

**relics, protestants,
things¹
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ABSTRACT

Reformation Protestants' detestation of Catholic sacra, holy objects, and sacred sites is well documented. To probe the later history of this contempt, this essay observes two nineteenth-century Protestants in Palestine. Both, as might be anticipated, exhibit disgust at those physical phenomena revered by other Christianities. But surprisingly, both also obsessively collect alternative things that are associated with the Holy Land. Contemporary theory—namely Bill Brown's Thing Theory—is brought to bear on the preoccupation with things represented by this substitution of safe objects for abhorrent ones. However, instead of providing an explanatory frame for this behavior, Thing Theory seems to reproduce it. The essay concludes by suggesting that a primal Protestant anxiety about powerful things continues to haunt contemporary Western scholarship.

Keywords: Jerusalem, Protestant, relics, missionaries, Thing Theory

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In 1532, Erasmus defended himself before the Faculty of Theology in Paris from the charge of criticizing pilgrimage:

Men recognized as religious once thought it was nothing special to have been in Jerusalem, and I think that Christianity would be no worse off if no one ran off to Jerusalem but rather looked for the traces of Christ in books and transferred his effort and expense to the assistance of the poor. (Erasmus 1993: 273–4)

Erasmus' mockery of the veneration of relics and holy sites in his *Colloquies* was a moderate Catholic version of the violent assaults made by Protestants on sacred images, objects, and places in the iconoclast riots of the sixteenth century (Erasmus 1997). John Calvin helped incite them. His denunciation of Catholic relics, published in 1543, shows how (de Greef 2008: 143–4):

St. Augustine complains ... that certain people were, even in his time, exercising a dishonest trade, hawking about relics of martyrs, and he adds the following significant words, "should they really be relics of martyrs," from which we may infer, that even then abuses and deceits were practiced, by making simple folks believe that bones, picked up any where, were bones of saints ...

Now, the origin and root of this evil, has been, that, instead of discerning Jesus Christ in his Word, his Sacraments, and his Spiritual Graces, the world has, according to its custom, amused itself with his clothes, shirts, and sheets, leaving thus the principal to follow the accessory. (Calvin 1870: 162)

In their search for a direct, personal relationship with God, Protestants from the sixteenth century onwards denounced the physical intermediaries between the human and the divine—priests, saints, relics, shrines—so central to non-Protestant Christian traditions. Pilgrimage, which combined all such actors and added to the mix those indulgences so despised by Luther, was particularly detested. Much has been written about this Early Modern Protestant animosity towards traditional Christianities' *sacra*.² Critical scholarship has also been devoted to later Protestant attitudes towards premodern or non-European religious (mis)usages of objects and sites—fetishism, totemism, idolatry, possession.³ However, although significant work has focused on the anxiety that traditional religious things have historically caused Protestants, attention has only more recently been directed to Protestants' own peculiar materialities.⁴ This paper probes Protestant relations to physical objects further, suggesting that those long-felt anxieties about Others' *sacra* contaminate their own embrace of a new set of things.

Before continuing this discussion, the terms in my title require some definition. “Protestant” certainly refers here to those who lived their lives fully embracing that confession—working and writing as advocates of a particular form of Christianity. But it is also applied in a broader sense, evoking a *habitus* conditioned by religion and markets (Bourdieu 1977: esp. 72–81). In this text, then, “Protestant” is used as a descriptor both of Protestants and of those who, living in a predominantly Protestant culture, have thoroughly assimilated the anxieties and capitalist ethics of Protestantism. “Relic,” in the title, stands in for all *sacra* (icons and holy places, even totems, fetishes, and idols). For non-Protestant Christians, relics have traditionally had significant spiritual force; they demand veneration. Relics circulated principally through gifting and theft; it was illegal to buy and sell them. For Protestants relics are dangerous objects that mislead the ignorant. Protestants control *sacra* by destroying them. “Thing” is used here narrowly to identify objects and sites that are not traditional *sacra* but which, like *sacra*, have agency. This agency is not of the literary or philosophical sort, which entails consciousness and intention, but rather of the corporate or chemical variety, which involves acting on other things and people without consciousness. Protestants tended to control things not by destroying them but by textualizing, collecting, or commoditizing them (see Table 1). *Sacra*, things, and commodities have their spatial equivalents: sacred spaces (temenos, church, grove); place (home, museum, arena); mass-produced space (airports, office buildings, hotels).

