Objects, Narratives, Museums

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Abstract

The current "material turn" in cultural and literary studies has led to a focus of interest on how objects shape our daily lives and to a shift of attention from extraordinary things to what French writer Georges Perec calls the "infra-ordinary." This shift is reflected in a relatively new conception of museums: they were traditionally dedicated to unique and rare things, but nowadays one finds museums devoted to everyday, mass-produced objects. This article discusses three narratives that not only foreground ordinary objects, but also concern objects that inspired so much interest that they ended being displayed in real-life museums: *The Madeleine project*, by Clara Beaudoux, the novel *The Museum of Innocence*, by Orhan Pamuk, and the story of a sack filled with useful supplies that an enslaved mother gave to her young daughter as she was about to be sold away and forever separated from her mother. Displayed at the Smithsonian Museum, this sack has become a cultural icon for a society that hopes to amend for the injustices of its past by fully acknowledging and exploring this past.

Keywords:

Narrative, objects, material culture, museums, ordinary things, fetishism, slavery, collective memory, collecting, junk

1. Introduction

Through the study of narratives that focus on objects, more particularly on objects that end up in museums, I propose to link the topic of this conference—space and time—to a trend that is currently gaining considerable momentum in the humanities and in cultural studies, a trend known as the material turn. The quick spread of post-humanism and of critiques of anthropomorphism in the past few decades has resulted in greater attention to concrete objects, both as existing independently of human cognition, and as caught in a relation subject-object that determines our experience of our surrounding world. Daniel Miller, a pioneer of the movement, captures the spirit of material culture studies through this formula: "In material culture we are concerned at least as much with how things make people as the other way around" (2010, 42). This focus on how objects shape our daily lives has led to a shift of attention from extraordinary things to ordinary ones, or, to quote French writer Georges Perec, to the "infra-ordinary." "Today" writes Bill Brown, the pioneer of an approach known as "Thing Theory," "you can read books on the pencil, the zipper, the toilet, the banana, the chair, the potato, the bowler hat" (2001, 2).

Museums have been traditionally dedicated to unique and rare things, such as ancient archeological artifacts, outstanding examples of craftmanship, and sublime artworks; but nowadays there are museums of everyday things, such as the Museum der Dinge, in Berlin, which displays cooking ranges, TV sets, dolls or Nivea boxes, or the Musée de la vie quotidienne in Saint-Martin-en-Campagne, Normandy, which documents the life of ordinary people in the region in the 19th and 20th centuries. Museum have obvious connections to time and space: they contain objects that bring the past to life, and they display these objects in spatial exhibits, organizing the visitor's tour along pre-

designed itineraries. In this presentation I discuss three narratives—two about real people, the third about fictional characters—that not only foreground material objects, but also concern objects that are displayed in real-life museums.

2. How narratives connect objects to time and space: some fundamental questions

Since all existents exist in space and time, it should not be too difficult to link material objects to spatial and temporal categories. Here are some of the questions pertaining to time that we may ask of the objects represented in narratives:

Past/present/future

Do objects speak about the past, the present or the future? The past is the most frequent orientation in narrative because the past is set and can be narrated, and inspires the romantic feeling of nostalgia. Objects are invaluable as witnesses of history and as catalyzers of memories, and some of them—think of souvenirs or family photo albums—have no other function than conjuring memories. Practical objects used in everyday situations have a present orientation, while technological innovations shown at exhibits or objects depicted in science-fiction speak about the future. Another kind of future orientation is represented by the time capsule, in which people gather objects typical of their time, to be discovered by later generations. Insofar as the prospective finders will interpret the objects as witnesses of the past, the time capsule embodies an orientation of future retrospection.

Deliberate investigation of the past /voluntary memory/ Involuntary memories

When objects speak about the past, do they function as indices that allow the reconstitution of past events by an external observer, do they embody known memories about a personal past, as do photos or souvenirs, or do they unexpectedly release memories, as does the famous madeleine in Proust?

Object biography/people biography

When objects inspire the investigation of past events, will the resulting narrative be centered on an individual object, or will it concern the people associated with a given set of objects? In the first case, the narrative will take the form of a "biography of the object" that chronicles its passage through many hands and links the object to many different characters, while in the second case, the focus will be on the life of the person who owned a collection of objects, and the relation will be one character, many objects.

Increasing/decreasing value

Does the value of the object increase or decrease with the passing of time? This notion of value can be either commercial, market-driven and shared, or sentimental and deeply personal. Increased value is demonstrated by our love for ancient things, most notably antiques, that we do not seek for their practical function, but rather for their aesthetic appeal and for the history they embody. Decreased value is typical of objects we seek for their functionality, because their ability to perform certain tasks declines with time, or they are being replaced by more efficient technologies.

