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# The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism

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FOR NEARLY A DECADE I have been publishing on the theme of object-oriented philosophy, which can be treated as part of a wider movement known as speculative realism.<sup>1</sup> Both trends have rapidly gained influence in fields outside academic philosophy, with especial resonance so far in the fine arts, architectural theory, and medieval studies. For this reason I am often asked to present my views on various topics lying outside my usual professional sphere: How should political activism be done in the wake of speculative realism? What new directions should be taken by contemporary art as a result of object-oriented philosophy? My instinctive reaction in the face of such questions is to feel a certain reluctance. It is my view that philosophy should not be the handmaid of any other discipline, whether it be theology, leftist politics, or brain science. But by the same token, I also believe that other disciplines should not be subordinated to philosophy. Nor is there much point in proclaiming in advance that all boundaries are artificial, while throwing everything into a blender. The various districts of human knowledge have relative disciplinary autonomy due to their differing objects and the varying sorts of expertise required to practice them competently. The transgression of these boundaries should not be constant and rampant and decreed as a global principle, but can only be justified by its effectiveness in individual cases. Hence my reluctance to preach to those who deal in materials different from my own. Often it is better to let ourselves be surprised by what others do with our work, rather than command those adaptations like a bossy partygoer selecting the music in all other homes.

Nonetheless, as long as someone is asking, it would be either rude or lazy to sit by in silence. Lately there have been numerous requests for my views on object-oriented philosophy in relation to the arts, and the same is increasingly true of literary theory as well. Thus I will try to shed some light on how the most recent philosophical trends might contribute to literary theory. In what follows I will begin with a brief summary of those trends, and then show how object-oriented philosophy differs

from three prominent currents in twentieth-century literary theory: New Criticism, New Historicism, and deconstruction. In closing I will try to sketch what an object-oriented criticism might look like.

## I. Speculative Realism

“Speculative Realism” was the name of a one-day workshop at Goldsmiths College, University of London on April 27, 2007.<sup>2</sup> It thereafter became the name of a loose philosophical movement opposed to trends that have dominated continental philosophy from its inception. The central problem at stake is none other than realism: does a real world exist independently of human access, or not? Since the era of Immanuel Kant, it has often been held that the question is invalid, since we cannot think of world without humans nor of humans without world, but only of a primordial *correlation* between the two. This type of philosophy was dubbed “correlationism” by the French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux (b. 1967), whose 2006 book *After Finitude* provided speculative realism with this useful name for its mortal enemy.<sup>3</sup> The speculative realists are of course *realists*, given their defense of a mind-independent reality. But they are also *speculative*, in the sense that they do not wish to establish a commonsense middle-aged realism of objective atoms and billiard balls located outside the human mind. Instead, the speculative realists have all pursued a model of reality as something far *weirder* than realists had ever guessed. It is no accident that the only shared intellectual hero among the original members of the group was the horror and science fiction writer H. P. Lovecraft.

What prevented speculative realism from becoming a cohesive philosophical movement was the vast range of options available within its rather general founding principles: realism plus unorthodox speculation. Iain Hamilton Grant followed paths established by the philosophers F. W. J. Schelling and Gilles Deleuze in defending a productive nature-force that meets with retarding obstacles and only thereby generates individual objects.<sup>4</sup> Others adopted a more predictable strategy of scientific nihilism that increasingly identifies with the most antiphilosophical strains of neuroscience. But there is also the instructive contrast between Meillassoux’s philosophy and my own. While speculative realism is often presented as an enemy of Kant’s so-called “Copernican Revolution” in philosophy, the relation with Kant is more complicated than this, and even points to a key internal fissure within speculative realism itself. Oversimplifying somewhat, we can say that there are two basic principles underlying the Kantian revolution in philosophy.

1. Kant distinguishes between phenomena and noumena. The things-in-themselves lie beyond all possibility of human access, given that all experience is confined to the twelve categories and the pure intuitions of space and time. Human beings are finite; absolute knowledge is unavailable to them. The things-in-themselves can be thought but never known.

2. For Kant, the human-world relation is philosophically privileged. From the standpoint of Kantian philosophy, the relation between two colliding physical masses is something best left to the natural sciences, while the relation between human and world is where the genuine problems of philosophy unfold.

Now, whereas Meillassoux rejects 1 and affirms 2, my own position affirms 1 and rejects 2. That is to say, Meillassoux rejects Kantian finitude in favor of absolute human knowledge, while I reject absolute knowledge and retain Kantian finitude, though broadening this finitude beyond the human realm to include all relations in the cosmos—including inanimate ones.

The correlationist argument says that we cannot think a reality outside thought, for in so doing we instantly convert it into a thought. We remain trapped in the correlational circle, and must remain there if we wish to remain rationalists. The only easy way out of the circle, Meillassoux claims, is through a “rhetoric of the Rich Elsewhere.”<sup>5</sup> This rhetoric simply complains that the correlationist argument is boring and prevents us from exploring the world in all its rich empirical detail. It merely *refuses* the correlationist argument without *refuting* it. Instead of such a refusal, Meillassoux initially *accepts* the correlationist argument. He tries to work his way through the circle and provide a new proof of the existence of things-in-themselves that would exist even after the death of all humans. For Meillassoux, what belongs to things-in-themselves are those aspects of them that can be mathematized.<sup>6</sup> But this heavily Badiouian mathematical element in Meillassoux’s work has not been endorsed by most others in the speculative realist camp, which remains loosely affiliated around the critique of correlationism. While Meillassoux tries to move beyond Kant by attacking Kantian finitude, he tacitly endorses Kant’s privileging of the human-world relation as the root of all other relations. But this decision can also be reversed, so that Kantian finitude is retained but also expanded well beyond the realm of human-world interaction. In this way, even the duel between colliding billiard balls or between raindrops and tin roofs would be haunted by the inaccessibility of the thing-in-itself. The name of this position is object-oriented philosophy.