The setting for my argument is the Holy Land, the great generator of relics and sacred spaces. Jerusalem, at its center, is perfectly suited to an investigation of the strained relationships among Protestants, *sacra*, and things—it is a remarkably manipulative city filled with

Table 1 Distinctions: *sacrum*, thing, commodity

	Sacrum (relic, icon, idol, totem, fetish)	Thing (object or artwork)	Commodity
source	epiphanic	encountered or worked	industrially produced
attribute	aura–powerful	affect–potent	passive–powerless
value	priceless (gifted, stolen, not legally sold)	valuable (vendable but sometimes enclaved)	determined solely by the market
history	known	knowable	erased
authorization	community	individual	market
Protestant reaction	destroy	collect, textualize, commoditize	consume

manipulative objects. Protestants embraced Jerusalem so long as it remained in the realms of the textual, visionary, and historical. For example, early Protestant Bibles—such as the well-known Geneva Bible of 1560—like later ones, were commonly illustrated with maps of the Holy Land and images of imagined historical monuments. In both, Jerusalem was central. But when Protestants considered Jerusalem as a contemporary physical place, it was commonly associated with non-Protestant pilgrimage and roundly denounced. As the hefty Protestant tract *Mappe-Monde nouvelle papistique* of 1567 testifies, Jerusalem was understood by Protestants as the city foremost in a conspiratorial web of pilgrimage sites enabling the pope to rob the masses (Trento and Eskrich [1566] 2009: 21–3, 151–4). On the map accompanying the text, however, this material Jerusalem—in contrast to the ideal Jerusalem of biblical illustration—is small and marginal.

Physical Jerusalem was, in the sixteenth century, remote; few Early Modern Protestants traveled to the Holy Land (Noonan 2007). By the nineteenth century, however, technological improvements in transport and the expansion of middle-class wealth with industrialization allowed increasing access to the Holy Land. Protestant travelers multiplied exponentially. So did the narrative accounts of their experiences there. Although all of these texts have their own peculiarities, they are, in some features, remarkably consistent. Most notably, the monuments and practices of traditional Christianities are habitually derided. Typical is Edward Daniel Clarke (1769–1822), an English Protestant, a chapel clerk and private tutor, and finally a professor:

While the author is ready to acknowledge the impression made upon his mind by the peculiar sanctity of this memorable region, he is far from being willing to enumerate, or to tolerate the degrading superstitions, which, like noxious weeds, have long polluted the land of “milk and honey” ... The author has ventured to see the country with other eyes than those of monks, and to make the Scriptures, rather than Bede or Adamnanus, his guide in visiting “the Holy Places”; to attend more to a single chapter, nay, a single verse of the Gospel, than to all the legends and traditions of the Fathers of the church. (Clarke 1814: x)

Clarke dismisses long-venerated sites and objects as pollutants fabricated by monks and perpetuated by gullible travelers. Predictably, as a righteous Protestant, he insists that the biblical text is the sole legitimate guide to the land. But Clarke’s uneasiness with substituting a text for the land is revealed at the beginning of the paragraph where he recognizes the region as “memorable”

and its sanctity as “peculiar.” “Peculiar” suggests an unsettling idiosyncrasy. As his narrative reveals, the land’s peculiarity lies in its production of powerful things. Even as he dismisses *sacra* as the products of superstition, it is evident that they fascinate him. He investigates them in order to identify appropriate substitutes. For example, Clarke carefully explores the Holy Sepulcher to demonstrate that its physical body does not correspond to scriptural descriptions of the place of Jesus’ crucifixion and burial.

It will now be seen, that what was called the Holy Sepulchre was a mere delusion—a Monkish juggle; that there was, in fact, no crypt nor monument resembling a Jewish place of burial, beneath the dome of that building; that we must seek elsewhere for the place of our Savior’s Tomb ... (Clarke 1814: 334)

He repeats his appeal to the scripture. “It is time to quit these degrading fallacies: let us break from our Monkish instructors; and instead of viewing Jerusalem as pilgrims, examine it by the light of history, with the Bible in our hands” (ibid.) And thereby “throw new light upon the situation of Zion, and the topography of the ancient city.” But he does so not only to eliminate the old Holy Sepulcher but also to find a new one. Thus he discovers a site on the hill opposite Zion that he suggests might be the true location of Calvary and the entombment (ibid: 41).