Heirlooms/ephemera

Correlated to the previous distinction is the question of the time-span of the life of objects: are they conceived to last, like the watches of which advertisements says "you never actually own a Patek-Philippe; you merely look after it for the next generation," or are they ephemera, meant to be thrown away after use (but now judged worthy of preserving, as the creation of museums of everyday life suggests)? This second category includes movie tickets, bank checks, shopping lists, business cards, catalogs, envelopes, postcards, receipts, birthday cards, etc.

The investigation of the spatial manifestations of objects leads to another series of contrasting features:

Traveling/sedentary

Are objects represented as tied to a certain place, or do they travel in space? In narrative, an example of the first kind would be objects that define the setting, such as the furnishing of a house, while the second kind is illustrated by the so-called "novel of circulation," a genre popular in the 18th century that represented the travels of objects such as bank notes (and

also of animals and humans considered "property," such as pets and slaves) through the many layers of society. The novel of circulation also involves a time element, whose extension depends on the nature of the object.

In place / out of place

Even when objects are by nature sedentary, rather than meant for travel like bank notes, they can be represented "in place" or "out of place." The case of objects in place is again illustrated by descriptions of the furnishing of a house, a feature particularly prominent in those 19th century novels that regard individuals as the product of their environment. Objects out of place have been taken away from their environments and share space with other objects of various provenance. Garbage piles, storage areas and junk stores are among the most common locations for objects out of place.

Thrown together / organized

Objects can be either randomly thrown together, or properly organized and displayed. In the first case they accumulate within a space that may become too small to contain them all, and when they are needed, they are very difficult to find. Basement and attics are the preferred locations for storing away unwanted objects in disorganized heaps, and for this reason , they are also the most likely places for unexpected discoveries. In the second case, each object is given its own space and remains easily accessible. Well displayed collections, archives, and museum exhibits are the epitome of organized space.

These di—or trichotomies will guide my reading of the spatial and temporal manifestations of objects in three narratives.

3. The Madeleine Project

The Madeleine Project[1] is a serial and multimodal narrative first told on Twitter through 280-character fragments often accompanied by photos, videos and audio recordings. It gathered a considerable following, generated discussions, inspired reader contributions, spread to other platforms, such as Facebook and Wordpress, was printed in book form in both French and English, and became the subject of a travelling museum exhibit. The origin of this media phenomenon is presented as follows by the author and investigator, French journalist Clara Beaudoux:

> Her name was Madeleine, she would have been 100 in 2015. My name is Clara, I am 31 years old. We never knew each other. She is the woman who lived in my apartment before me for 20 years. She died a year before I moved in, the apartment had been completely redone. But it seems that everybody forgot about the basement. I discovered there the whole life of Madeleine, objects, photos, letters. I dove into it. (Introductory text on Web site; my translation) [2]

Out of the objects that she finds in the basement, and by following the leads that they suggest, Clara reconstitutes the life of Madeleine, whose first name she learns through an advertisement left in the mail box.[3] The name Madeleine suggests the famous Proustian pastry, and two objects evocative of it are found in the basement: a copy of *La Prisonnière* by Proust, though it is not the novel in which the madeleine episode is told, and a mold for baking madeleines, which appears on the cover of the book inspired by the project. But the only common denominator between the biographical investigation systematically conducted by Clara and the involuntary resurgence of memories caused by the Proustian madeleine is their ability to revive the past.

The story excavated by Clara from the basement falls into the category "many objects, one (human) life." The objects that lead to its reconstruction illustrates all three of the types of signs identified by C.S. Peirce: indices, based on a causal or metonymic relation; icons, based on resemblance; and symbols, based on a conventional relation

[1] The English spelling "project" is used even in the French original title.

[2] The project is divided into 5 "seasons." 1 and 2 have been translated into English; 3 to 5 have not. I use the translation when I quote from seasons 1 and 2, and my own for other sources.

[3] Marta Caraion (2020, 28) thinks that the name Madeleine is a pseudonym, but it appears in a handwritten document that lists the members of the whole family: Henri, the father; Raymonde, the mother, and Madeleine, the only child.