## II. Object-Oriented Philosophy

Whereas Meillassoux's philosophy emerges from dialogue with Alain Badiou and German idealism, the object-oriented philosophy to which I and others subscribe can be seen as an attempt, within the broader framework of speculative realism, to come to terms with phenomenology and its radicalization at the hands of Heidegger.<sup>7</sup> Phenomenology was launched in 1900-01 by Edmund Husserl's landmark *Logical Investigations*. In a climate where the natural sciences were on the rise and philosophy seemed in danger of being replaced by experimental psychology, Husserl insisted instead on a patient description of the phenomena as they appear to us. For example, any scientific theory of color in terms of the wavelength of light must be grounded in our prior immediate experience of color: in a description of how red or blue appear to us, and how they affect our motor reactions and our moods. Phenomenology must also include the description of nonexistent objects, given that centaurs and unicorns can appear before my mind no less than masses of genuine granite. But Husserl also noted that the intentional objects before my mind are not "bundles of qualities," as British empiricism held. I can view a blackbird or mountain from numerous different angles, thereby changing their manifest qualities, yet the blackbird and mountain still remain the same things despite these shifting profiles. In this way, there is strife within the phenomenal realm between objects and their shifting qualities. The phenomenological method aims to strip away the inessential qualities of things, and to gain an insight into what is really essential about any given intentional object—what it truly needs in order to be what it is.

Heidegger radicalized phenomenology by noting that most of our contact with entities *does not* occur in the manner of having them present before the mind. Quite the contrary. When using a hammer, for instance, I am focused on the building project currently underway, and I am probably taking the hammer for granted. Unless the hammer is too heavy or too slippery, or unless it breaks, I tend not to notice it at all. The fact that the hammer can break proves it is deeper than my understanding of it. This has led many to read Heidegger's famous tool analysis in "pragmatist" terms, which implies that all theory is grounded in a tacit practical background. The problem with this interpretation is that praxis does not use up the reality of things any more than theory does. Staring at a hammer does not exhaust its depths, but neither does wielding that hammer on a construction site or a battlefield. Both theory and praxis are distortions of the hammer in its subterranean reality. Object-oriented philosophy pushes this another step further by saying

that objects distort one another even in sheer causal interaction. The raindrops or breezes that strike the hammer may not be “conscious” of it in human fashion, yet such entities fail to exhaust the reality of the hammer to no less a degree than human praxis or theory.

Heidegger’s own distinction between “objects” and “things” is irrelevant for our purposes; we can use the single term “object,” simply because that was the term used by phenomenology when it first revived the philosophical theme of individual things. Husserl’s intentional objects (or “sensual” objects, as I prefer) do not hide from the mind at all. They are always present before us, and are simply encrusted with accidental surface features that must be stripped away to discover the object’s essence. This includes all the objects of our theoretical and practical experience. Sensual objects are in strife with their swirling sensual qualities. By contrast, Heidegger’s tools always remain hidden from the mind, just like Kant’s things-in-themselves. In Heidegger’s terminology, they “withdraw” (*entziehen*) from all access: they remain veiled, concealed, or hidden. But real objects must also have individual features, since otherwise all things would be interchangeable. Hence the strife between objects and their qualities is repeated in the depths of the world as well. In Husserl’s philosophy there is a further hybrid strife between sensual objects and their *real* qualities; it need not be discussed in this article, though I hold that this is the root of all theoretical activity in all domains. Of more importance to us here is the fourth conflict, between *real* objects and their *sensual* qualities. For this is precisely what happens when Heidegger’s hammer breaks. The broken hammer alludes to the inscrutable reality of hammer-being lying behind the accessible theoretical, practical, or perceptual qualities of the hammer. The reason for calling this relation one of “allusion” is that it can only hint at the reality of the hammer without ever making it directly present to the mind. I call this structure *allure*,<sup>8</sup> and quite aside from the question of broken hammers, I contend that this is the key phenomenon of all the arts, literature included. Allure alludes to entities as they are, quite apart from any relations with or effects upon other entities in the world.

This deeply *non-relational* conception of the reality of things is the heart of object-oriented philosophy. To some readers it will immediately sound deeply reactionary. After all, most recent advances in the humanities pride themselves on having abandoned the notion of stale autonomous substances or individual human subjects in favor of networks, negotiations, relations, interactions, and dynamic fluctuations. This has been the guiding theme of our time. But the wager of object-oriented philosophy is that this programmatic movement towards holistic interaction is an idea once but no longer liberating, and that the real discoveries now lie

on the other side of the yard. The problem with individual substances was never that they were autonomous or individual, but that they were wrongly conceived as eternal, unchanging, simple, or directly accessible by certain privileged observers. By contrast, the objects of object-oriented philosophy are mortal, ever-changing, built from swarms of subcomponents, and accessible only through oblique allusion. This is not the oft-lamented “naïve realism” of oppressive and benighted patriarchs, but a *weird* realism in which real individual objects resist all forms of causal or cognitive mastery.

