

The Secret Life of Things

The Nature of Things: The Secret Life of Inanimate Objects. By Lyall Watson. 1992. Destiny Books, One Park Street, Rochester, VT 05767. 255 pp. Paper \$12.95.

ROBERT A. BAKER

Lyall Watson's latest exploration of the farther reaches of the human imagination outdoes all of his previous efforts by a wide margin. In this newest effort the reader is asked to accept as credible the idea that inanimate objects in the world around us have always had a "mind" or "life-force" of their own and, moreover, it has come from and is due to our own creative and emotional nature. As John Steele notes, "Both life and mind are emergent properties of sufficiently complex matter." And Man, both as *homo faber* (the maker) and *homo ludens* (the player), has certainly created and played with some very complex forms of materials.

Recognizing the inherent absurdity of Watson's basic proposition, the publisher as well as Watson himself took steps at the outset to head off criticism. On the cover the publisher quotes Desmond Morris: ". . . There's nothing worse than a closed mind. Lyall Watson has a first-rate scientific brain. His strength lies in his readiness to find and study strange phenomena without the fears that other scientists have!" Other cover blurbs tell us that "Watson logically investigates illogical events," and, further, "We have all experienced those strange moments when things seem to take on lives of their own. Valued possessions return to their owners, houses greet us with a welcome or unfriendly demeanor, lost items turn up in the most unlikely places, and computers misbehave. What's going on?"

Most of us with a grain of common sense and a smidgen of an education know perfectly well what's happening: *nothing!* Watson, however, knows better. He suggests that what we are witnessing is the development of "a new life form," and he insists that we are investing objects with "a life-force" through the attention we give to them. Just how does this come about? Well, according to him, we are surrounded by subtle forces, such as "memory fields," and all matter has the "capacity to absorb emotional 'fingerprints'—the mental fossils that channel echoes from the past." Through stories of sacred stones that sing, lost wedding rings that reappear, and statues of the Virgin Mary that weep, Watson demonstrates the complexity of inanimate life and offers possible proof of our sensitivity to its minute, natural patterns of energy. Our observations bring things into existence.

Recognizing that all of this is much too much for even the most credulous reader to swallow, Watson coyly remarks in his conclusions: "The anecdotal nature of much of the evidence for all this has made it necessary for me to trip lightly over the detail, but I am very serious about the thrust of the argument. . . . I believe that it is our destiny to lift, nudge, urge and cajole inanimate matter into life. This is our job. The bright man's burden" (p. 228).

Watson launches his attack on the reader's credulity from the very be-

ginning. In his Introduction he urges us to recognize that "things, even those that are totally inorganic and undeniably inanimate, sometimes behave as though they were alive, on occasion even sentient" (p. 11). He insists that we see our relationship with devices and machines as a sort of "suburban shamanism" and ourselves as "apprentice sorcerers." Is it therefore any wonder that he gleefully confesses that he used the *National Enquirer* and other weeklies as his sources of information. In his own words, "Few scientists and no learned journalists take the subject seriously. I do. Despite the shortcomings of this database I remain impressed with the consistency I find there." After this revelation it should come as no surprise that Watson also tells us that he depended heavily on the work of Charles Fort; he even dedicated the book to Fort.

In Chapter 1, "The Nature of Things," Watson regales us with primitive stories of magical rocks and stones, sacred altars, runes, and legends of singing rocks. Watson asks us to believe in the truth of these things. He insists they are not *merely* legends and folktales. He cites stories of the magical power of Ayres Rock in Australia and takes the Aborigine tales of stone-power as the gospel truth. As further evidence Watson tells us about "homing things," that is, things that people lose that, in believe-it-or-not fashion, return to the loser. Watson is astounded by the fact that several weeks after a woman dropped her wedding ring into the lake, she found it in the stomach of a fish she caught in the same lake. Such things boggle Watson's mind and, for him, prove the existence of "thing" power. So do quartz crystals, which Watson is convinced have minds of their own.

In his second chapter, "The Origin

of Things," Watson pays a debt of gratitude to one obscure seer with the unlikely name of Ion Will. According to this esteemed guru, "Metaphors are living things" that soon turn into *Metaphorms*, that is, ideas that take on an existence in the real world. Since psychologists (according to Watson and Will) can't tell you what perception and seeing are or mean, there are other similar things we (Watson and Will) don't understand. Watson cites the violins crafted by Stradivarius as an example. Watson finds it absolutely incredible that every one of the violins Stradivarius made has excellent tone and timbre. Watson cannot believe that Stradivarius "got it right 600 times—it couldn't be due to chance." Watson is correct, it wasn't due to chance; it was due to skill and craftsmanship. Watson's major point is that the violin itself is alive and it "influences the way you play." Watson next turns to dowsing as further proof of the life that resides in metal and wood and that is sensitive to concentrations of water, metals, and so on. The most convincing work of all, as far as Watson is concerned, was that carried out by the notorious Rhodes Buchanan around the turn of the century. Called "psychometry," this pseudo-scientific bit of flim-flam argues that material objects give off some sort of subtle emanation that certain sensitives are able to feel and interpret. Psychometry also forms the basis for the belief that psychics can divine the history of, or events connected with, material objects with which they come in close contact. Modern ghost theory also rests upon the assumption that material objects in the environment soak up or absorb human emotional energy and when psychics, at a later time, enter this environment they can pick up and interpret these emotions and energies.

