

realm is always completely determinate in its status. After all, ducks, earthworms, and waterfalls are not a series of overdetermined images saturated with meticulous detail, so that Duck 1, Duck 2, Duck 3, etc. are all slightly different manifestations and are only unified retroactively as the “same” object by way of their family resemblances. Here Bryant is too much of an empiricist, and like most Deleuze-inspired authors he does not give Husserl his due.

With time running short we must speak more briefly of Tristan Garcia, whose marvelous 2011 book *Forme et objet* established him as a significant figure in the debates to come.²⁵ Garcia begins with an extremely flat ontology, even flatter than that of the famously “inflationary” thinker Alexius Meinong. Anything is a thing, no-matter-what. While my own position emerged from phenomenology and Garcia’s from Hegel, Wittgenstein, and the Frankfurt School, there are surprising convergences between our respective positions. We agree that things descend infinitely downward but not infinitely upward, and that the relationship of container and contained is of tremendous importance. The main difference is that I retain a classical notion of the in-itself, while for Garcia the thing is precisely what is *never* in-itself, but is rather *the difference* between its components and its environment. In my view this is an excessive concession to relationist, anti-object-oriented positions. It makes things hypersensitive to their environment in two directions, as if the tiniest rumblings in the atoms of a hammer could change that hammer, and as if distant planetary movements could change that hammer as well. A fuller debate between me and Garcia will appear in Spring 2013 in the Australian journal *Parrhesia*.

This has been a quick pencil sketch of the state of Speculative Realism at the end of 2012. So much has changed since that April 2007 workshop at Goldsmiths, and it is likely that more surprises are in store during the coming five years. We can expect refined positions from already visible authors, the unexpected emergence of new authors, and the use of Speculative Realism in a wider range of fields outside philosophy. The question is not whether Speculative Realism exists, but whether anything better will arise to stop it.

²⁵ Tristan Garcia, *Forme et objet: Un traité des choses* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2011).

EILEEN A. JOY WEIRD READING¹

for Michael Witmore

Experience of being, nothing less, nothing more, on the edge of metaphysics, literature perhaps stands on the edge of everything, almost beyond everything, including itself...What is heralded and refused under the name of literature cannot be identified with any other discourse.

—Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*

SOMETHING LIKE THE WEATHER

It may seem strange to open an essay on the possibilities of Speculative Realist (SR) literary reading modes with a quotation from Derrida, whose status as one of the architects of the “linguistic turn” within the humanities supposedly makes him an enemy (or at least, an often convenient whipping post) of the new realists. Such is the odd flavor of this essay, which, situated outside of philosophy proper, seeks a more anti-disciplinary and even autistic relational field—that is to say, an amodal, synaesthetic, fluid, and diffusely intentional model for discerning relations among thinkers and objects.² Unlike Graham Harman (although very much influenced by him), who opened his essay “Vicarious Causation” by saying his theory of causation “is not some autistic moonbeam entering the window of an asylum,” but rather a “launching pad for a rigorous post-Heideggerian philosophy,”³ I am hoping to follow just such moonbeams into many-chambered asylums. My thinking is hopefully rigorous, but also unreasonable.

This issue of *Speculations* was designed to bring together multiple voices to address the *question*, from a wide variety of disciplinary angles, of the definition and practice of Speculative Realism—a

¹ This essay is a mutation, or meltdown, of Eileen A. Joy, “Notes Toward a Speculative Realist Literary Criticism,” *Svenska Twitteruniversitet* [Swedish Twitter University], December 20, 2011: <http://svtwuni.wordpress.com/2011/12/21/eileen-a-joy-stuo9/>. My thanks to Marcus Nilsson for inviting me to give that lecture, and to the interlocutors there who helped me to refine my thinking, especially Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Robert Jackson, John Russell and Karl Steel.

² My thinking on autistic modes of thought within the positive register of neurodiversity is inspired by Erin Manning, *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), and also by Steven Shaviro, “Value Experience,” *The Pinocchio Theory*, September 30, 2012: <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=1086>

³ Graham Harman, “On Vicarious Causation,” *Collapse II* (March 2007): 171.