### III. The New Criticism

We have seen that for object-oriented philosophy, there is a series of tensions between objects and their qualities. Real objects withdraw from all human access and even from causal interaction with each other. This does not mean that objects engage in no relations (for of course they relate), but only that such relations are a problem to be solved rather than a starting point to be decreed, and furthermore that these relations must always be indirect or vicarious rather than direct. No object relates with others without caricature, distortion, or energy loss; knowledge of a tree is never a tree, nor do two colliding asteroids exhaust one another’s properties through this contact. At first glance, this model of objects might seem to step backwards into a retrograde intellectual past. According to one familiar narrative cited above, philosophers used to be naïve realists who believed in real things outside their social or linguistic contexts; these things were ascribed timeless essences that were not politically innocent, since they subjugated various groups by pigeonholing each of them as oriental, feminine, pre-Enlightenment, or some other such tag. According to this view, we have luckily come to realize that essences must be replaced with events and performances, that the notion of a reality that is not a reality *for someone* is dubious, that flux is prior to stasis, that things must be seen as differences rather than solid units, and as complex feedback networks rather than integers. I will deal with these prejudices as this article progresses.

For the moment, we should simply consider what might seem to be obvious similarities between the relationless concept of objects just presented and the New Criticism’s long unfashionable model of poems as encapsulated machines cut off from all social and material context. In “The Heresy of Paraphrase,” surely the most famous chapter of his book *The Well Wrought Urn*, Cleanth Brooks says that a poem cannot be paraphrased. What this strictly means is that the poem cannot be

rephrased as a series of literal propositions, yet it can also be taken to mean, as Brooks argues elsewhere, that poems cannot be reduced to the series of social influences or biographical facts that gave rise to them. The poem is an integral unit irreducible either to its ancestors or its heirs, not constituted by its relations in any decisive way. This might seem to have dismal political consequences, since the poem as a closed-off unit seems to lead to an aesthetic elitism supporting a privileged caste of white ruling-class men and their arbitrarily selected literary canon. I will consider the political side of the question in the next section, when discussing the New Historicism. Here I only want to show that Brooks is by no means true to the nonrelational view of poems that he seems to propose.

The object-oriented side of Brooks can be found in his hostility to paraphrase. A poem cannot be translated into literal prose statement: "All such formulations lead away from the center of the poem—not toward it."<sup>9</sup> Any attempt to summarize the literal meaning of a poem inevitably becomes a long-winded effort, filled with qualifications and even metaphors, a lengthy detour that comes more and more to resemble the original poem itself. The poem is not a "prose-sense decorated by sensuous imagery" (*WWU* 204). Only weak poets use facile ornament to spice up literal content (*WWU* 213–14), and any literal idea drawn from a poem can be nothing better than an abstraction (*WWU* 205). It is unavoidable for critics and students to make prose statements about poems, but these statements must not be taken as the equivalent of the poem itself (*WWU* 206). Hence Brooks's focus on "irony" and "paradox" in poems, since ironic or paradoxical content is two-faced and thus cannot be translated into any literal meaning at all (*WWU* 209, 210). The poem differs from any literal expression of its content just as Heidegger's hammer itself differs from any broken, perceived, or cognized hammer. It is not just that the poem or hammer usually acts as an unnoticed background that can then be focused on explicitly from time to time. Instead, the literal rendition of the poem is *never* the poem itself, which must exceed all interpretation in the form of a hidden surplus.

So far, all is well. But there are two key points where we must dissent. The first is that Brooks is guilty of what I have sometimes called the taxonomic fallacy, which consists in the assumption that any ontological distinction must be embodied in specific *kinds* of entities. Namely, we can accept Brooks's claim of an absolute gulf between literalized prose sense and the nonprose sense that it paraphrases or translates. Yet *it does not follow* that there should be a division of labor in which poetry has all the non-prose sense while other disciplines have all the literal sense. But this is precisely what Brooks holds. By literalizing a poetic



statement, he tells us, “we bring [it] into an unreal competition with science or philosophy or theology” (*WWU* 201), as if these disciplines, unlike poetry, had direct rather than allusive contact with their objects. Object-oriented philosophy says otherwise. The failure of paraphrase is not monopolized by the arts, but haunts *all* human dealings with the world, and even the relations between inanimate entities within that world. As Brooks puts it later, “The terms of science are abstract symbols which do not change under the pressure of the context. They are pure (or aspire to be pure) denotations” (*WWU* 210). But regardless of aspiration, the irreducibility of reality to literal presence applies as much to the sciences as it does to poetry, as is demonstrated by (among other things) scientific theory changing over time. By treating poetry as a special case, Brooks wrongly concedes the claims of much “science or philosophy or theology” to deliver prose truth incarnate, and also needlessly shields poetry from the literal surface dimension that it also does possess. The literal and the nonliteral cannot be apportioned between separate zones of reality, but are two distinct sides of every point in the cosmos. Thus the attempt of the New Critics to treat literature as a *uniquely* privileged zone standing outside the rest of space-time must indeed be rejected: not because everything has reality only within this cosmic network, but because everything stands partially outside it just as poems do.

Yet there is another complaint to be made against Brooks, which concerns the *reason* he gives for why poetry is supposedly so special. In one sense it is obviously true that he views the poem as existing in pristine isolation from the rest of the cosmos. Yet once we have entered the gates of the poem, nothing is autonomous at all according to Brooks: instead, we inhabit a holistic wonderland in which everything is defined solely by its interrelations with everything else. For whereas “a scientific [proposition] can stand alone” (*WWU* 207), a poem is defined instead by “the primacy of the pattern” (*WWU* 194). A poem is a structure: “A structure of meanings, evaluations, and interpretations; and the principle of unity which informs it seems to be one of balancing and harmonizing connotations, attitudes, and meanings” (*WWU* 195). Stated differently, “The relation of each item to the whole context is crucial” (*WWU* 207). Yet this is clearly false. To make a slight change in two lines of the Fool might not alter the general effect of *King Lear*, nor would it likely make much difference to the characterizations of Regan or Kent. To add a few chapters’ worth of adventures to *Don Quixote* might increase or decrease our enjoyment of the book, yet it would possibly just reinforce rather than renovate our previous sense of Sancho and the Don. In everyday life, changing my shirt at the last minute before boarding the bus certainly affects “the total context” of the bus ride, yet it would not have

