specific individuals and by the social forces at work in her world, her body reacts in unique ways to counteract this tendency. Her body transforms, and her perceptions blur the lines between subject and object, person and thing. These perceptions begin as frightening, unpredictable events, yet as the novel progresses, they become a source of strength. As Hermione begins to develop an understanding of the way she encounters the world, she also develops the ability to act within it. Or rather, the ability to act emerges from within herself; her body becomes a *thing*—not a passive object, but, as we will see, a much more powerful and volitional state of being. It is this bodily transformation that ultimately allows her to move beyond the relationships and expectations which threaten to confine her in a solely “decorative” life.

#### “I Am Nebulous”: The Body in Confusion

Before Hermione can approach enlightenment through her body, however, she experiences it as a place of confusion. As evidenced by the opening scene of the novel, Hermione’s world is a disorienting and unstable place. (The character’s situation as the story begins provides some explanation for this: having failed out of college, she has returned to live with her parents and is trying to navigate between expectations of a domestic life and her own ambition toward a creative career.) Hermione’s experience of her body suggests an identity constantly in flux and lacking a unified purpose. She often feels that parts of her body are disconnected from her, acting on their own as she observes but does not control them: for example, “Hermione saw a thin claw-like hand pressing against the blue stuff that was the clean sweet fresh stuff of the summer shirt of George” (74). The “claw-like hand” is her own hand, but she is detached from it; similarly, George’s shirt is “blue stuff . . . of the summer shirt of George.” These layers of prepositional phrases create a sense of distance and fragmentation.



She also experiences transformations, imagining that her body is turning into a tree, a marble statue, or water:

Her head lay marble weight in cushion of forest moss. . . . The back of her head in the moss was pressed out, rounded out, round marble-polished surface in the soft moss. (73-74)

Her slid to feet that pulsed under Her . . . like feet of water. Her limbs were water. The limbs of her were water. Could she stand on water limbs? (174)

I am the Tree of Life. Tree. I am a tree planted by the rivers of water. (70)

Because these transformations coincide mostly with moments of distress for Hermione, critics have often attributed them to dissociation and madness. Much of the existing criticism on *HERmione* focuses on how the protagonist is oppressed by a patriarchal and heteronormative culture, suffering psychic damage as a result. Susan Stanford Friedman comments on “the culturally imposed choice many women artists felt compelled to make, . . . the choice to be an artist or a woman, categories culturally constituted and mutually exclusive” (*Penelope’s Web* 105) and finds in *HERmione* evidence of other characters’ “plot against Her’s autonomy” as she attempts to pursue a career as a poet (117). Hermione’s transgression of sexual norms has also been frequently discussed; Shari Benstock writes that *HERmione* “follows the tortuous pathways of a sexual ambivalence that leads to psychic breakdown. Sexual division leads to an alienation—of mind from body, of identity from psyche” (335).

This criticism is fundamental to an understanding of H.D.’s work, as it examines issues that recur throughout her poems and especially her fiction; this discussion of the restrictive environment in which Hermione lives provides crucial context for the novel. Hermione struggles to be taken seriously and to be allowed to choose her own path; these problems are the same ones

that H.D. faced as a female writer, and throughout much of the twentieth century, they impeded critical study of her work. In a 1975 article, Susan Stanford Friedman pondered the obstacles to H.D.'s serious recognition by the critical establishment, which, fittingly, are reflected in Hermione's quest for self-actualization. Friedman notes that in the canon of western literature, women are "the static, symbolic objects of quest, not the questors" and are "dehumanized" by being reduced to "'feminine principles,' both threatening and life-giving, and not particularized human beings" ("Who Buried H.D.?" 803).

This tendency toward the dehumanization of women is, as I will discuss, explicitly referenced in *HERmione*. Society's misogynistic qualities are a key contributor to the situations that prompt Hermione's unusual bodily experiences; however, to step beyond this explanation, toward a more theoretical discussion of how a human becomes an object, lets us explore some of the fundamental phenomenological questions: What is the relationship between subjects and objects in the world? Can something (or someone) be *both* a subject and an object? The answers to these questions can in turn reflect back on the situations that prompted them, to illuminate how the body can be a counteractive force against society's impulse to oppress, repress, and confine.

#### "My Breathless Statue": People as Things

Much of the criticism on *HERmione* has dealt with the objectification of the title character at the hands of her associates, and this discussion has extended into discussion of how H.D. explores issues of subjects and objects. I will now trace two examples of this criticism: discussion of the protagonist's nickname ("Her") and consideration of her transformations into a statue.

*HERmione* both explicitly and implicitly explores of the shifting roles of subject and object. Such questions are suggested by an odd linguistic detail in the text; the nickname Hermione uses throughout the book, “Her,” continuously unsettles the question of the character’s status. The reader is reminded of this uncertainty through difficult-to-parse sentences like “Her bumped her head on the low door” (11). Rachel Blau DuPlessis explains the calculated effect of this detail: “The difficulty in establishing female identity as subject is signalled by H.D.’s cunning nickname for her main character, Hermione. That object case, used in subject place, exactly locates the thematics of the self-as-woman: ‘surveyor and surveyed’” (61). Shari Benstock also notes that the name recalls Hermione’s position as the “object of others’ attentions . . . and her own inability to place herself as the subject of her own speech” (337).