between signifier and signified. Indices are represented by Madeleine's material possessions, such as old shoes, cheap jewelry, a luxurious fur coat, ice skates, a tennis racket, school supplies and text books, a collection of guidebooks about Holland, and a bottle of Lourdes water of which Clara asks: did you believe in that nonsense? We can conclude that Madeleine was a teacher, was athletic, cared about her appearance, travelled in the Netherlands, but the meaning of the Lourdes water remains mysterious, since no other religious item is found, and her only relative says she was an unbeliever, like most French teachers at the time. Iconic meaning is represented by photographs that show what Madeleine looked like, but most scholars agree that photography combines an iconic with an indexical dimension, through which, as Roland Barthes observed, it testifies that "something has been there." As an example of this indexical value, we can infer from photos of Madeleine in various recognizable places where she spent her vacations. While indices give general information about Madeleine (that is, features shared by many other individuals) and icons tell mostly about her appearance, it takes text-bearing objects such as letters, diplomas, diaries, obituaries, and newspaper cut-outs to flesh out Madeleine's life and to provide a glimpse into her personal experience, thanks to the symbolic meaning of language, which is infinitely more versatile than icons and indices. Clara learns through a collection of letters that the great love of Madeleine's life was a man named Loulou to whom she was engaged, but who died of tuberculosis in 1943 at age 31. Though the written documents mean primarily through their text, they are also material objects that mean indexically through properties such use of certain fonts, type of paper, smell, handwriting style, printed decorations, etc. These physical properties do not yield precise, propositional information about Madeleine's life, but they bear cultural significance by telling us how graphic design, calligraphy, or even the packaging of objects have changed. In some cases, the textual meaning of written documents is eclipsed by their indexical meaning: once textbooks or guidebooks have been identified as such through their written title, it is not necessary to read them to conclude that Madeleine was a teacher and vacationed in Holland.

To what purpose did Madeleine keep so many things? There is too much junk and ephemera—shopping lists, recipes, dried four-leaf clovers--mixed in with the letters, diplomas, note-books, obituaries, and newspaper clippings mentioning relatives for Madeleine to have conceived of the stuff as strictly biographical documents. People who select what things to keep and organize them properly are known as collectors, a respected pursuit; people who keep everything are known as hoarders, a habit considered unhealthy if not morbid, when taken to an extreme. Was Madeleine a hoarder or an archivist of her own life, which means a collector? Clara cannot decide. In the book she writes: "Why did you keep so many things? Why did you organize it so well? Did you hope that somebody would discover your things? Why do some people keep everything? And others throw away everything? (2017, 121). The materials are organized into neatly labelled containers: there is a suitcase for Loulou's letters, a sealed envelope for obituaries (Clara feels guilty about breaking the seal), and a cardboard box for little things ("babioles"), some of which are little purses containing even smaller things, forming a structure reminiscent of Russian dolls. An example of Madeleine's painstaking organization is a box that contains a collection of the magazine *Historia*, a popularization of history writing that concentrates on leaders and celebrities, against the current trend, represented by the Madeleine project, of focusing on ordinary, forgotten or oppressed people. On this box, Madeleine lists the issues that are there, the missing issues and the doubles.

From a temporal point of view, the project tells two stories: first, the personal life story of Madeleine; second, the story of everyday life, of "how it was" for ordinary people in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Clara writes: "I also understood that, from fragment to fragment, your portrait was drawn, but not only your portrait: with it, a whole facet of our History. I am now convinced that this basement holds much

more than the story of an individual: a piece of our collective memory." (2017, 258). This second story is told not only by objects deliberately saved by Madeleine, but also through information that comes as an unintended bonus, such as the articles in the newspapers used to wrap objects, or the advertisement of the magazines that Madeleine saved for their content. An ad for Kronenbourg beer from the fifties will amuse (or anger) contemporary readers for its stereotyping of women: it features a man who thanks his wife for buying the beer, with no suggestion that she may enjoy it herself. The story of collective memory told by the project captures not only cultural change and everyday life, it also reflects how History with a capital H affected ordinary people. The letters of Loulou tell about coping with the invasion of France by Nazi Germany in 1940; the food coupons saved by Madeleine testifies of the privations of life during the occupation, and her newspaper clips document the moments in history that she want to remember: Russian troops closing in on Berlin in 1945; French women being granted the right to vote in 1945, the Moon landing in 1969, the death of de Gaulle in 1970, and, surprisingly, news about Steve Jobs and breakthroughs in computer technology in the eighties and nineties. A life-long learner, Madeleine told a neighbor that her greatest regret was not being able to use a computer.

But the Madeleine project is more than the life story of an ordinary person and the evocation of the times she lived through: it is also the story of an investigation that puts Clara and her relationship to Madeleine in the spotlight. As Bikialo and Guilbard observe (2020), the entanglement of Madeleine's and Clara's lives is represented visually in photos that bear the imprint of Clara's presence, such as her fingers holding documents, and, in the most blatant sign of her presence, the reflection of her face in the glass of a framed photo of Madeleine by the sea (figure 1).

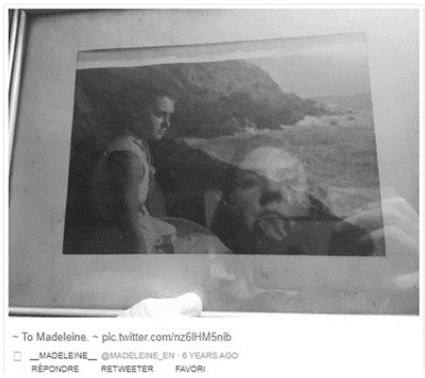

Figure 1: A photo of Madeleine with the reflection of Clara.