any discernible effect on the bus or most of the passengers riding it, indifferent as they are to my fashion mediocrity. What is truly interesting about “contexts” is not that they utterly define every entity to the core, but that they open a space where *certain* interactions and effects can take place and not others. There is no reason to descend the slippery slope and posit a general relational ontology in which all things are utterly defined by even the most trivial aspects of their context. Here as in the case of Heidegger’s hammer, if all objects were completely determined by the structure or context in which they resided, there is no reason why anything would ever change, since a thing would be nothing more than its current context. For any change to be possible, objects must be an excess or surplus outside their current range of relations, vulnerable to some of those relations but insensible to others—just as a hammer is shattered by walls and heavy weights but not by the laughter of an infant. The New Criticism gets it wrong twice: first by making the artwork a *special* nonliteral thing, and second by turning its interior into a relational wildfire in which all individual elements are consumed.

#### IV. The New Historicism

Since it is well known (and often lamented) that the New Critics were primarily well-off white gentlemen, we are not unprepared for the following report by Stephen Greenblatt from his student days at Yale: “I was only mildly interested in the formalist agenda that dominated graduate instruction and was epitomized by the imposing figure of William K. Wimsatt. . . . I would go in the late afternoon to the Elizabethan club—all male, a black servant in a starched white jacket, cucumber sandwiches, and tea—and listen to Wimsatt at the great round table hold forth like Doctor Johnson on poetry and aesthetics.”<sup>10</sup> This passage is not just a cringe-inducing anecdote about Wimsatt and his environment, but also contains a tacit intellectual claim. Namely, it makes the familiar implication that all “formalism” tends towards sociopolitical blindness—an aestheticism exploiting the marginal servitude of subaltern actors. This suggestion is reinforced by the praise on the next page for leftist critic Raymond Williams for asking such “nonformalist” questions as “who controlled access to the printing press, who owned the land and the factories, whose voices were being repressed as well as represented in literary texts, what social strategies were being served by the aesthetic values we constructed.”<sup>11</sup> Surely we should all prefer the critic who champions the oppressed over the dominant fat cat of an all-male club, attended by black servants and nibbling on cucumber sandwiches while holding forth like Doctor Johnson.

The question, however, is whether this proves that a relational ontology is better than one in which objects are autonomous from their contexts, as Greenblatt's remarks seem to imply. On the contrary, I hold that this is one of the most deeply rooted intellectual biases of our time. In the current landscape, the notion of autonomous substances seems to evoke a world of stagnant subjugation, while the dynamism of relational and materialist ontologies seem to open up a vast panorama of political and intellectual breakthrough. Here we need only note that the historical prejudice used to be quite the opposite. At the time of the French Revolution, for instance, it was the conservatives who defended socially constructed rights, while the ultraradical Jacobins defended the natural autonomy of human nature from its current social conditions. No doubt the day will come again when the political left and right will reverse direction on questions of nature and culture once more. We must not commit the taxonomic fallacy by holding that relations are always liberating and nonrelational realities always reactionary.

Cleanth Brooks was able to turn the world of the poem into a holistic machine at the cost of making it an *inner* world, famously cut off from the biographical, social, and economic conditions in which the poem was produced. The New Historicism is less hypocritical, turning *everything* into an interrelated cosmos of influences. As stated in one of its best-known manifestoes (by H. Aram Veeger), the New Historicism has "struck down the doctrine of noninterference that forbade humanists to intrude on questions of politics, power, indeed on all matters that deeply affect people's practical lives."<sup>12</sup> All disciplinary boundaries have been dissolved, since the New Historicism "brackets together literature, ethnography, art history, and other disciplines and sciences hard and soft" (*NH xi*), a list that seems to exclude nothing. We are told that "literary and non-literary 'texts' circulate inseparably," and are asked to "admire the sheer intricacy and unavoidability of exchanges between culture and power" (*NH xi*). Empty formalism is combated "by pulling historical considerations to the center stage of literary analysis" (*NH xi*). We will bring together "metaphors, ceremonies, dances, emblems, items of clothing, popular stories" and all will be "circulation, negotiation, exchange" (*NH xiv*). Amidst this general blend of all disciplines and practices, this fiesta of interactivity, we will realize "that autonomous self and text are mere holograms, effects that intersecting institutions produce; that selves and texts are defined by their relations to hostile others . . . and disciplinary power" (*NH xii*). Somewhat paradoxically, despite this advocacy of a firestorm of holistic interaction between all things, it is the *opponents* of the New Historicism who are accused of "[constructing] a holistic master story of large-scale structural elements

directing a whole society,” when what they should really do instead is “to perform a differential analysis of the local conflicts engendered in individual authors and local discourses” (*NH* xiii).