For a woman in Hermione’s situation, the subject-object question is particularly apt. Even as the reader comes to know Hermione as a subject, one who views the world and acts upon the objects around her, she is also objectified by the other characters: her parents observe and criticize the way she conducts her life, while her fiancé George Lowndes tries to influence and mold her into a supportive muse. At least to most of the characters in the novel, Her belongs solely in the object case.

H.D. provides a physical metaphor for this dilemma in her depiction of Hermione’s perceived transformations into a marble statue. Most of the statue imagery occurs during the parts of the book in which Hermione is romantically involved with George. He has a particular vision for what his relationship to Hermione should be: “He wanted Her, but he wanted a Her that he called decorative” (172). George’s attention seems to have a peculiar effect on Hermione. While being kissed by George in the forest, Hermione feels that “[h]er head lay marble weight in a cushion of forest moss. . . . The back of her head in the moss was pressed out,

rounded out, round marble-polished surface in the soft moss” (73-74). In another scene, again involving a sexual encounter with George, Hermione collapses; she also seems to have completely transformed from woman to statue, as the response to her collapse is that “George put two hands under the armpits of a statue that was falling” (175). No longer bearing a name or even a distinct identity, Hermione becomes “a Her,” “a statue ” that must be acted upon (rescued) by George. Susan Stanford Friedman discusses this imagery at great length. According to Friedman, “Statue imagery pervades the heterosexual love plot to signal Hermione’s frozen existence as the object of George’s desire” (*Penelope’s Web* 122); rather than engaging Hermione’s sensuality and bringing her to life, George’s desire has effectively killed Hermione’s passion and free will, leaving her as a cold statue.

Susan Gubar, in an article from 1981 (incidentally, the same year that *HERmione* was published), uses the idea of the artistic object to show how male portrayal has throughout history objectified women: “[I]f the creator is a man, the creation itself is the female . . . . Woman is not simply an object, however. If we think in terms of the production of culture, she is an art object: she is the ivory carving or mud replica, an icon or doll, but she is not the sculptor” (244). In *HERmione*, George exemplifies the male creator, molding Hermione into the type of woman he wants to marry, just as he molds words into the poems that bring him recognition in the literary world. Even Hermione’s mother, a woman who seems to gladly accept her role as the subservient helpmeet to her husband, admonishes Hermione, “George Lowndes is teaching you, actually *teaching* you words, telling you what to say” (95).<sup>2</sup> However much Hermione protests this assessment, her body betrays her, becoming a decorative object in George’s hands.

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, Susan Stanford Friedman points out that in *HERmione*, H.D. uses words and images from *Hilda’s Book*, a set of poems Ezra Pound dedicated to her during their courtship. Friedman notes that while these words represent “textual sources of her own objectification” at

Hermione's statue-identity is part of a long tradition of woman-statue hybrids in literature, to which the text explicitly refers. The persistence of statue imagery in the novel is also clearly linked with Hermione's identity: the character knows that her namesake is "Hermione out of Shakespeare . . . Hermione from the *Winter's Tale* (who later froze into a statue)" (66). The Pygmalion myth, the story of a sculptor who falls in love with his creation, figures in the novel as well, but with a twist. In the novel's lesbian love plot, one of Hermione's early encounters with Fayne takes place while Fayne is costumed as Pygmalion for a play. In addition to Fayne's gender-bending dramatic role as the sculptor Pygmalion, both women figure themselves as statues: one of the women says, "I'll make you breathe, my breathless statue," while the other replies, "Statue? You—you are the statue" (163). In Hermione's relationship with Fayne, Friedman asserts, H.D. "rescripts the traditional myth in which the desire of Pygmalion, the male artist, brings to life Galatea, the object of his gaze. Like Fayne, Her is both artist and statue. . . . In the mutuality that characterizes their ideal moments, both women are statues that come to life; both women are subjects in the story of desire" (*Penelope's Web* 123). Because both women are in relatively equal positions, this relationship provides an alternative to the stifling, paralyzing relationship in which Hermione is dominated by George. And as both women seem to perceive themselves in both the roles of statue and artist, and to freely and fluidly move between the two roles, the metaphor suggests that the roles of subject and object may indeed be just as fluid.