Clara's narrative relies on the double temporality that is typical of detective stories: it follows her investigation chronologically, taking the reader through both productive searches and false leads, but it reveals Madeleine's life non-linearly, as bits and pieces of this life come to light through the investigator's discoveries. The main difference with detective stories is that there is no specific case to solve, and the investigation could go on forever, since a human life is not a mystery awaiting a solution. The various pieces of evidence are documented through photos of objects taken by Clara, but when they consist of written documents, only selected passages are shown and transcribed in the caption: rather than displaying complete documents, Clara maintains a strict control on what the reader sees. This method is not as different from history writing as one may think: historians base their narratives on archival documents, but they select information that fits their purpose rather than quoting the entire archive. An example of Clara's selective approach is her contrasting treatment of Madeleine's relationship to Loulou, her fiancé, and to Bernard, a fellow teacher with whom she lived for a while in the fifties but never married. Clara presents excerpts of Loulou's letters that express a loving relation but avoid intimate information. In the case of Bernard, no letter is shown and the relationship is kept hidden: all that Clara says of Bernard's letters (in Season 2) is that they are "full of everyday stories, which I wouldn't know how to write down today. And there is

a complicated story with his daughter, it looked quite serious. I read some 'don't cry for too long', some 'grieving is useless', it sounds grey, sad, cold, like the concrete walls around me. I leave this story aside." Clara refuses to speculate and does not pursue the thread, putting her respect for Madeleine's privacy ahead of the curiosity of her readers. Throughout the narrative, Clara expresses deep concern for the ethical nature of her project. She respects Madeleine's privacy by never revealing her last name, and she goes to great lengths to hide her identity: when she shows photos of official documents that bear her full name, she covers it with a piece of paper, an obvious visual intrusion of the narrator into the narrated. Similarly, Clara does not show a photo of Loulou's grave, though she does visit it, probably because it would reveal his name. A recurring concern of Clara is whether or not Madeleine would approve of her life and things being so publicly exposed; Clara must have experienced great relief when, in the fifth season, she visits Madeleine's Dutch acquaintances, who remember her fondly as "aunt Madeleine," and they vindicate Clara's project by telling her that Madeleine would have been delighted.

Are the objects found by Clara in place or out of place? They are in storage, which means that they are no longer displayed in the apartment nor used on everyday basis. Storage is the first step toward discarding things, a middle ground between the home and the trash can: you put in storage things you no longer want to see but you do not have the heart to throw them away. But storage is also the place where you put things for which there is no room in your house, but that you might need some day. As long as Madeleine lived, then, the rightful place of the objects was the darkness of the basement, where the past is both accessible, and conveniently out of sight. But what will be the place for Madeleine's possessions once the story has been told and the project is complete? The expected thing to do would be to send them to the landfill, but Clara cannot bring herself to throwing them away, because, as she learns more about Madeleine's life and becomes emotionally more and more attached to her, the objects take on the value of relics. Disposing of the collection would be tantamount to disposing of Madeleine herself. But just as there was no room for the things in Madeleine's apartment, there is no room for them in Clara's home, since she lives in Madeleine's apartment. Clara finds a solution to the dilemma by creating a museum exhibit out of Madeleine's things, a move that turns the more or less randomly assembled stuff into a genuine collection. It is shown, among other places, in the Musée de la vie quotidienne (Museum of everyday life) that I have mentioned above. Objects displayed in museums are always out of place compared to where they come from, but their new place is a honorary location that signals them as interesting and protects them from the wear and tear of time, since they no longer have to fulfill a practical function. Yet a museum home is not necessarily a forever home. Madeleine's objects are only part of temporary exhibits, and one wonders what will become of them once the considerable public interest raised by the project has waned and their museum tour is over.

4. Orhan Pamuk's Museum of Innocence[4]

My next example is part of a triptych that includes a novel, Orhan Pamuk's *Museum of Innocence*, a real-world museum by the same name that has become a significant Istanbul tourist attraction, and a partly autobiographical text titled *The Innocence of Objects* that mediates between the novel and the museum and functions as catalog. The novel narrates the creation of a fictional museum; the museum displays objects that bring to life the historical, geographical and social setting of the novel, and the autobiographical text (henceforth referred to as the catalog) mediates between the actual museum and the novel: on one hand, it describes the contents of the actual museum and how it came into being, on the other hand it reveals hidden connections between the

[4] The following discussion of Pamuk condenses my article "How Stories Relate to Places? Orhan Pamuk's Museum of Innocence as Literary Tourism" (Ryan 2021).

displays and the chapters of the novel to which they refer. Here is a summary of the novel:

Set in Istanbul from 1975 to 1984, *The Museum of Innocence* tells the story of an unhappy love affair that turns into a fetishist obsession. The narrator, Kemal, belongs to the upper crust of Istanbul society, a class that tries to emulate European culture at all costs. He is engaged to Sibel, a heavily Westernized young woman. One day he walks into a store and he falls in love with Füsun, the salesgirl, a stunning beauty who is a distant relative of his. They engage for a short time in a passionate sexual relation, but after Kemal's formal engagement to Sibel, Füsun disappears and Kemal is heartbroken. His strange behavior leads Sibel to break the engagement. When Füsun renews contact with Kemal a few months later she is married to Feridun, a fat boy whom she married without love, because by giving up her virginity she has compromised her marriage prospects. For eight years, Kemal visits Füsun four times a week for supper in her parents' house, where she still lives with her husband, and he spends his evenings watching TV with the family. He also steals various objects from the house, because they bear the imprint of Füsun's presence. Finally, Füsun gets a divorce from Feridun and she agrees to marry Kemal on condition that he take her to Paris. During the trip they renew their physical relation, but the next day Füsun drives Kemal's car into a plane tree, killing herself and seriously wounding Kemal. The text is ambiguous as to whether it is an accident or a suicide. After Füsun's death, Kemal creates a museum with all the things he has stolen from her house as well as with other objects he has acquired in the meantime, for he has become a passionate collector.

Kemal's decision to create a museum develops in three stages. It begins with an attempt to conjure Füsun's presence through the objects that have touched her body. He retreats regularly to the apartment where he used to make love to her, and he tries to pick up her scent in the sheets or the trace of her hand in the objects that she used to touch. Kemal's desire to possess Füsun's objects is neither past nor future oriented but rather intensely focused on the present. Treating things that have been touched by Füsun as erotic fetishes, he asks of them to conjure her live presence, rather than to activate memories of her or to help him reconstruct her life story, as was the case for the Madeleine Project. In the second stage of his obsession—stealing objects that belong to Füsun—Kemal does not make a distinction between trivial ephemera and valuable artifacts: everything that has been touched by Füsun is equally precious to him, whether it is a cigarette butt or a golden earring. During the eight years when he visits her four times a week at her parents' house, he steals her earrings, barrettes, and combs, including those that he gave her as presents, and he brings them back to his apartment, where he tries to reassemble her body through the things that belonged to her. His kleptomania soon expands to other kinds of objects found in Füsun's parents' house, such as glasses, bottles of cologne, salt shakers, and a quince grater. He often replaces the stolen objects with new ones, only to steal them again. In a third stage of his obsession, the fetishist lover turns into a compulsive collector of objects of the same kind: he religiously picks up Füsun's cigarette stubs, and after eight years, he has collected 4213 of them. He also manages to steal numerous examples of the China dogs that sit on top of the TV, creating a unique collection of a kind of item that symbolizes an important turning point in middle-class culture—the moment when television replaced radio and became the center of domestic life. After Füsun's death, Kemal continues his gathering of mementos that represent Turkish everyday life in the seventies and eighties by getting objects from other collectors. To find room for his growing collection, he buys the family house of Füsun and he sends her mother to live elsewhere. Taken away from Füsun's house, the objects in Kemal's collection are out of place, but they find a new permanent home when he creates a museum for them. The museum is much more than a mausoleum to Füsun (Kemal reminds us that mausoleum is the etymology of museum), it is also a tribute to the passion that led to the creation of many small, private museum around the world: the passion of collecting for its own sake. Compulsive

hoarding is turned into a labor of love and into a work of art.

Pamuk's museum is in many senses the opposite of Kemal's. It is a real museum that tells a fictional story, while Kemal's museum is a fictional museum that tells what is from Kemal's point of view a true story. In Kemal's museum, objects are in a sense derealized, since they stand for Füsun and the memories they evoke, while in Pamuk's museum they stand primarily for themselves, projecting a mute presence that combines strangeness and familiarity. While Kemal *first* falls in love with Füsun, *then* becomes an obsessive collector of objects connected to her, and *ends up* with a museum, Pamuk *starts* as a passionate collector of objects, and *ends* with the simultaneous creation of a museum that hosts the objects, and of the fictional characters of Kemal and Füsun as the thread that connects the objects. In the catalog Pamuk tells us that starting in the 1990s, he began collecting objects from antique shops that represented daily life in Istanbul in the 70s and 80s, a time when a Westernized elite was trying to erase any trace of the Ottoman past. Therefore, what one sees in the museum is not typical Turkish artifacts, the kind that tourists adore, but mass-produced objects similar to those found everywhere in the West.