Revered objects are also ridiculed, but then acquired and repurposed. Locally made olive wood and mother-of-pearl ornaments are, for instance, labeled as “trumpery.” Nevertheless, they are described in considerable detail and then purchased.

This morning our room was filled with Armenians and Jews, bringing for sale the only produce of the Jerusalem manufactures; beads, crosses, shells, etc... . All these, after being purchased, are taken to the church of the Holy Sepulchre, where they receive a sort of benediction ... Afterward, they are worn as relics ... This sort of trumpery is ridiculed by all travellers ... We provided ourselves with a considerable cargo [of these ornaments], and found them useful in our subsequent journey. (Clarke 1814: 137–8)

Sacra, first obliterated by censure, are subsequently repossessed as things, either metaphorically, by discovery of an alternative site, or literally, through purchase. Both forms of possession are figured and legitimated through texts.

Clarke attempted to control the “peculiarity” of the Holy Land not only by substituting acceptably Protestant objects for *sacra* but also by acquiring autochthonous

things. He systematically collected mineral samples, manuscripts, medals, as well as those beads at which he scoffs. Clarke's things might not have aura but they certainly had affect (Benjamin 1969; Seigworth and Gregg 2010). In a remarkable letter that Clarke wrote to his friend Mr Cripps in 1807, shortly before he received his professorial appointment at Cambridge, he describes one of his collections as a kind of harem: "I send you the Cambridge paper; you will see the two advertisements. On Tuesday, 17th, at a quarter after twelve, imagine me in a grand room, before all the University, tutors and all!—all my minerals around me, and models of crystals" (Otter 1827: 388). He put his things from the Holy Land to work for himself; they gained him not only prestige and position but also profit.

Clarke, who had now obtained considerable reputation, took up his residence at Cambridge. He received the degree of LL.D. shortly after his return in 1803, on account of the valuable donations, including a colossal statue of the Eleusinian Ceres, which he had made to the university ... Nor was his perseverance as a traveller otherwise unrewarded. The MSS which he had collected in the course of his travels were sold to the Bodleian library for £1000; and by the publication of his travels he realized altogether a clear profit of £6595. (*Encyclopedia Britannica* 1911: 444)

Clarke also sold his medal collection to a private individual, Payne Knight, for 100 guineas and his mineral collection to the Mineralogical Museum of Cambridge University (now a small part of the Sedgwick Museum of Earth Sciences) for £1500 (Otter 1827: 392, 394; Registrar 1909: 827). In current terms, he made well over a million pounds from his travels (Officer and Williamson 2013). Traditional pilgrims acquire relics of the Holy Land for the spiritual leverage that they might have on the world. Clarke possessed things for their ideological and financial advantage. Relics resisted conversion into commodities; Clarke's things did not. Possession was the means by which Clarke normalized a "peculiar" Holy Land.

Clarke's accounts of the Holy Land in his *Travels in Various Countries* exemplify one broadly recognized trope of nineteenth-century Protestant travel narratives: the denunciation of non-Protestant *sacra*. Clarke's acts in the Holy Land are also a turn-of-the-century index of a less remarked Protestant practice: the naturalization of the Holy Land not only by the displacement of traditionally venerated objects and sites but also by the possession, through writing and collection, of alternative things. A rather bad poem from the other end of the nineteenth century suggests not only the persistence of

the Protestant practice of displacing *sacra* with surrogate things but also something more about both the religious sensibility and the capitalist character of the habit. “Wild Flowers of the Holy Land,” written by Ralph H. Shaw, was published in 1897 by the Methodist *Western Christian Advocate* in its “World of Letters” section.

Wild Flowers of the Holy Land
O sacred flowers from hill and plain!
What visions come to me,
That I may look on Olivet,
And over Galilee.
I rest me where the holy palms
Their solemn shadows lay;
I feel what airs of sun and song
Fell on His human way.
No better gift hath Palestine
Than you, O flowers fair!
Endeared to Him whose tender eyes
Looked on your beauty rare.