But it is difficult to see how “local” conflicts and discourses could exist at all in light of the ontology just outlined, built of furious interactivity, with academic disciplinary walls immediately broken down along with the distinction between literary and nonliterary texts. My purpose is not to identify contradictions for the sake of scoring easy points. Instead, I simply want to note that both philosophical and political problems arise when individual selves and texts are described as holograms, as the relational effects of hostile others and disciplinary power. First, despite Veerer’s passing nod to the hard sciences and the rampant talk of “materiality” in the New Historicism (and other Foucault-inspired trends), there are few traces of nonhuman entities amidst all this discussion of mutually conditioning forces. What we find instead is a historicism of the human subject as shaped by various disciplinary practices. But while the New Historicism is interested in “the manifold ways culture and society affect each other” (*NH* xii), the phrase “culture and society” does not encompass an especially diverse range of entities. For the world also contains parakeets, silver, limestone, coral reefs, solar flares, and moons, none of them easy to classify as “culture” or “society,” and all of them interacting with *each other* whether humans discuss it or not. As Bill Brown accurately puts it when trying to distinguish his own “thing theory” from the work of New Historicists:

However much I shared the new historicist “desire to make contact with the ‘real’,” I wanted the end result to read like a grittier, materialist phenomenology of everyday life, a result that might somehow arrest language’s wish, as described by Michel Serres, that the “whole world . . . derive from language.” Where other critics had faith in “discourse” or in the “social text” as the analytical grid on which to reconfigure our knowledge about the present and the past, I wanted to turn attention to things—the objects that are materialized from and in the physical world that is, or had been, at hand.<sup>13</sup>

The problem that thing theory seems to share with the New Historicism lies in the assumption that “the real” has no other function than to accompany the human agent and mold or disrupt it from time to time. If the real has an inner struggle of its own quite apart from the human encounter with it, this is apparently not something in which we are expected to take much interest, and thing theory shows symptoms of a correlationism in which the human-world duet is always central. But at least Brown allows for some recalcitrance in material things, however human-centered the notion of recalcitrance always remains.<sup>14</sup> For New

Historicism, even this sense of recalcitrance is weaker. We read, for instance, that “everyone’s sexual identity, not just Rosalind’s, remains in ceaseless upheaval, [and] *our society rewards* those who choose one gender or another” (*NH* xiv, emphasis added). Rather than being recalcitrant in opposition to our wishes, gender is depicted here as a mutable, indeterminate lump shaped by societal reward systems. And given the general New Historicist attitude towards fixed essences and boundaries, this seems not to be a special point limited to sexual identity, but a generally negative hypothesis about identity in general, heavily flavored with Bourdieuan sociology: everything is in flux, but *society rewards* those who gullibly believe in fixed identities.

The political problem here is that a consistently relational ontology would only lead to a perpetual ratification of the status quo. For if humans are merely the effect of a ceaseless upheaval of discursive practices, if they are merely holograms, then it is difficult to see why any situation at all should count as oppression: after all, the current residents of a dictatorial state would only count as holograms produced by intersecting institutions and disciplinary practices. It is difficult to see why these holographic citizens would have any inherent right to exist outside the institutions and practices that produced them, which perhaps ought to be honored as parents instead. One suspects that the hostility of the New Historicism to *fixed* identities leads the movement to an unjustified suspicion even of *instantaneous* identities. For example, even if we assume it to be true that everyone’s gender identity is in ceaseless upheaval, and that even the identity of a rock is in ceaseless upheaval, it does not follow that in this particular moment neither we humans nor rocks have any identity at all. It may be that fifteen different observers and institutions all make different inferences or classifications about this identity simultaneously, but all this really proves is that none of them is capable of fathoming what that identity currently is. What you are may mutate; it may shift through countless upheavals over the course of years, months, or fleeting hours. It does not follow from this that you are everything and nothing simultaneously. You are perhaps a human in a state of upheaval over your gender identity, but you are not at the same time also a trireme, a wall, a butterfly, a nonbutterfly, and a human *devoid* of any upheaval in gender identity. If this critique sounds like the sort of vulgar realism too often thrown at postmodern theories, I would answer that not all realism is vulgar. We must not let adjectives such as “vulgar” and “naïve” do our thinking for us.

The strictly philosophical problem with this boundary-free holism is one that we already encountered earlier. Namely, relational ontology is incapable of thinking adequately about the concept of “locality” on which the New Historicism also prides itself. A completely intercon-

nected cosmos would have no individual location at all: everything would affect everything else, and all things would be mutually and utterly near. I would be sitting in Cairo and Sydney at the same time, just as some early Islamic theologians held that God could allow us to sit simultaneously in Baghdad and Mecca. For there to be location, there must also be individuality, however ephemeral and mutable it may be. If Japanese cities are in constant upheaval in terms of their identity, they are nonetheless in Japan and not in Brazil. In short, contextuality is not universal. Shakespeare is molded by some aspects of his era while completely unaffected by others, and his own character is partly responsible for which aspects are assimilated and which are screened from view. Indeed, Shakespeare as a writer is a *style*—a style that among other things would enable us to distinguish between authentic and inauthentic plays under his name. Falstaff is an individual character who guides Shakespeare's decisions as to which scenes work and fail to work, and who silently resists or embraces the new lines placed in his mouth. In turn, the economy of London and the disciplinary practices of kings and functionaries do not just dissolve into Shakespeare's plays, but retain an autonomous character and also influence and fail to influence playwrights, moths, the diffraction of moonlight, and the parabolic movement of stones.

Here is another way to put it. Cleanth Brooks severed literary texts from the world but turned their interiors into contextual houses of mirrors where everything reflects everything else. By contrast, the New Historicism tacitly dissolves literary works into a house of mirrors that is now ubiquitous and is held to define the whole of reality. Object-oriented philosophy, however, simply rejects the house of mirrors. Objects may change rapidly; they may be perceived differently by different observers; they remain opaque to all the efforts of knowledge to master them. But the very condition of all change, perspectivism, and opacity is that objects have a *definite character* that can change, be perceived, and resist. This holds not only for literary works, but also for scientific, philosophical, and theological propositions. It holds equally well for genders, prisons, clinics, zebras, and volcanoes. All literary and nonliterary objects are partially opaque to their contexts, and inflict their blows on one another from behind shields and screens that can never entirely be breached.