It is interesting to note, however, that critical discussion of Hermione's "changes of state" (and their connection to the subject-object issue) focus on how they are determined by her

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the hands of the male writer, they become in H.D.'s novel a source of empowerment for the female subject (*Penelope's Web* 116).

relationships. Susan Stanford Friedman's work is a prime example of this. At the beginning of the story, she writes, "George initially draws her out of psychic paralysis, with the result that Hermione begins to write. . . . But George is upset and ambivalent about the poems she tentatively shows him. . . . As muse for his poems, she cannot also be the poet" (*Penelope's Web* 113-14). In Friedman's description, George's attentions and criticisms produce Hermione's transformations (both mentally and physically). And as described above, in Friedman's interpretation, when George pressures her to conform, she becomes a statue; she melts when Fayne treats her as an equal partner. And, despite the seemingly idyllic nature of her relationship with Fayne, "Fayne's confession on the phone that she has been with George refreezes Her into white marble" (123). Friedman's phrasing casts Hermione as the object even of these sentences.

It would be unrealistic to ignore the fact that Hermione's changes do seem to coincide with these alterations in her relationships. But a slight reassessment allows us to take a different angle on the situation. I would argue that Hermione does indeed change in response to the changes in her relationships, but not in such a way that (as seems to be implied by Friedman's descriptions) Hermione is an object being acted upon by George and Fayne. Instead, I see her mind and body (the two inexorably combined) acting, reacting, and driving forward her progression. It is true that Hermione's changes do not seem to be conscious choices. However, I think they come nonetheless from a source within herself. So Fayne does not "refreeze Her into white marble"—Her freezes herself. Returning to Susan Gubar's discussion of woman as the object of male creation, she notes that in the absence of real creative opportunity, women may nonetheless be able to use their bodies as a means of expression: "the woman who cannot become an artist can nevertheless turn herself into an artistic object" (249).

Hermione takes control of the situation by making herself simultaneously a subject *and* an object, which allows her to approach the changing circumstances of her life in different ways as a given situation demands. There are plenty of examples in the novel of Hermione as a subject; the book begins with Hermione naming herself and considering her origins: “I am Hermione Gart precisely” (3); “I am out of *The Winter’s Tale*. . . . I am out of this book. . . . I am the word AUM” (32). And yet even as she speaks from herself, about herself, her perspective often shifts so that she appears to be observing herself from a distance. She is literally detached from her body: “Her hand flung out on the long narrow too-soft pillow sank down, down into the pillow. Her hand was something apart, weighted. . . . My hand is a marble hand sunk into the pillow” (84). Hermione’s assumption of these roles puts her in a unique position. Rachel Blau DuPlessis describes the dual nature of Hermione’s portrayal:

She is then both the object of sight, caught as the awkward over-intense beauty, and the subject, since interior monologue is a main technique of [*HERmione*]. . . . H.D.’s autobiographical projections can escape dominant narrative and representation by what is surely near solipsistic introspection . . . [but] the single-ness, solipsism and narcissism apparent on the surface are some results of experiments in ending the dichotomy of subject and object, of observer and observed. (59-60)

Hermione the observer and Hermione the observed thus have the potential to complete the subject-object relationship, without the intrusion of an outside viewer distorting the picture. Thus, Hermione’s role as both subject and object serves a particular artistic purpose. This unique portrayal of Hermione is a way for the character (and by extension, H.D.) to avoid appearing solely as an object in the novel, commented on by some outside observer. Instead, by

giving her main character the roles of both the observer and the observed, H.D. situates Hermione as the reader's only access to her story.

What DuPlessis refers to as the “near-solipsistic introspection” of the novel is driven by Hermione's desire to know herself, to understand *who* and *what* she is. The unpredictable and unsettling result of the pursuit of self-knowledge is pondered by theorist Barbara Johnson in her book *Persons and Things*. In a section entitled “The Thingliness of Persons,” Johnson writes,

One of the most obvious assumptions we make is that the human ‘self’ is a person, not a thing. But might this assumption be more problematic than it appears? . . . The problem would seem to arise when the ‘self’ becomes known—known as an object of knowledge. But if the ‘self’ becomes an object of knowledge, it can *only* be known as an object among other objects, and not as a subject. (47-48)

Hermione attempts to know and define herself as a means of asserting her identity and independence; yet with this very act she turns herself into an object. Johnson asks, “Can a subject articulate its own predicate, or is that one of those things that ground a subject but cannot be articulated by the ‘I’ who speaks, without endangering the status of subject?” (50).

Throughout the novel, Hermione constantly tries to “articulate [her] own predicate.” In the first paragraph, we see her struggling to define herself: “‘I am Her,’ she said to herself; she repeated, ‘Her, Her, Her’” (3); throughout the text she continues in this vein: “I am Hermione Gart, a failure” (4); “I am the Tree of Life. . . . I am a tree planted by the rivers of water” (70); “I am Hermione Gart and will be Hermione Lowndes” (112); “I’m too strong and I’m nothing and I’m frightened. . . . I am frightened. I am the word Aum. I am Her. I am Her” (176).