The pathos of His life is yours;
You move us, as if we
Did in you all His smiles of love
And tears of pity see.

You tell of Him as nothing else
Of Holy Land can tell:
The beauty in the Gospel found,
Is in your page as well.

From ‘Pressed Flowers from the Holy Land.’ Flowers gathered and pressed in Palestine by the Rev. Harvey B. Greene. Published and sold by Harvey B. Greene, Lowell, Mass (World of Letters 1897: 72)

The poem is accompanied by a citation of its source: it appeared in editions of pressed flowers from Palestine sold in the United States. The wild flower offers the personal immediacy of Jesus for a modest price. An affective thing is here unproblematically commoditized.

The wild flower’s power to collapse the temporal and territorial distance between Jesus and his Protestant beholder works on two conditions: its originating presence in Palestine and its analogy to the Bible. The second condition is met in the poem: the flower acts like the sacred text to which it is analogized: “The beauty in the Gospel found, is in your page as well.” That second condition was more literally realized in its original context. In Harvey B. Greene’s *Pressed Flowers of the Holy Land*, the flower was textualized not only by the poem but also by its physical incorporation into an auratic little book (Figure 1). The first condition of the wild flower’s aura—its origin in Palestine—is authenticated by the

FIG 1

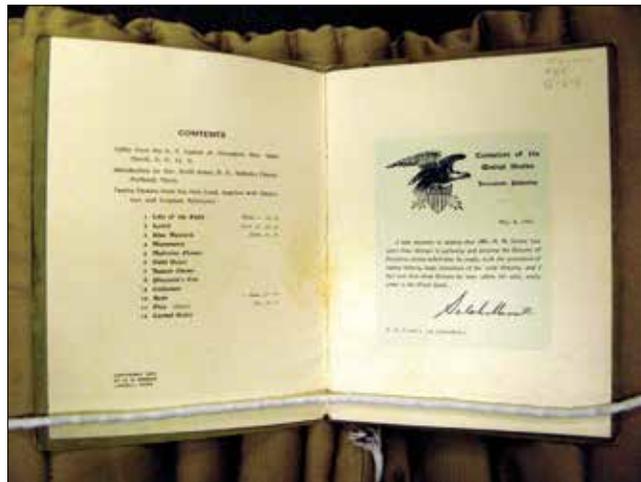
Harvey B. Greene, *Pressed Flowers of the Holy Land: Flowers Gathered and Pressed in Palestine*, 16 cm (Lowell, MA 1903), 5. Courtesy of the Rubenstein Library, Duke University.



American Consul in Jerusalem, Selah Merrill. His official seal opens the small volume. The seal is accompanied by his endorsement: "I take pleasure in stating that Mr. H. B. Greene has spent three Springs in gathering and pressing the flowers of Palestine, during which time he made, with the assistance of native helpers, large collections of the wild flowers, and I feel sure that these flowers he now offers for sale, really grew in the Christ Land" (Figure 2). Just as Catholic relics are accompanied by "authentics," so the pressed flowers from the Holy Land require explicit legitimation. But that legitimation functions for Protestants less as a sanction for veneration than for vendability. The Christian desire to possess some bit of the Holy Land as a means of making the divine more present is an ancient reflex; selling *sacra*, as mentioned earlier, is not. Commoditization is a particularly modern, Protestant reaction to powerfully affective things.

FIG 2

Harvey B. Greene, *Pressed Flowers of the Holy Land: Flowers Gathered and Pressed in Palestine* (Lowell, MA, 1903), iii. Courtesy of the Rubenstein Library, Duke University.