## V. Deconstruction

We now turn to deconstruction and Jacques Derrida, who along with Michel Foucault is probably the most influential continental philosopher of the past half-century. What Derrida shares with object-oriented

thought is the conviction that Heidegger changed the state of the art in our discipline, and that further progress requires coming to terms with what Heidegger saw. Nonetheless, the two standpoints draw precisely the opposite conclusions. As object-oriented philosophy sees it, Heidegger showed that being withdraws behind any form of presence. Not only does theoretical comportment fail to exhaust the being of things, but so does practical activity, and so too does sheer inanimate contact. Object-oriented philosophy is a frank *realism* which views objects or things as genuine realities deeper than any of the relations in which they might become involved. This realism is what *prevents* the sin of ontotheology or metaphysics of presence, since objects are so deeply and inexhaustibly real that no form of access can ever do them justice. Any attempt to translate this reality into masterable knowledge for logocentric purposes will fail, precisely because being is *deeper* than every logos.

Derrida takes the opposite tack. He does call for “the undermining of an ontology which, in its innermost course, has determined the meaning of being as presence.”<sup>15</sup> But far from agreeing that presence is overcome by the absence of a withdrawn real being, Derrida treats this notion as the heart of the problem. As he reads the evidence, “Heidegger’s insistence on noting that being is produced as history only through the logos, and is nothing outside of it, the difference between being and the entity—all this clearly indicates that fundamentally nothing escapes the movement of the signifier, and that, in the last instance, the difference between signified and signifier *is nothing*” (G 22–23). The question of being “does not amount to hypostatizing a transcendental signified” (G 23). For this reason, Derrida takes pleasure in speaking of threats to substantiality and what he calls “the metaphysics of the proper” (G 26). He does not try to escape presence by pointing to a withdrawn absent reality, since this could result only in a “naïve objectivism” (G 61). For even if an object were absent from us, it would still be present *to itself*, which is exactly what Derrida holds to be impossible: “The so-called ‘thing itself’ is always already a *representamen* shielded from the simplicity of intuitive evidence. The *representamen* functions only by giving rise to an *interpretant* that itself becomes a sign and so on to infinity” (G 49). Although Derrida sometimes speaks of “concealment” (G 49), it is a concealment “always on the move” in an infinite chain of signifiers (G 49), not a self-identical reality sheltered in cosmic depths beneath all relation, as is the case for object-oriented philosophy. Concealment for Derrida is merely a constant lateral shifting and sliding from whatever might seem to be given at any moment, rather than a hidden oracle buried beneath the temple of the world. “The literal [*propre*] meaning does not exist, its ‘appearance’ is a necessary function—and must be analyzed as such—in the system of differences and metaphors” (G 89).

And furthermore, “The thing itself is a collection of things or a chain of differences” (G 90). To ignore this point, to treat the thing as something real existing outside the chain of differences, amounts in Derrida’s eyes to “logocentric repression” (G 51). By contrast, object-oriented philosophy insists that *only* the relationless depth of objects, incommensurable with any signs, is capable of combating the logocentrism that thinks it can make reality directly present to the mind. Despite what Derrida thinks, the problem is not self-presence, otherwise known as “identity.” Instead, the problem is the assumption that such self-presence can be converted adequately into a form of presence for something else.

The thing is a *representamen*, whose property “is to be itself and another, to be produced as a structure of reference, to be separated from itself” (G 49–50). This observation expresses the core of who Derrida is as a thinker. The thing is not simply itself, but *différance*, “an economic concept designating the production of differing/deferring” (G 23). The world is a “play,” and “in this play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable. There are things like reflecting pools, and images, an infinite reference from one to the other, but no longer a source, a spring. There is no longer a simple origin” in this “game of the world” (G 36, 50, emphasis removed). The movement of difference is “arche-writing,” a play or game in which, instead of the supposedly derivative or parasitic character of writing as subordinate to living speech, the tables are turned so that “non-presentation or de-presentation is as ‘originary’ as presentation” (G 62). It is the “trace,” which “was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin . . . [and] thus becomes the origin of the origin . . . [and] if all begins with the trace, there is above all no originary trace” (G 61). We hear of the trace that it “must be thought before the entity” and is where “the other” is announced (G 47), though this other is occluded not because it is deep, but simply because it is always elsewhere. Amidst all this shifting and meandering without any naively objective underpinning of real things, Derrida finds a key ally in the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, who “goes very far in the direction that I have called the de-construction of the transcendental signified” (G 49), by which Derrida means a deconstruction of so-called naïve realism. We never reach the end of the chain of signs: “From the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs” (G 50). And as even Husserl fails to notice, “the thing itself is a sign” (G 49, emphasis removed). In short, Derridean deconstruction is an uncompromising *antirealism*, despite the strange and growing fashion of calling him a realist.<sup>16</sup>

The central error of Derrida’s position lies in his tendency to conflate ontotheology with simple realism. That is to say, Derrida assumes that any belief in a reality outside the play of signs automatically entails the



view that this reality can also *be made present to us* apart from the play of signs. In other words, he thinks that all ontological realism automatically entails an epistemological realism according to which direct access to the world is possible. This confounding of two different registers is seen even more clearly in Derrida's celebrated "White Mythology" essay,<sup>17</sup> where he draws the mistaken conclusion that Aristotle's insistence on the law of identity, or a proper *being* for individual substances, also implies that every word must have a proper, literal *meaning*—despite Aristotle's high praise for metaphor throughout the *Poetics*, and despite his insistence in the *Metaphysics* that substances can never be defined in language.<sup>18</sup> Because of Derrida's understandable fear that genuine things-in-themselves would overpower the play of signs by becoming directly visible to us in logocentric fashion, he also takes the needless step of holding that things-in-themselves cannot *exist* in proper, literal form, even if this were to occur in an absent depth on the underside of all signification. In Heideggerian terms, Derrida would say that there is no withdrawn self-identical hammer apart from all the entanglement of its references. There is only a hammer on the surface of the world, immersed in the play or game of the world, marked with traces of otherness so that the hammer is not one identical thing, but a collection of things or chain of differences.