Friedman and others have written extensively about naming and self-definition in H.D.'s work, as well as its importance for H.D. herself. Friedman notes that H.D. never published anything as "Hilda Doolittle" or "Hilda Aldington" (her married name), but instead wrote under a succession of male and female pseudonyms—aside from the androgynous initials "H.D." that adorn her poetry, she published prose as "Rhoda Peter," "Helga Dart," "John Helforth," and "Delia Alton" (*Penelope's Web* 42-43). The manuscript of *HERmione* bears the name of "Helga Doorn," a pseudonym H.D. used when acting in film projects (132). As Friedman has written, her use of various names provides insight into the way H.D. constantly redefined and refashioned herself: "this (re)naming was an endlessly repeating act that signified the self as a process (not a product) of becoming" (35-36). Likewise, *Hermione* explores different names, titles, and associations for herself as a way of exploring who she is in different contexts and relationships. *Hermione's* constant attempts at self-definition do indeed make her the (often inscrutable) object of her search for knowledge, but they do not necessarily detract from her position as subject either. Her explorations seem instead to be acts of negotiation, attempts to place herself in the world among various categories of objects while maintaining her role as an observing and speaking subject.

This act of negotiation is necessarily open-ended. *Hermione's* perceptions and characterization are dominated by contradictions and ambiguity. Describing her relation to the character of *Hermione* in *The Winter's Tale*, she remarks, ". . . Almost, almost *Hermione* was *Hermione* out of Shakespeare . . . but not quite" (67). It is left unclear as to what ways *Hermione* is "not quite" like her namesake, but nonetheless that quality of being "not quite" one thing or another is essential to understanding *Hermione's* character and her perceived place in

the world. It also sets the tone for H.D.'s exploration of the way human beings physically inhabit and interact with the world around them.

These questions about the shifting roles of humans and the fluidity of subject and object status are not unique to the novel; they reflect a significant focus of the phenomenological philosophers. In particular, the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty deals extensively with the categories of subject and object, and the ways these states intersect and exchange properties. The site of this intersection is the body, which he describes as “the initiation to and the opening upon a tactile world” (166). In his essay “The Intertwining—The Chiasm,” Merleau-Ponty explores exactly what happens when a human reaches out to touch an object. Even as the hand applies its touch to an object, it is also an object which can be touched, “it takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them” (166). There is a “crisscrossing within [the hand] of the touching and the tangible”—hence the “intertwining” of the essay’s title (166). Merleau-Ponty rejects the idea of a distinct and permanent division between subject and object; instead of two rigidly defined entities occupying separate spheres, the body encompasses both states. The body is “from one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees them and touches them; we say, because it is evident, that it unites these two properties within itself” (168). A body that encompasses both properties has the possibility of changing from one to the other, and in fact does just that countless times as the embodied person maneuvers through the physical world.

Merleau-Ponty’s theories offer interesting insight into the question of subjectivity and objectivity in *HERmione*. We can consider Hermione as being always both a subject and an object; her pronouncement, “I am Her” (3) encompasses both states at once, the subject “I” and the object “her.” Importantly, Merleau-Ponty’s formulation does not privilege the status of subject over that of object; both are necessary aspects of one’s existence, and in fact “each calls

for the other” (168). The fact that Hermione seems to vacillate between these states throughout the novel need not exclusively derive from societal oppression; instead, these changes represent a growing awareness of the complexity of her existence. When Rachel Blau DuPlessis refers to Hermione as “surveyor and surveyed,” she echoes Merleau-Ponty, who writes, “As soon as I see, it is necessary that the vision . . . be doubled with a complementary vision or with another vision: myself seen from without” (166-67). This idea is handled playfully in the novel when Hermione’s friend wishes to introduce her to Fayne Rabb; an invitation instructs her, “come to see me—to see a girl I want to see you” (34). With this chiasmic sentence, Hermione is invited to simultaneously see and become an object of sight.

“Things Make People, People Make Things”:

#### The Intertwining of Humans and Objects

Merleau-Ponty’s statement that the body can be “a thing among things” (echoed in Johnson’s worries about the self as an “object among other objects”) leads naturally to the consideration of those “things” and “other objects” among which the body moves. The bodily transformations Hermione experiences involve not only the metaphysical concepts of subjectivity and objectivity, but also bodily encounters with actual physical objects. Thus, it is a natural next step to consider the role of things in constituting human identity.

Before continuing in this line of thought, it is useful to tease out the different implications of the terms “object” and “thing.” While in practical use the terms are often interchangeable, critics have taken pains to distinguish them, and I think this distinction is valuable. Apart from its role as half of the subject/object dichotomy, the word “object” is most often used when referring to actual physical items, and throughout this article I try to use this word when

discussing any nonhuman items that are perceived or interacted with by people. “Thing” is a term that has taken on even more nuanced and meanings within the critical discourse.