Selah Merrill, the American Consul who gave his imprimatur to Greene's enterprise, provides a second individual through whom to probe further into the uncomfortable Protestant, thing, commodity relationship. Selah Merrill (1837–1909) was an American Congregational minister, evangelical archaeologist, and missionary, as well as a diplomat. He dabbled in archaeology from his first tour of the Holy Land in 1869 and later between 1874 and 1877, in expeditions sponsored by the American Palestine Exploration Society (*Explorations in Palestine* 1875: ix; Ben-Arieh 1986; also Bates 1909). He returned to Jerusalem more permanently as US Consul during each of the Republican administrations from 1882 to 1907, altogether fourteen years (Kark 1994: 323–6). Like Clarke, Merrill claimed objectivity, though he puts an even greater emphasis on empiricism: “In all my researches I aim to go upon the principle, that if I am conscientious and careful in collecting *facts*, the theories that are subsequently evolved from them will be more likely to correspond with the truth” (Merrill 1877: 118). Like Clarke too, Merrill's “objectivity” was molded by his religious biases. His archaeological publications reveal his Protestant partisanship. His extended critique of the Holy Sepulcher as the site of Jesus' burial in his *Ancient Jerusalem* depends entirely on his readings of texts against the topography of the city (Merrill 1908: 305–37; Merrill 1886). His denunciation of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher was rightly criticized as deeply flawed. William F. Albright, the “father of biblical archaeology,” ascribed Merrill's misunderstandings to “his narrow Puritan attitude” (Albright 1933).

Merrill's cultural biases were more explicitly articulated in his popular publications. In several such works he acknowledges that the Arabs are good for being servants, but Jews and non-Protestant Christians are good for nothing.

Poor Jews in Europe know that, if once they can get to Jerusalem, they will receive something, although it be a mere pittance ... As there is no work for them, they live in idleness ... The Jews throughout the world ought to be ashamed to foster such a spirit, or to perpetuate such a state of things.

If we turn to the Christian population of Jerusalem, we find that matters are not much better than they are among the Jews ...

The Protestants form only a very small community, and for a very significant reason—namely, a reason which expresses a radical difference between Protestantism and the various forms of nominal Christianity. Protestantism teaches independence and self-reliance; the Catholic and Greek churches teach exactly the opposite. (Merrill 1885: 102–3)

This quotation suggests that Merrill's critique of other religious groups in the Holy Land was not simply a matter of differences in belief. His expressed dislike was, indeed, less theological than cultural or sociological. While Protestants promoted hard work and individualism, "nominal" Christians, Jews, and Turks subsidized laziness and community. They lacked the Protestant ethic. Weber's theorization of the Protestant ethic as steeped in Calvinism and embodied in Benjamin Franklin is still powerful. He argues that, for the Protestant, the embrace of profitable work acts as a confirmation of "calling" and a proof of election. The wealth produced by that labor is indicative of its possessor's piety. Poverty results from the sin of not working, of not responding to a "calling" (Weber [1904] 1998; also Stallybrass 2002). That Jews, Catholics, and Greeks squandered God's time was, for Merrill, evident in their poverty. The sharing of wealth by the Greeks and Jews not only undermined work, it also eroded individualism. Merrill's ideological commitment to individualism as expressed in conventional Protestant habits is most apparent in the vicious enmity he showed towards a community of Protestants that refused to act as Protestants should—his fellow countrymen of the American Colony in Jerusalem.

The American Colony was a prosperous and entrepreneurial millenarian commune, established in Jerusalem in 1881. Its members affronted Merrill's rigid Protestantism in a number of ways. The sect was religiously tolerant. Its teachers taught *gratis* in both Jewish and Muslim schools. It was also non-missionary, refusing to work for the conversion of non-Protestants. Indeed, the group did not despise poverty but sought to minister to it with soup kitchens, free clinics, and an orphanage. But perhaps the greatest provocation perpetrated by the American Colony was its non-conformist communality: money and goods were shared among its members. Merrill's free-market, capitalist sensibility was scandalized. Equating shared wealth with shared bodies, without basis he accused the Colonists of perverted sexual practices. Merrill treated the Colonists not only as un-Protestant, but also as un-American (Geniesse 2008). In 1905, as the American Consul, he forbade them to display the American flag at their shop in Jerusalem on July 4 and ordered that they not celebrate the holiday (Figure 3) (Ford 1906: 654). But whatever its ideological foundation, Merrill's loathing of the community was most fully realized archaeologically. Infamously, in 1891, he excavated in the American Cemetery, exposing the coffins of the Colonists. Later, with his colleague, Rev. Edwin Sherman Wallace, Merrill colluded in the secret