Pamuk first thought of writing a novel in the form of a museum catalog; he would show objects, and then describe the memories that the objects evoke in the protagonist; but the novel eventually developed as a classic self-standing narrative, without illustrations. The catalog is the bridge that connects the museum to the novel. The novel consists of 83 short chapters, and each of them is represented in the museum by a box that shows some of the objects mentioned in the chapter (figure 2). Through their spatial organization, these boxes are reminiscent of the work of the artist Joseph Cornell, who pioneered the practice of arranging objects in a box in an aesthetic and meaningful way that make the whole more than the sum of its parts. While Pamuk does not mention Cornell as influence in the catalog, he acknowledges another important source of inspiration: the so-called cabinets of wonders, or *Wunderkammer*, that displayed disparate collections of exotic objects in the 17th and 18th centuries. The *Wunderkammer* treads a thin line between a disciplined collecting of objects representing specific categories, and indiscriminate acquisition driven by the need to possess. Similarly, the Museum of Innocence is part highly selective display of mementos from a certain period in Istanbul's history, and part random collection of objects that happened to strike a chord in Pamuk's imagination when he saw them in a junk store. Some of the objects shown in the Museum play an important role in the plot, while others are inserted into the text through casual mentions, not because of their strategic importance for the novel, but because these objects grabbed Pamuk's attention. When the reader re-reads the novel and consults the catalog at the same time, she will discover many objects in the text that she had overlooked on a first reading, because these objects are shown in the corresponding box.

From Pamuk's point of view, the objects in the museum play many roles. (1) Found objects that excited his imagination and inspired the plot of the novel. (2) Mementos of a vanished way of life—the Istanbul of the fifties to eighties. (3) Materials for the creation of works of art. (4) Means of organizing space and of turning time into space: when visitors climb the stairs in a spiral movement to the top story and look down at the other stories, they will see all the displays simultaneously, together with a large spiral drawn on the bottom floor. This spiral symbolizes the Aristotelian conception of Time, which links all the moments together, just as a story links isolated objects and characters into a meaningful sequence of events (2012, 253). (5) Words in an unknown language whose meaning arises from their relations. About frame 9, which shows junk crammed under the metal frame of a bed, Pamuk writes in the catalog: "As they gradually found their place in the museum, the objects began to talk among themselves, singing a different tune and moving beyond what was described in the novel" (2012, 83). This remark prefigures role. (6) Bearers of a will of their own, so that beauty can emerge from random

arrangements, rather than from premeditated designs. As Pamuk writes of box 14: "I am particularly fond of this box, which, despite my sketching and designs, has been so receptive to the whim of uncalculated beauty" (2012, 100). This observation reminds us of the Surrealist conception of beauty as the chance encounter of an umbrella and sewing machine on an operation table.[5]

Figure 2: One of the displays at the Museum of Innocence featuring mementos of Füsun. Its design is reminiscent of a Cabinet of Wonders.

An important difference between Kemal's and Pamuk's museums is the importance of Füsun. While Kemal conceives his museum as a mausoleum to Füsun, she is only represented in the real Museum of Innocence through her earrings, one of her dresses, her shoes, socks, panties, combs and barrettes, and her cigarette butts. It would have been easy to include photos of her (or rather photos of a woman posing as her), but this would have turned the museum into some kind of photo-novel, and it would have detracted attention from the objects. The museum is not really a memorial to the fictional character of Füsun, it is a tribute to that which she represents, namely the city of Istanbul. The love of Kemal for Füsun is an opportunity for the novel to explore Istanbul in its diversity, from Nişantaşı, the rich neighborhood where Kemal's family lives, to Çukurcuma, the ethically diverse, occasionally run-down, but vibrant neighborhood where Füsun's family lives, and where the actual museum is located. To quote a favorite cliché of literary critics, Istanbul is truly the main character in the novel. After Füsun's death, "Istanbul [becomes] a very different city" (2009, 492), a city of paved streets and concrete buildings rather than the sensory feast of noises, sights and smells that it was before.

The objects in the displays speak of Istanbul much more than they speak of Kemal and Füsun, and even more importantly, they speak to the visitor of a past that is perceived at the same time as very remote and very close. Very remote, because technology steadily accelerates the rate of change of the world, and the world of our youth seems to be centuries away. But also very close, because some of us can actually remember using the kind of objects displayed in the boxes. This is why a museum like Pamuk's creates much more personal emotions than, say, a museum devoted to medieval artifacts or to objects from the antiquity. This emotion has a name: it is called nostalgia.

Pamuk's combination of novel and museum represents a unique literary experiment. Unlike existing museums devoted to literary works and characters—for instance, to Don Quixote or to Sherlock Holmes--, the Museum of Innocence is not a commercial exploitation of the success of the novel nor an illustration of its plot. From the very beginning the museum and the novel were mysteriously entwined in Pamuk's imagination. He wrote the novel to give meaning to the museum, and he used the museum as inspiration for the novel. Like most works of art, the museum fulfills an obscure personal desire, and it is in order to understand this desire that Pamuk wrote the story of Kemal and Füsun.