The reason this conception fails, stodgy though it may sound, is the same reason already noted by Aristotle in his criticisms of Anaxagoras. If nothing has identity and everything is merely a chain of differences, then everything will be everything else. The same thing will be a battleship, a wall, and a human, so that there will be no specific locations or entities of any sort within the world. But if each thing is a *specific* set of differences, as could only be the case, then it would have to be this specific set of differences and no other. Whatever the constant upheaval of play, trace, writing, and dissemination in which I am lodged, at the end of the day I am myself rather than Charlie Chaplin, Queen Elizabeth, a cat, or a stone. The only way to prevent the universe from turning into a holistic blend-o-rama in which everything melts into a perfectly interrelated lump is to concede from the start that there are individual, self-identical sectors or entities in the cosmos, and that this self-identity (however transient) requires that things be irreducible to their relations. Only this absolute untranslatability of things into their relations can explain the failure of logocentrism to legislate the proper forms of the visible world. Only here do we grasp why its edicts must always fall short of the things themselves, which can only be known obliquely. Much like Cleanth Brooks, Derrida makes the mistake of concluding that relationality (here the play or game of signifiers) is what makes literal paraphrase impossible, when the opposite is true. Only

because the thing is *deeper* than its interactions are they unable to do it justice. The fact that models of autonomy and depth have been under fire in recent decades tells us more about the character of those now past decades than about the mission of thinking in the years to come.

## VI. Concluding Remarks

The rejection of literary texts as isolated individual things can proceed in two different directions. As Charles Altieri sums it up when speaking of “materialist” literary studies: “At one pole the text dissolves into its readings and the applications people make of those readings. At the other pole the text dissolves into its cultural elements—the practices, the active ideologies, and the webs of interest that are largely responsible for the author’s sense of the possible significance of what he or she writes.”<sup>19</sup> This dual tactic is not only found in cultural studies, but is also the basic double maneuver of philosophy in our time. Everyone wants to demolish the object, as if it were some naïve remainder that no philosopher could allow on earth unchallenged. On one side the object dissolves downward into its physical subcomponents, so that what we call a “table” is just a set of subatomic particles or an underlying mathematical structure. This strategy can be called *undermining*. On the other side the object can be dissolved upward into its effects on human consciousness, so that what we call a “table” is nothing in its own right, but only a functional table-effect for someone or a table-event for other entities. By analogy, I have called this strategy “*overmining*.”<sup>20</sup>

Just as humans do not dissolve into their parents or children but rather have a certain autonomy from both, so too a rock is neither downwardly reducible to quarks and electrons nor upwardly reducible to its role in stoning the Interior Ministry. The rock has rock properties not found in its tiny inner components, and also has rock properties not exhausted by its uses. The rock is not affected when a few of its protons are destroyed by cosmic rays, and by the same token it is never exhaustively deployed in its current use or in all possible uses. The rock does not exist because it can be used, but can be used because it exists. If this severing of a thing from its surroundings above and below can be called “formalism,” this is not because the rock is just a form in our minds, but because it is a real form *outside* our minds. It is what the medieval philosophers called a *substantial form*: the reality of an individual object over and above its matter, and under and beneath its apprehension by the mind.

Given that the modern revolutions in physics and philosophy began (with Descartes, for example) by ridiculing the substantial forms, there should be no surprise if it proves difficult to retrain our minds to look

for objects in between the various sets of relations. Leibniz made serious efforts in this direction, but his metaphysics of windowless monads was perhaps too outlandish to become a mainstream theory. The object is “unparaphraseable,” or indissoluble into its components or its neighbors. But this does not entail, as Altieri’s remarks might imply, that the alternative is a criticism focused on “idealizations about coherent meanings or guesses about authorial intentions.”<sup>21</sup> As we have seen, the autonomy and integrity of the object in no way implies the autonomy and integrity of our *access* to the object. The literary text runs deeper than any coherent meaning, and outruns the intentions of author and reader alike.

This brings us to the question of object-oriented method. What is most characteristic of intellectual methods is that they are always two-faced, opening up new approaches while also reversing into petrified dogma. This is why the work of theorization must always be on the move. We always want to identify “the next big thing” not for the sake of earning social capital and a with-it image, but because any theoretical *content* eventually reaches a point where it is no longer liberating. The Marxist idea that there is economics and all the rest is ideology was once a fresh approach to the human sciences, but eventually became petulant, robotic, and blind. Freud’s model of dreams as wish fulfillments gave closure to an otherwise impenetrable subject, and thereby shed light on the entire field of culture, while also tending to veer towards petrified dogma. All of these methods provide key flashes of insight at crucial moments in intellectual history and individual biography, yet over time they have become empty clichés that spare us the necessity of thinking. From time to time something new is needed to awaken us from various dogmatic slumbers. Properly pursued, the search for “the next big thing” is not a form of hip posturing or capitalist commodification, but of hope.