FIG 3

Fourth of July pageant at the American Colony, Jerusalem, ca. 1910. John D. Whiting Papers, Library of Congress (LC DIG-ds-03110).

sale and subsequent destruction of the cemetery. Bodies were exhumed, removed from their coffins, hacked into pieces, and stored indiscriminately in packing cases in a temporary mass grave in the English cemetery.⁵

That Merrill's hatred had such material markers—flags and bodies—is an index of the intensity of his engagement with things. A preoccupation with them is more clearly evidenced, as with Clarke, in his writing and collecting. Both as an archaeologist for the American Palestine Exploration Society and as consul, Merrill compulsively acquired local specimens, as well as archaeological facts and artifacts. He claimed to have collected 2000 birds while in Palestine (Merrill [1890] 1903: 324). Also like Clarke, he attempted to turn Palestine into profit. Merrill was part of a scheme to sell bottled water from “the sacred river of Judea” to the American public. He added his consular stamp to certifications of the water's authenticity, an act later deemed improper by the US government (Vogel 1993: 183). He was also accused of trafficking in antiquities and stuffed animals, acting “as the agent of several firms and museums in Massachusetts and other States” by shipping off “boxes of stuffed birds and valuable relics, which brought high prices in the English and American markets” (Morganton 1886). Part of his collection of stuffed birds appeared, for example, in the Biblical Museum of Union Theological Seminary in New York (Moulton 1926–7: 67). He apparently attempted to sell his collection of ancient pottery to the Palestine Exploration Society (King 1983: 38). He certainly sold manuscripts to collectors—for example a Torah scroll of the Minor Prophets obtained from a Jerusalem synagogue (A Library of Bibles 1890).

An article on Merrill's collection appearing in the *Boston Daily Advertiser* in 1889 indicates how the collector's religion vindicated his attempt to discipline an obstreperously material Holy Land:

It is, of course, as illustrative of the Bible that Dr. Merrill's collection is most interesting. There is hardly an object animate or inanimate mentioned in the sacred volume of which a specimen cannot be found here ... A visitor will probably be impressed most quickly by the sight of what may be appropriately called a biblical menagerie. Four-footed beasts, fowls of the air, creeping things and fishes are on exhibition in vast numbers, many of them stuffed and mounted. (The Religious Outlook 1989)

The article provides a few of the many possible examples, complete with an allusion to the biblical passage which the item illustrates: "little foxes that spoil the vines," "the ravens that fed Elijah," "the eagle, like unto which the free spirit shall mount upward." Also mentioned "among a vast number of objects" is "a basket identical in shape and make with those in use when 12 baskets full of fragments were gathered up after the 5000 had been fed," a ram trumpet, phylacteries, a crown of thorns, and a cradle from Bethlehem (The Religious Outlook 1989). In a less lyrical manner than Shaw's verse on the wild flowers of Palestine, Merrill's collection suggests how religious *sacra* became Protestant things.

Like Clarke, Merrill turned his things into profit. Although he initially promised his collection to his home institution of Andover, he later undertook to sell it to the Hartford Theological Seminary. He became embroiled in the subsequent litigation (Bates 1909; Goldman 1997: 168). Ultimately his collection found its way to the Harvard Semitic Museum. It is reported that "thousands of specimens of flora, fauna, agricultural tools, and other miscellanea" were sent by oxcart from Andover to Cambridge (Gavin 1987: 12). Only two anonymous objects from Merrill's collection are now on display at Harvard—a pair of baskets in a diorama of an Israelite house. Most of the objects seem to have been lost.⁶ His 'biblical menagerie' was not, apparently, a persuasive equivalent of the Holy Land. Merrill's compulsive acquisition of autochthonous things—stuffed animals and baskets—like his treatment of the graves of the American Colonists, appears now as aberrant. A Catholic's desire to acquire something that retains the aura of its origins is familiar. Most humans take pleasure in possessing things with meaningful histories—a grandmother's ring, a favorite childhood toy, a seashell from a family vacation. In contrast, Merrill's enterprise seems cruel and absurd, perhaps even pathological.