Martin Heidegger devoted a significant amount of work to the question, “What is a thing?”, including an entire book-length lecture published under this title. In a later essay, “The Thing,” he contrasts the concept of “thing” with that of “object”: a thing is “self-supporting, or independent” (166), but a thing “may become an object if we place it before us, whether in immediate perception or by bringing it to mind in a recollective re-presentation” (167). So a particular item may have the role of either a thing or an object, depending on whether (and how) it is brought into relationship with a human subject. Importantly, Heidegger also turns “thing” into a verb: “The jug” (the example he uses throughout the essay) “is a thing insofar as it things”—in other words, the mere fact that something *is* does not make it a thing; it must *thing* in order to be a thing (177). Heidegger thus attaches some inherent internal property to things, a property not bound up in the materials from which they are made. He writes of an active force by which the thing “comes into its own, appropriatively manifests and determines itself” (177). A thing proactively *things* itself in the world.

Much more recently, Bill Brown has built upon Heidegger’s foundation to develop the contemporary critical discourse of thing theory. In a 2001 article, Brown sets out the foundational concepts of thing theory and draws his own distinction between “objects” and “things.” He writes that as human beings move in the world, we look “through” objects, using them for an intended purpose; we see them as “facts” that reveal truths about our culture and about ourselves. On the other hand, an *object* becomes a *thing* when it disrupts attempts to use it for human-directed purposes. Taking an approach which is concrete and grounded in lived experience, Brown writes, “We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop

working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy”—in other words, when we can’t simply look through them (“Thing Theory” 4). Echoing Heidegger’s use of *thing* as a verb, Brown envisions things as unruly, even rebellious objects which have taken to “asserting themselves as things” (4).

*HERmione* provides many opportunities in which to examine the interactions between people and the things that make up their world (even if those interactions occur primarily in the protagonist’s hallucinations). Throughout the novel, Hermione makes frequent, repeated statements that allude to the intrinsically close and interdependent relationship between humans and objects. “Things make people, people make things” is one of her mantras (25)<sup>3</sup>. The second part of the declaration “people make things,” besides its obvious literal meaning, is a comment on how people influence their surroundings through their presence. For example, Hermione’s sister-in-law, Minnie, whom she greatly dislikes, seems to diminish everything around her. Simply by her presence as a critical outsider, Minnie makes “Gart hallway and the wood lilies and Pius Wood so much junk. She ate into things” (25). Not only does she change the way Hermione *feels* or *thinks* about the objects in her house, Minnie’s presence actually changes the way Hermione experiences those objects through her senses; and by extension, in the world of the book, her presence affects the objects’ very existence.

A similar but opposite effect occurs when Hermione meets Fayne. Rather than diminishing her surroundings and turning them into cheap junk as Minnie does, Fayne’s presence turns a room into an artistic space. Whereas Hermione has previously described the parlor of a friend’s house in terms of its everyday details—tablecloths, the tea service, the knickknacks on

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to note here that H.D.’s use of the word “thing” does not necessarily correspond to the distinction between “things” and “objects” that has just been discussed. “Thing” as it is used here, has a much more generic meaning. However, as we will see, many of the objects in Hermione’s world are decidedly *thing-like*.

the mantle—when Fayne arrives, Hermione’s observations turn toward the abstract and geometric and become dominated by color and line: the curtains become “long lines of pure blue,” and Hermione describes Fayne as “something that made the floor sink beneath her feet and the wall rise to infinity above her head” (52). As the relationship between Fayne and Hermione develops, there is indeed an effect of expansion and a sense of infinite potential that overtakes Hermione; this change in consciousness is prefigured by the physical (or seemingly physical) change in the room’s composition due to Fayne’s presence.

These effects make clear the way human presence affects objects and how humans “read” objects, using them as reflections of human characters and relationships—how “people make things.” More intriguing, however, is the first part of Hermione’s aphorism, “Things make people.” This touches more directly on the active meaning of “thing” that Heidegger and Brown discuss: things can impose their presence and even their will on people. In the early parts of *HERmione*, mundane events are enlivened by Hermione’s unusual perceptions of the world. There are many instances in which objects seem to exert strange powers over Hermione, taking on a life of their own. “Trees,” she feels, “no matter how elusive, in the end, walled one in. Trees were suffocation” (7-8). She is stalked by shadows; the shadow of her family’s house on the lawn “lengthened, came near, it would cut her feet off” (22). Objects transform into other objects in front of her eyes, walls move, and at one point, “a huge bee lifted Her on translucent wings, flung straight upward, her legs either side of the stiff propeller-whirr of the wings, hung down into space” (14). The things in Hermione’s world are out of control, producing in her a sense of terror. Critic Christine Berni asserts that Hermione views physical objects as threats to her bodily integrity and identity because of their indeterminate relationship to language and reality (52). However, we might also emphasize *Hermione*’s indeterminate relationship with

language and reality—she tries to verbally define herself while feeling that “she was not of the world, she was not in the world, unhappily she was not out of the world” (8). By contrast, the objects around her *do* physically inhabit the world, and their apparent stability threatens her fragile sense of self. They seem to be trying to define *her* as a helpless and manipulated object.