Allow me, then, to speak of my hopes. What object-oriented philosophy hopes to offer is not a method, but a *countermethod*. Instead of dissolving a text upward into its readings or downward into its cultural elements, we should focus specifically on how it resists such dissolution. For the sake of time, let’s focus here on resistance in the downward direction. All efforts to embed works exhaustively in their context are doomed to failure for some fairly obvious reasons, though one usually avoids stating them because they are often associated with people whose motives are viewed with suspicion. One of those obvious reasons is that to some extent, the social conditions under which authors produced *The Epic of Gilgamesh* or *Frankenstein* are not entirely relevant to these works themselves. For one thing, these works travel well across space and time—and generally the better the work, the better it travels. If literary canons have been dominated by white European males, then

this may be cause for shaking up the canons and reassessing our standards of quality, not for dissolving all works equally into social products of their inherently equal eras. We are all at our best not when conditioned by what happens around us, but when an inner voice summons us to take a courageous stand, walk in a different direction, or do the most outstanding work of our lifetimes. The same social era produced Jackson Pollock, Patricia Highsmith, Frank Sinatra, and President Truman, but to ascribe them all to this era vastly understates the widely different temperaments and talents on this list. The call for “the death of the author” needs to be complemented by a new call for “the death of the culture.” Rather than emphasize the social conditions that gave rise to any given work, we ought to do the contrary, and look at how works reverse or shape what might have been expected in their time and place, or at how some withstand the earthquakes of the centuries much better than others. To call someone “a product of their time and place” is never a compliment; neither should it be a compliment when aimed at a literary work. This is something that the New Critics largely got right. Social and biographical factors should not be excluded from the picture. But they are always chosen selectively even by materialists, for the simple reason that we are never affected by *all* aspects of our surroundings. “Everything is connected” is one of those methods that has long since entered its decadence, and must be abandoned. What is more interesting is why *certain* things are connected rather than others. We must be fully aware of nonconnections in any consideration of cultural influence on literature.

What the New Critics *did not* get right, as argued above, is their view of the text as a holistic machine in which all elements have mutual influence. Here we have the same dogmatic relationism upheld by the materialists, but simply relocated to the interior of the text. If Keats’s “beauty is truth, truth beauty” can only adequately be read as the outcome of the earlier part of the poem, this is not true of the *whole* of the earlier portions, Cleanth Brooks notwithstanding. We can add alternate spellings or even misspellings to scattered words earlier in the text, without changing the feeling of the climax. We can change punctuation slightly, and even change the exact words of a certain number of lines before “beauty is truth, truth beauty” begins to take on different overtones. In short, we cannot identify the literary work with the exact current form it happens to have. And while many of the literary methods recommended by object-oriented criticism might already exist, here I would like to propose one that has probably never been tried on as vast a scale as I would recommend. Namely, the critic might try to show how each text resists internal holism by attempting various *modifications* of these texts

and seeing what happens. Instead of just writing about *Moby-Dick*, why not try shortening it to various degrees in order to discover the point at which it ceases to sound like *Moby-Dick*? Why not imagine it lengthened even further, or told by a third-person narrator rather than by Ishmael, or involving a cruise in the opposite direction around the globe? Why not consider a scenario under which *Pride and Prejudice* were set in upscale Parisian neighborhoods rather than rural England—could such a text plausibly still be *Pride and Prejudice*? Why not imagine that a letter by Shelley was actually written by Nietzsche, and consider the resulting consequences and *lack* of consequences?

In contrast to the endless recent exhortations to “Contextualize, contextualize, contextualize!” all the preceding suggestions involve ways of decontextualizing works, whether through examining how they absorb and resist their conditions of production, or by showing that they are to some extent autonomous even from their own properties. *Moby-Dick* differs from its own exact length and its own modifiable plot details, and is a certain *je ne sais quoi* or substance able to survive certain modifications and not others. By showing how the literary object *cannot* be fully identified with its surroundings or even its manifest properties, criticism will show us the same tension between objects and their sensual traits displayed in the tool analysis of Heidegger. It will reveal the nature of the well-wrought broken hammer, and it will reveal further that not all broken hammers are equally well-wrought.

## THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO

### NOTES

1 The original published version of my philosophical position can be found in Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002). A more compact and up-to-date account can be found in Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011). The final chapter of the latter book contains a history and overview of the speculative realism movement.

2 For a transcript of the event, see “Speculative Realism: Ray Brassier–Iain Hamilton Grant–Graham Harman–Quentin Meillassoux,” *Collapse* III (2007): 306–449.

3 Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008).

4 Iain Hamilton Grant, *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling* (London: Continuum, 2006).

5 This phrase comes from Meillassoux’s portion of the Goldsmiths transcript referred to above, “Speculative Realism,” 423.

6 For a detailed account of the difference between my philosophical position and Meillassoux’s, cf. Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2011).

7 Under the modified form of “Object-Oriented Ontology” (OOO), this movement was initially pursued by such authors as Ian Bogost, Levi Bryant, and Timothy Morton, but has since been practiced more widely by a much larger group.

- 8 Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 142–44.
- 9 Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1947), 199 (hereafter cited as *WU*).
- 10 Stephen Grenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 1.
- 11 Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse*, 2.
- 12 H. Aram Veeger, introduction to *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeger (New York: Routledge, 1989), ix (hereafter cited as *NH*).
- 13 Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2003), 3.
- 14 Cf. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2010), esp. 1, 3, 9, 35, 61.
- 15 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1997), 70 (hereafter cited as *G*).
- 16 See for example Michael Marder, “Différance of the ‘Real,’” *Parrhesia* 4 (2008): 49–61. For a thorough counterexplanation of why Derrida is every bit as antirealist as he seems, see Lee Braver’s account in chap. 8 of the already classic *A Thing of This World: A History of Continental Anti-Realism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 2007).
- 17 Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982).
- 18 My account of Derrida’s misinterpretation of Aristotle on metaphor can be found in Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 110–16.
- 19 Charles Altieri, “The Sensuous Dimension of Literary Experience: An Alternative to Materialist Theory,” <http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~altieri/manuscripts/Sensuous.html>
- 20 For a detailed explanation of the terms “overmining” and “undermining,” see Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011).
- 21 Altieri, “The Sensuous Dimension of Literary Experience.”