The collections undertaken by Clarke and Merrill, like that of Greene's wild flowers, replaced traditional religious *sacra* with vendable Protestant things. These collections offered investments as well as assurances of control. A collection is, after all, a means of disciplining things. The French sociologist and cultural critic Jean Baudrillard posits that a collector's pleasure arises from his assemblage of quality examples of a type. In this he smells "a strong whiff of the harem ... Surrounded by the objects he possesses, the collector is pre-eminently the sultan of a secret seraglio" (Baudrillard 1994: 10). The harem, in Western discourse, is the archetypal expression not only of orientalism, but also of male authority over his greatest rival, the fractious female. The desire to collect is certainly a desire to master things that promise pleasure and privilege. It is also, however, a desire to control that which might otherwise be disruptive. Indeed, the need to assert authority over the things in which the Holy Land manifested itself—things that acted like *sacra*—may imply a Protestant ambivalence about potentially powerful things more generally.

What about these things? Contemporary theory—namely Thing Theory—might be expected to provide some help in parsing obstreperous Protestant things. "Thing Theory" was brought to the attention of the academy in 2001 by Bill Brown's article of that title. Brown, a distinguished theoretician and scholar of literature, mobilizes a Heideggerian variety of phenomenology to consider human interactions with things in the world. Thing Theory has been broadly and productively understood as a demand that attention be turned from the human subject to the non-human object. It certainly has already been deployed by scholars committed to understanding the material body in its religious context.⁷

Brown begins "Thing Theory" with the observation that things act as an alternative to theory; they have a particular appeal for those jaded by texts, ideas, and theories. But, he then insists, they are subject to theory's discipline. He quotes Leo Stein's embodiment of things in the world ("Things are what we encounter, ideas are what we project.") only to dismiss it ("the experience of an encounter depends, of course, on the projection of an idea"). He goes on to name as "things" only those objects that have specially caught our attention by frustrating our attempt to take them for granted: Brown's things are not attended to because of their intrinsic interest but because of their annoyance. Objects become things by not acting as they should: the window is a thing when it is too dirty to see through; the toy is a thing when it trips us. But even those objects that qualify as things are, in Brown's

treatment, oddly immaterial. His examples come almost exclusively from literary sources or from the art world. The “things” by which Brown exemplifies “Thing Theory” are not physical objects at all but representations from literary texts or artworks. These representations of things are, moreover, themselves displaced by the ideas *about ideas* that make up the bulk of Brown’s article, just as they have dominated Western academic life. An arrangement of quotes from philosophers and critical theorists from Heidegger and Simmel to Derrida and Appadurai constitute much of the author’s argument. The author protects himself and his readers from objects by layers of literary reference. The human subject is not superseded in our attention by the material object but rather by the thing’s interpreter. The thing is controlled by textualizing it with theory.

What explains Brown’s need to discipline things with theory? The answer to this question is suggested by a 45-minute interview of Brown by Austin Allen for BigThing.com. Brown answers with enthusiasm and at length a query as to his favorite works of literature. Indeed, he responds with coherence, authority, and brilliant objectivity to all of the interviewer’s questions, except the very last: “What are a few of your favorite things?” Most of us would probably answer something like “cream colored ponies and crisp apple strudels.” But Brown reacts distractedly.

Right, what are a few of my favorite things? This is an ongoing question that I have, it’s an ongoing question that I pose to my therapist and my therapist poses to me, which really does have to do with whether or not I write about things because I, myself, care deeply about them, or whether I write about things because I see other people caring about them and I’m trying to figure it out. So is it, is my writing about things therapeutic or does it serve some other function? A few of my favorite things, you know, I would say that there certainly objects in which I take great pleasure, but mostly, I’m a failed collector, by which I mean, I really tried, so, stereoscopes, for instance, right, and stereoviews. Early 20th century, I’ve got three of those, somebody gave me one, I thought, “That’s cool,” bought another one, bought another one, bought some stereoviews, that’s as far as I got, and, you know, if anybody wants to make it happen, because it just, and I thought, those would be great, you put them on a shelf and to me it just seemed like, they seemed like dust collectors, and I never find myself spending more time with them. And that’s not the only instance, I mean, I have tried to be some sort of a collector and I’m just not. It’s like one of those people who, you know, always gets a chess set because people think you love chess sets, but it turns out you never wanted chess sets, but you now have a big bunch of them. So it could be that my writing about things is my effort to figure out my absence of cathexis on objects, that could be, too. But it’s not as though I don’t, I mean, I do like,

love the material world. I like beautiful furniture, I like beautiful houses, clothes, and things like that. But that's different from being possessed by possessions the way I think most people are who are in some sense normal, that is, I think that it's a normal relation to have to the object world. (Brown 2010)