Hermione also has a rather complicated relationship to the smaller household items that fill her family’s home. She is initially dismissive of the knickknacks and decorations that make up the house’s Victorian interior, things such as decorative china, cameos, and miniature portraits adorned with braided hair; she calls them “things of no actual value, small totems that meant some tribal affinities with European races” (9). These items seem to bear little relation to Hermione’s life as it is now, the life of a young woman in the early twentieth century seeking to escape from traditional roles and to express herself creatively and sexually. Yet she can’t help but fixate on them; she refers to herself as a “psychic magpie . . . [gathering] little unearthed treasures, things she did not want, yet clung to” (8). As she later declares, “All the things people gather about them hold people” (155). This sentence, with its repetition of “people,” echoes the syntactic ambiguity already discussed with regard to subject/object confusion; who or what is acting, and who or what is being acted upon? People gather objects and yet are at the same time being gathered by them.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the objects in Hermione’s home seem determined to possess her. She fixates on seemingly insignificant objects—a pincushion, a piece of china, a carved wooden dish—which seem to be pulling her in the direction of domesticity. In one dramatic scene, Hermione and George discuss their future together, including George’s expectations for Hermione’s wifely role. The scene takes place near a dining table cluttered with knives, forks, glasses, the “old

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Heidegger traces the etymology of the word “thing” in German to the concept of gathering: “Thinging gathers” (174).

silver” which the maid insists on bringing out for company, and “too many little cups” from the tea set; there, George announces that Hermione is “so damned decorative,” classing her as simply another object designed to make a house look nice (169). As the conversation continues, and as George begins to kiss her, Hermione senses that the room and the things in it are coming closer, pressing in on her. It is as if the collection of objects wants to keep her in a position that will lead to her becoming one of them as George’s “decorative” wife.

However, not all of Hermione’s encounters with objects are menacing and oppressive. There are moments that suggest that there can be a meaningful, beneficial relationship between humans and objects. At a party, Hermione rests her hand on the top of a piano as it is played:

Standing like someone out of Greek drama, her hand (on the piano-polished piano top) felt beat and live quiver of naked nerves that were the quiver and live beat of song, that were the long tones drawn from a harp. People in a circle, in a half-circle, people in a sort of splice of a bit of a circle shaped like the harp frame were (it appeared) making tired things sing, notes open and spread and tired nerves (the piano’s?) respond, sing and break into little catch-in-your-throat noises, making her hand just conscious, acquisitive, making her say my hand can dip down into this very black pool (the piano-polished top of the piano) and lift up odd star-notes, and things drawn out like the nerves in the dissected frog I did for that biological treatise that I never finished, that went on kicking after he was carefully dead.

She seemed, like a frog on a wide slab of beautifully sterilized and radiantly clean glass, to be kicking, to be feeling with some set of nerves other than the set



of nerves that had so carefully deadened in the process of her becoming dead. I was dead and am alive again. (107-08)

Hermione and the piano share a communal moment, and the piano infuses her with life and energy. There is a sense of equality—she is neither transforming the objects around her with her presence, nor are the objects manipulating her. There is no dominance and no privileging of one over the other. She and the piano form a partnership, with Hermione recognizing the piano's unique being and the piano recognizing hers as well. Later, when she ends up in a tense situation with George at her home, she physically pulls away from him and moves toward her piano, viewing it as an ally or a source of safety, apparently still feeling the strength of that bond.

Both the menacing behavior of some objects in the novel and the comforting presence of others testify to the power of things to act on people. Merleau-Ponty attributes to things a impulse toward self-preservation: the world of objects, the world of the visible, “imposes my vision upon me as a continuation of its own sovereign existence” (164). The relationship between humans and objects is in some ways characterized by struggle, with both sides trying to gain the upper hand. But at the same time, they seem to have a mutual need for each other. As with Merleau-Ponty's discussion of subject and object, the touching and the touched, there seems to be an intertwining between humans and objects—or perhaps more accurately, between humans and things. For while the relationship between humans and simple objects appears one-sided (as Bill Brown describes, people use objects to accomplish their purposes), humans and things have a more complex, and less clearly defined relationship. Heidegger asserts that things “do not appear *by means of* human making. But neither do they appear without the vigilance of mortals” (181). At the very least, there is a symbiotic exchange between the two, with people and things engaging in a process of give and take. As I will now explore, this process is a prosthetic

one, troubling the distinct boundaries of where a person begins and where a thing ends, allowing for the existence of a hybrid body.

“Things Are in People, People Are in Things”: The Prosthetic Body

Hermione’s declaration that “Things are in people, people are in things” can also be taken more literally, as an expression of the hybrid quality of the human body. The most vivid images in the novel are those which describe Hermione’s physical transformations into a composite being, in which parts of her body become marble, water, or metal. It seems that things have become part of her—or that they were always contained within her, making their presence known when the need arises.