Nowadays it is hard to believe that

anyone takes this seriously. Houdini, around the turn of the century, routinely would confound and embarrass such psychics by giving them artifacts of living females and telling them they were objects of dead males. Those who remember James Randi's TV show of a few years back will also recall that the psychometrist failed miserably to correctly connect the watches, rings, keys, and so on, with their proper owners. Watson, however, cites as convincing evidence, for him, the story of an engineer in London before World War II who was correct 34 percent of the time in connecting objects with their owners. Watson also notes that the engineer, amazingly, "scored best with things belonging to people he knew"! Watson next calls upon "Earth Magic," which is the theory that there are "good" places and there are "bad" places. In the latter category are haunted houses peopled by ghosts. Watson tells us that "we make the world up as we go along." Information, it seems, is trapped not only in crystals but in water as well.

In another chapter we learn that since the beginning of time people have made statues and idols, have endowed them with lifelike qualities, and worshipped them. Now we have statues that bleed, shed tears, and glow with a holy light. Doors and paintings—particularly of religious figures—also weep and shed blood.

In another chapter Watson gets into the world of machines. He says that many machines seem to be jinxed or evil and actually strike back at their makers and owners. As evidence he cites the large number of automotive recalls and James Dean's fatal crash, which apparently, Watson says, was more the fault of the car than of its driver.

In his seventh and final chapter, "The Ghost in the Machine," we learn

that machines have it in for us and that we can and do interact with them as if they were living things! Watson's evidence: Ted Serios's ability to impress his thoughts on film inside a camera; reports of house lights that go on and off by themselves; telephone-line mixups and phone calls from dead people, as argued by Scott Rogo and Raymond Bayless. We also have heard that tea kettles in England send mystic messages to cleaning ladies and that chain saws have been known to sing while church organs occasionally broadcast shipping forecasts. Moreover, many psychics claimed to capture the voices of the dead on audio tape. Many people seem to send forth electric signals and emanations that mess up various electrical and electronic devices. Robert Jahn's work at Princeton also shows that people can influence energy radiations at very low or weak levels of output. All of these things are accepted unquestionably by Watson and prove to him that material things are alive and have minds of their own. His *pièce de résistance* is that in 1981 Kenji Urada, a Japanese factory worker at Kawasaki Heavy Industries in Akashi, was beaten to death by a robot's arm, and artificial intelligence and berserk computers a few years ago almost brought about World War III.

Watson has been writing such things for well over two decades, beginning with *Supernature* (Doubleday, 1973), *Lifetide* (Simon and Schuster, 1979), and *Beyond Supernature* (Bantam Books, 1988). He has surprisingly overlooked the "powder of sympathy," an idea promulgated by Sir Kenelm Digby (1603-1665), who enjoined the medical fraternity of his time to employ "weapons salve" to heal battlefield injuries. A soldier's wound was cleaned and covered with a bandage, then a salve was applied

not to the wound but to the weapon that had caused it. If the weapon was unavailable, a piece of bloody clothing was dipped in the salve. Strangely enough it worked. The wounds did indeed heal more quickly when the ointment was applied to the weapon than when it was applied to the wound. Why? Because the bacteria-infected salves and powders caused infection; treating the weapons didn't!

In *Beyond Supernature*, Watson argued: "Given wide public interest in the supernatural, it was probably inevitable that it should become big

business and suffer from all the distortions of the marketplace. I am ruefully aware of having helped to create this situation and accept my share of responsibility for fueling enthusiasms which have, in some cases, got out of hand. Our culture, however, is prone to such excesses" (p. 2). Watson is, obviously, incorrigible, and when he "rues" he doesn't overdo. This latest work is medieval in attitude, concept, and execution.

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Science, Myth, and Cosmos

Conversing with the Planets: How Science and Myth Invented the Cosmos. By Anthony Aveni. Times Books, New York, 1992. 255 pp. (30 photos). Hardcover, \$21.00.

L. STEPHEN COLES

Clearly I have mixed feelings about this book. The more I got into it, the more I became enchanted, not only by the material itself but by the author's lucid writing style. Anthony Aveni, a professor of astronomy at Colgate University, has pioneered a new discipline that is usually called "archaeoastronomy" but might be called "astronomical anthropology." There are extended discussions of calendrical systems (Mayan, Babylonian, Chinese, Julian, etc.) and even an exposition of the logical basis for astrology. The deciphering of Mayan hieroglyphics and Babylonian cuneiform writing with respect to the planet Venus was brilliant, like a detective story laid out before one's

eyes. Obviously, the methods of science were being used to understand the minds of the ancient "naked-eye" astronomers in a way that allowed crosscultural comparisons and, as an added insight, more clearly revealed the hidden agenda of the ruling classes of those times.

Over the past couple of years, as I myself have walked along the thoroughfares of the ruins of Chichen Itza and Tulum, I felt the same sort of warm, positive feelings that I usually experience while walking on a modern college campus. Of course I tried to imagine the collegial atmosphere of these ruins as they might have been when they were newly built structures and not crumbling ruins. In the