That which is obscure in Brown's article becomes explicit in his interview. Things make Brown anxious. That anxiety is expressed as incoherence in addressing the question about what are the things for which he has feelings. It is also revealed in his substitution of his therapist for the interviewer. The extent to which Brown is worried by things is even indirectly displayed in his inability to collect them. He is unable to control things by simply owning them. His stereopticons have gotten the best of him. He cannot collect them; they have become the collectors (if only of dust). Most revelatory is his observation that "most people" "who are in some sense normal" are "possessed" by the things that they own. Things with the power to possess those who desire them are certainly dangerous, as victims of vampires are aware. Brown suggests that he might write about things to compensate for his inability to invest emotionally in them. He is only able to discipline them through writing. In the end, instead of providing an explanatory frame for the apprehension that some objects cause Protestants, Thing Theory seems to reproduce it. Indeed, Thing Theory suggests that a primal Protestant anxiety about powerful things continues to haunt contemporary Western scholarship.

Since the sixteenth century, Protestants have deployed different strategies to control the effects of powerful objects. Relics and similar *sacra* are readily recognized, distanced, and destroyed. Other potentially problematic things that threaten to possess humans may be controlled by collecting and then commoditizing them. Commodities, after all, are entities without a history that we consume without much noticing. Finally objects and sites can also be disciplined through their conversion into words. Travel chronicles and archaeological accounts systematize and thereby subjugate the disorderly landscape. "Thing Theory" provides another example of textualizing objects and artworks—through theory. But Thing Theory does more than present another way of restraining things. It certainly indicates that none of the ways in which Protestants have sought to limit the affect of objects has been entirely successful. It provides a further lesson. Theory is inevitably brought to bear on the past in our efforts to understand it. But theory's utility may also be refined by history. Here, for example, nineteenth-century Protestants in the Holy Land allow a reassessment of "Thing Theory."

notes and references

¹ Parts of this material have been presented in a broader context in my *Selling Jerusalem: Relics, Replicas, Theme Parks*, University of Chicago Press, 2006, Chapter 4, and *Architectural Agents: The Delusional, Abusive, Addictive Lives of Buildings*, University of Minnesota Press, 2015, Chapter 4. I am indebted to the American Colony Collection in the Library of Congress for much of my argument's documentation. I am particularly grateful for the productively critical readings of this essay by Professors Kalman Bland and Chad Seales. They both helped move it from a paper that was presented to provoke to an article meant to convince.

² For good introductions to the Protestant relation to visual culture, see Eire 1986; Koerner 2004; Moxey 2009.

³ For useful historical assessments of the role of colonialism in shaping the West's invention of the practices of the other, see Keane 2007; Johnson 2011; Pietz 1999.

⁴ From the recognition of the material turn in Chidester 2000 through the founding of *Material Religion* to collections of essays in Houtman and Meyer 2012.

⁵ The most detailed account of the events was that written by the daughter of the founders of the American Colony, Horatio and Anna Spafford; see Vester 1950: 158–9, 197–207. A brief version is provided by Goldman 1997: 164–5. The documents recording the questionable role of the British government and Episcopal Church in the affair are published in Lipman 1989: 150–63, 181–3. For the most politically effective account of Merrill's treatment of the American Colony, see Ford 1906.

⁶ I am grateful to James A. Armstrong, Associate Curator of the Semitic Museum of Harvard

University, for providing me with the inventory lists of Selah Merrill's collection (Semitic Museum of Harvard University [1899] 1902/1911).

⁷ Thing Theory is, for example, prominently positioned on the first page of *The Corporeal Imagination*, written by the eminent scholar of Late Antiquity and Early Christianity, Patricia Cox Miller. Miller 2009: 1.

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