To return once more to Merleau-Ponty and an idea that has also been echoed by Bill Brown: the body is “a thing among things.” Or, more precisely, the body is sometimes a thing, sometimes composed of many things, sometimes part thing and part human. Thing theorist John Frow writes about the human body’s tendency to resist classification as exclusively a “person” or exclusively a “thing.” He discusses mythological stories in which women transform—Daphne into a tree; Eurydice, in Rilke’s poem “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes,” into a root. Frow notes that in such cases,

The fusion is never complete. Eurydice is constantly on the verge of becoming a root but does not lose her human shape. . . . [T]he deep metaphysical opposition, the tied dichotomy of difference and mutual constitution as between things and representations and between humans and nonhumans, becomes flattened; difference . . . gives way to a mixing in which things and persons exchange properties and partly resemble and partly don't resemble each other. In this world

you can still tell the difference between persons and things, but the difference is not an ontological absolute. (278)

Frow's examples and the concept of the free exchange of properties between people and provide further insight toward interpreting Hermione's transformations. We can view Hermione as a composite being, both human and statue, subject and object all at once.

This complex composition can be described as a *prosthetic* existence. In recent years, the concept of prosthesis has interested artists and critics alike, and has been part of the discussion on, as promised in one essay collection, "consciousness, compositing, the organic versus the machinic, the post-human, autobiography, indexicality, desire, the Other, the phenomenon of the phantom limb, deficiency, puppetry, and gestation" (Smith and Morra 5). With such a broad range of possible applications, it seems that the prosthetic has become a means of exploring many of the anxieties that arise in modern life. Indeed, according to Yoshiki Tajiri, prosthesis "is useful for addressing the general cultural situation in which the distinction between the body and technology (and by extension, inside and outside, self and other) is blurred or abolished" (2). It is easy to see why this topic has captured imaginations in the current age of technology, as well as why the Modernist period, which saw its own explosion of technology, should provide such a fertile ground for the study of prosthesis. It becomes a logical step in the discussion of the relationship between people and things: the way people incorporate prostheses into their bodies can serve as the basis for a discussion of what exactly constitutes a person and can add nuance to the phenomenological question of how a human body (or a body that incorporates human and nonhuman) interacts with the world around it.

Tajiri describes the prosthetic body as "a body that has the inorganic other or the outside within it. To be more precise, it is the locus for dynamic interactions between the body and

material objects . . . , inside and outside, self and other, and for the concomitant problematisation and blurring of these distinctions” (6).<sup>5</sup> Under this definition, then Hermione’s body is indeed a prosthetic one. She not only encounters and acts in conjunction with the animate and inanimate objects in her world, as described earlier; she incorporates them into herself (or they incorporate themselves into her), and thus creates a prosthetic body.

A key element in discussion of the prosthetic body is an examination of its division into parts. David Wills, whose critical work has focused on poststructuralist theory, has written extensively on the topic of prosthesis, especially focusing on its relationship to the concept of amputation. According to Wills, prosthesis is inherent in the (perhaps illusory) idea of wholeness: “the whole never was anywhere, neither in the singular nor in the total, because the parts were always already detachable, replaceable” (*Prosthesis* 15). A prosthetic body, even one that is nominally “whole,” is composed of parts that may be removed, replaced, or refashioned.

As noted before, Hermione is frequently aware that her body is not a single, unified object but rather is composed of detached, independent parts. These images frequently appear in the context of her relationship with George Lowndes. To return to an example I have mentioned before, here is how Hermione perceives herself interacting with George: “Hermione saw a thin claw-like hand pressing against the blue stuff that was the clean sweet fresh stuff of the summer shirt of George. Underneath her hand there was the clean sweet flax-blue shantung, fine nice

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<sup>5</sup> This definition comes from Tajiri’s book *Samuel Beckett and the Prosthetic Body*; interestingly, Tajiri finds in Beckett’s work many of the same body characteristics that we see in Hermione—body parts that seem detached and acting with a will of their own, an emphasis on bodily surfaces as the (unstable) boundary between inside and outside, a personal vision of one’s body that differs from what others would see or what is empirically “actually” there. Yet Tajiri primarily views these descriptions as tied to a psychosexual regression to the experience of a fetus or infant as a result of abnormal psychosexual development; he utilizes the theories of Freud and others to discuss this view. On the other hand, I choose to see Hermione’s changing body image not as a sign of disorder but as an adaptive response to challenging circumstances.

shoulder beneath the thin shirting. . . . Long dynamic hand ran across the smooth narrow surface, felt thud-thud, heavy thud-thud of rather too heavy bursting heartbeat” (74-75). Not only is the hand a separate thing from Hermione herself, but the shirt, the “smooth narrow surface,” and the beating heart are all treated as disconnected objects rather than parts of George. In this stressful setting, Hermione feels at her most fragmented.