5. Ashley's sack

While the objects in our first two narratives

[5] Conception originally formulated by Lautréamont, but adopted by Surrealists.

chronicle an everyday life that could be ours, though slightly removed in space or time, the third one concerns an experience that strains the imagination: that of enslaved people who are considered property, and are therefore reduced to the status of objects. As Tiya Miles, the author of *All That She Carried*: *The Journey of Ashley's Sack, a Black Family Keepsake* writes of her project: "But we can be sure that Rose faced the deep kind of trouble that no one in our present time knows and only an enslaved woman has seen" (2021, xiii). This trouble is Rose having her 9-year-old daughter, Ashley, sold on the slave market and forever taken away from her. The story is embroidered on a cotton sack yellowed with time that was found in 2006 in a bundle of textiles bought by a woman for 20 dollars in a flea market in Tennessee (figure 3). She immediately recognized the immense historical value of the object, and donated it to Middleton Place in South Carolina, a former plantation that now hosts a foundation devoted to the history of slavery. In 2016 the sack was borrowed and displayed at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., where it caused deep emotional reactions--"torrents of tears," according to Miles (2021, 34). The story reads as follows:

My great grandmother Rose
mother of Ashley gave her this sack when
she was sold at age 9 in South Carolina
it held a tattered dress 3 handfulls of
pecans a braid of Roses hair. Told her
It be filled with my Love always
She never saw her again
Ashley is my grandmother
Ruth Middleton [6]
1921

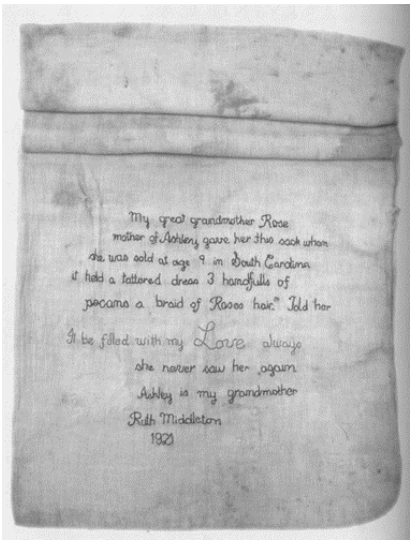

Figure 3: Ashley's sack. Middleton Foundation.

The simple eloquence of the text defies critical commentary: whatever we can say about the story, Ruth says it better. In ten lines she narrates an incident that captures the profound dehumanization of slavery, how it reduces people to object status, how it disintegrates family ties, but the tale also celebrates the persistence of love and the will to survive in the direst conditions. The size of the sack and the time-consuming medium of embroidery limit the story to the bare facts, but it presents a classical narrative structure:

Exposition: the narrative begins with the identification of the characters and the specification of family relations.

Complication: The mention of Ashley being sold provide the context that explains the central event. No mention of slavery is made, because it is implied by the act of selling, and it would be obvious to future readers.

Central event: Rose gives the sack to Ashley.

The enumeration of the content of the sack captures the meaning of this central event. A mother's essential duties to her child are to feed her, clothe her and give her love. The first two of these duties are represented,

[6] The relation between the Middleton place and Ruth's last name of Middleton, which she acquired through her marriage, is coincidental, though it is not impossible that her husband's ancestors were slaves at the Middleton plantation, from which they could have received their name.

symbolically, by the dress and the pecans, while the braid of hair, taken from Rose's body, stands metonymically for the loving presence the mother will no longer be able to provide physically.

Climax: The direct quote of Rose's parting words to Ashley represents the emotional highlight of the story. This line is stitched in a different color, separated from the neighboring lines by a larger space, and the capitalized word "Love" is twice as big as the rest of the text. The unusual position of the word "always" (as opposed to the more common "it be always filled") stresses the everlasting nature of this love, a love that spreads from Rose to Ashley and from Ashley to Ruth.

The *Resolution* is represented by the statement that "she never saw her again." Since the story is told from the point of view of Rose, the pronouns can be resolved as "Rose never saw Ashley again," but the experience of separation is reciprocal, and the reference of the pronouns can be easily inverted into "Ashley never saw Rose again." One can imagine that the separation was just as painful for the nine-year-old Ashley as for her mother Rose.

Conclusion: By specifying her family relation to Ashley, already implied by the first line, Ruth suggests that she knows the story through Ashley's storytelling, thereby establishing a chain of transmission that guarantees its truth. The transmission of the tale skips a generation—that of Rosa, Ashley's daughter and Ruth's mother—but it is not uncommon for grandmothers, rather than mothers, who have to work, to be the tellers of tales and the guardians of family history, especially since their memory reaches deeper into the past.