Yet this prosthetic detachability need not be seen as a flaw or disability. Indeed, while disconcerting to Hermione, the fragmentation of her limbs actually serves a useful purpose: paradoxically, it allows her to retain her integrity and sense of self even while George “uses” some of these parts for his own gratification. In the same scene from which I just quoted, Hermione is surprised to note that George’s “kiss doesn’t affect the back of my head. The back of marble head pressed down into moss, down down into moss wasn’t affected in the slightest by recurrent, rather charming really, kisses of this George” (74). The back of her head, here described as marble and also as a “convex mirror” (78), because it is detached from the other parts of her body and remains independent.

Because the “convex mirror” remains untouched by George, it is able to play an important role in Hermione’s relationship with Fayne: “George had said, ‘Oh rot, what rot it is you’re talking’ when for a moment she had realized her head—the bit here, the bit there, the way it fitted bit to bit—was two convex mirrors placed back to back. The two convex mirrors placed back to back became one mirror . . . as Fayne Rabb entered” (138). Fayne’s positive association with the mirror indicates that this relationship is separate and distinct from how Hermione interacts with George.

Hermione’s other transformations also provide a sense of safety and self-preservation. In the very setting where critics have described Hermione’s dehumanization at the hands of George,

it is true that she becomes something not simply human; however, rather than *sub-human*, Hermione's transformations render her *extra-human*. Becoming a statue allows her to fortify herself against George's actions; it is not that he has turned her into a statue but rather that her body has turned itself into a statue as a way of strengthening her. Similarly, in another encounter with George, she notes, "Her limbs were water. The limbs of Her were water. Could she stand on water limbs? She swam (found use for limbs in water) toward the piano" (174). Here the image of water limbs is one of flexibility and escape—despite her initial trepidation, she finds that her "water limbs" allow her to swim away from the perceived threat. Paragraphs earlier, she describes being held by George's "iron arms" and notes that she "would have been crushed by iron" if she remained with him (173). Thus, the fluidity of water is a fitting means of escape from the rigidity of iron (and, by implication, the rigidity of George's plans for their relationship). Shortly thereafter she tells herself, "Save yourself and offer them a sort of water creature" (177). This water creature, then, is a version of herself that can handle the struggles of her various relationships while allowing her inward self to be preserved.

These changes occur without Hermione's direct volition. Sometimes she simply observes them ("The hand thrust out made its habitual movement" [162]), but other times she attempts to make sense of what is happening. In one scene, she notes that "another part of her mind, apart from that mind, had prompted her . . . had whispered so that she had automatically reached out a ouija-board thin hand and picked up the statue" (111). Here, "another part of her mind" is distinguished from her rational, thinking mind—it seems to have a direct connection to (or perhaps is even housed in) her hand. In another scene, she simply states, "they were being propelled by arms, by legs, by shoulders, down a corridor" (134). Parts of the body act not as objects but as things, moving under their own power, driven by their own impulses.

Thus, Hermione has a prosthetic relationship with her own body. She has within herself what David Wills refers to as “a relation to difference or otherness” (45). This inward relation to otherness, while useful for self-preservation, is also the impetus that propels her to connect with others in a positive way. Fayne tells her, “Your hands are healing. They have dynamic white power,” and Hermione begins to notice this power for herself: “Fire and electric white spark pulsed in thin wrists” (180). This ability is one factor that allows her to finally emerge from her illness at the end of the novel: she tells her nurse, “People say my hands help. Vibrant, something comes out through my fingers” (212). This moment, which implies the joining together of bodies in a way which is also prosthetic, seems to be something of a new beginning. Hermione gains understanding of the way her body functions in its environment, and of the possibilities inherent at the boundary where the body opens onto the world.

She initially speaks of using her healing powers as a nurse, but a subsequent scene shows a more appropriate (if less literal) application of her skills: “Her feet went on making the path. Her feet were pencils tracing a path through a forest. . . . Last summer the Creator had been white lightning brandished against blackness. Now the creator was Her’s feet, narrow black crayon across the winter whiteness” (223). As Susan Stanford Friedman writes, “[H]er body itself has become the artist’s pen” (*Penelope’s Web* 115). Having preserved the core of Hermione’s being through traumatic changes, her body is able to enact a final transformation which allows her to become an instrument of creation.

This image of creative, decisive strength provides a contrast to Her’s earlier attempts at creative production. After showing some of her poems to George, she seems to invest her entire future into the pages they are written on: “Pages fluttered in the hands of George Lowndes. His hands fluttered white pages. When George holds in his hands is my life’s beginning. What

George flutters is my life's ending" (148). Now, rather than pinning her hopes onto flimsy paper, Hermione is impressing her own story onto the world itself. She becomes the recipient of what Heidegger, in another instance of a noun becoming a verb, describes as the world's "worlding"; in turn, a creative impulse springs from her body and asserts itself upon her surroundings. David Wills calls prosthesis "a balancing act performed by the body, a shift or transfer between the body and its exteriority" (20). *HERmione* portrays this balancing act and presents it as an ongoing fact of existence, a process by which the body reinvents itself and discovers its own potential.



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