The *signature*, Ruth Middleton, 1921, establishes her identity and authorship for future owners of the precious object and inserts her in the broader story of the survival of the object. Through the act of stitching the story on the sack, she gives a literal meaning to the expression of tell-tale object: thanks to the material inscription that it bears, the sack can no longer be separated from its story.

In an important sense, however, the embroidered story remains incomplete. If we analyze narrative structure according to the schema problem—action (aiming at solution)—result, the parameters problem and action are filled, respectively, by the sale and the gift of the sack, but the outcome remains unspecified: did Ashley find comfort in the love symbolically contained in the sack? It is in the context of Ruth's act that the narrative receives its full meaning and achieves closure: by committing to writing the story told to her by Ashley, Ruth provides proof of Ashley's gratitude toward Rose, proof that Rose's gift of love did indeed fulfill its goal.

In addition to its role in the story it tells, the sack participates in a larger narrative that scholars have been eager to reconstitute: the story of its travels through several generations, and of the lives of the Black people—all women, it turns out-- who passed it on as a memento of the suffering of their enslaved forebearers. The story of the sack begins in the first half of the 19th century, when it is woven out of cotton, probably by Black slaves, as a container meant to carry grain or food. Its dimensions—75 by 40 cm—are out of proportion with the small collection of objects that Rose gives to Ashley, but while it is far too large for a tattered dress, three handfuls of pecans and a braid of hair, all that Rose could gather, it has room for lots of love. The sack's travels in space start in South Carolina, as the inscription tells us. Scholars have been able to identify Rose and Ashley on the basis of the archives of slaveholders. 200 Roses were found, but only three Ashleys, an uncommon name in the 19th century. The two names appeared together in the records of a prominent family of South Carolina named Martin, and it is assumed that they refer to the protagonists of our story. We don't know what happened to Rose after the sale. Ashley was freed by the emancipation act in 1865 and had a daughter around 1880 named Rosa, who was the mother of Ruth. Born in 1903, Ruth took the sack to Philadelphia where she resettled as part of what is known as the Great Migration of Black people from the South to the North. Ruth worked as a domestic servant, like most Black women at the time, but enjoyed some level of social

prominence in the Black community of Philadelphia. She died in 1942 at age 39 of tuberculosis, and her daughter Dorothy inherited the sack. Dorothy died without heirs at 69 in 1988, and the whereabouts of the sack are unknown between 1988 and 2006, when it mysteriously resurfaced in Tennessee. It returned to South Carolina when it was gifted to the Middleton Foundation, and from there started a triumphal tour that took it to Washington D.C. in 2016, as well as to other museums, though it will eventually return to South Carolina and to the Middleton foundation. Throughout its story, the sack evolves from modest, functional object used to transport goods, to treasured family heirloom, a status that makes it unique for its private owners among all objects of the same kind, to part of a bunch of undifferentiated rags offered for sale at a flea market, to venerable relic displayed to the public in a protective glass case in a prestigious museum.

6. Conclusion

What is it that makes the objects in these three narratives remarkable enough to merit exhibition in a museum? Or to reword the question, what kind of interest do they elicit in museum visitors? The appeal of the Madeleine Project and of Pamuk's Museum of Innocence lies in nostalgia. By displaying ordinary things, they invest in our penchant to cherish any object that evokes personal memories, even though we may have been indifferent to these objects when the past was the present. The objects shown in the Madeleine project present the additional appeal of belonging to one particular person: visitors are invited to imagine Madeleine's life on the basis of the things she wanted to keep. Clara's comments about what she learned from the project can be extended to the experience of many visitors: "I don't watch old ladies the way I used to." "And when I go to flea-markets, I think of the lives behind each thing, it all looks tremendous." Pamuk's museum, being made of objects found in the various junk and antique stores of the neighborhood, and concerning fictional characters, lacks this biographical dimension, but it makes up for it through its sentimental connection to Istanbul (for to access it you will have to walk through some of the older and most charming neighborhoods of the city), through its relation to the novel, and for those visitors who have not read it, through the aesthetic arrangement of the displays. It is simultaneously an art museum and a "museum of things," like the Berlin museum that served as Pamuk's inspiration.

There is no hint of nostalgia in the fascination of the public for Ashley's sack: it tells a story that no visitor has experienced, whatever their race. This story is both very general and very particular: on the general level, it speaks for the thousands of enslaved parents and children who were separated from each other by being sold away; of these thousands, probably many parents gave their child something to remember them by or something to help them survive. But, to our knowledge, only one of these multiple stories was commemorated by a descendent who put it into writing in a strikingly original manner. Ashley's sack is a unique object that tells us about circumstances that inspires horror rather than romantic longing. It has become a cultural icon for a society that hopes to amend for its slavery past by fully acknowledging and exploring this past.

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