term, a turn, an approach, a mode, and never a unified school or movement, of critical thought. My essay will not attempt to sketch out any sort of history of SR (especially within the currents of contemporary post-continental, anti-correlationist, eliminative, and nihilist philosophies), nor to delineate its various present forms, adjudicating among them, nor to craft some sort of unified definition. Rather, I wish to sketch out (somewhat elliptically) what I see as the possible value of SR, and also of one of its most visible off-shoots, Object Oriented Ontology (OOO), to reading literary texts, and to also producing commentaries on those texts, outside of strictly human-centered, historicist frames of reference. These historicist frames of reference (whether the older or newer forms of historicism) have been enormously important for helping us to delineate certain cultural, social, historical, and material conditions that have given rise to certain literary texts and the discursive-expressive networks within which they have circulated as carriers (or symptoms) of various (often violent) orders of meaning (and we can't forget either, that real entities, institutions, nations, etc. are composed and held together, with no uncertain force, in human language). Nevertheless, works of literature are also unique events that possess a penumbra of effects that can never be fully rationalized nor instrumentalized, and there is no one set of relations within which the whole range of any one text's possible effects can be fully plumbed or measured. There is always something left over, some remainder, or some non-responsive item, that has to be left to the side of any schematic critique, and this is an occasion for every text's becoming-otherwise. Art is inherently subversive, after all, as much an act of doing as undoing.

All narratives have over-arching propulsive qualities, of course. All stories tend in a certain, and not any other, direction: Anna Karenina will always jump in front of that onrushing train every time you read Tolstoy's novel, and there will always be that boy on the platform, selling bottles of beer, when she does it. Macbeth always gets his head chopped off by Macduff, and Hamlet never gets around to killing Claudius until it's too late (although "too late" is a matter of opinion), and so on. Stories are like deterministic, machinic systems in which characters, situations, and other details are frozen, as it were, in certain poses, while also being always "wound," like watches, to keep the same time. Yet, narratives also contain discrete, disconnected instances of being and becoming that are always attempting to expand beyond or subvert the larger narrative system—these instances, or "units" (as Ian Bogost would term them⁴) are like

⁴ See Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame*

things, material elements with their own *conatus* (Spinoza's term for any thing's tendency to persist in existing), which always leaves the system open to a creative and possibly fruitful chaos (a plenitude of generative unruliness whose historical tense would be the future perfect subjunctive: *what would have been*, or, *what would have not been*). Reading is the activity by which these elements might spring to new life, and perhaps always do, when we consider that every reading is idiosyncratic in some way, always embedded in a unique set of relations and conditions (social, psychic, mechanic, etc.).

Whereas traditional literary criticism often seeks to reveal the psychic-cultural-historical orders in which texts play an important part (and thereby, for all of contemporary critique's disdain for what is "universal," texts are often subsumed, whether as willing or more subversive actors, into larger and supposedly totalizing orders of meaning, referred to, with some suppleness, as "context"⁵), a speculative reading practice might pay more attention to the ways in which any given unit of a text has its own propensities and relations that might pull against the system and open it to productive errancy (literally, "rambling," "wandering"—moments of becoming-stray). Any given moment in a literary work (all the way down to specific words and even parts of words, and all the way up to the work as a whole), like any object or thing, is "fatally torn" between its deeper reality and its "accidents, relations, and qualities: a set of tensions that makes everything in the universe possible, including space and time,"⁶ and literary criticism might re-purpose itself as the mapping of these (often in- and non-human) tensions and rifts, as well as of the excess of meanings that might pour out of these crevasses, or wormholes.⁷ We'll call

Criticism (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

⁵ As Rita Felski writes, "Instead of swarms of actors moving toward each other, we imagine an immobile textual object enclosed within an all-determining contextual frame. Frozen in time and space, the literary work is deprived of the very mobility that forms the precondition of our own experience of it. Implaled on the pin of our historical categories and coordinates, it exists only as an object-to-be-explained rather than a fellow actor and cocreator of relations, attitudes, and attachments": Rita Felski, "Context Stinks!" *New Literary History* 42 (2011): 590. This entire issue of *NLH*, devoted to the *question* of context in literary interpretation, is worth reading.

⁶ Graham Harman, "Space, Time, and Essence: An Object-Oriented Approach," in Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2010), 150.

⁷ I might argue that this is a reading strategy that has already been employed in some quarters, such as queer studies; see, for example, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," in *Novel Gazing: Queer*

this reading for the *weird*, which is fitting when you consider that the word “weird” (traditionally related to “wyrd,” or “fate”) is related to the Old English *weorðan* [“to become”], rooted in Indo-European **wer-* [“to turn, bend”]. This will entail being open to incoherence as well, as one possible route toward a non-routinized un-disciplinarity that privileges unknowing over mastery of knowledge. The idea here would be to unground texts from their conventional, human-centered contexts, just as we would unground ourselves, getting lost in order to flee what is (at times) the deadening status quo of literary-historical studies at present, aiming for the carnivalesque over the accounting office.⁸

An object-oriented (or unit operations) approach to literary works would not (in its supposed de-centering up of historical-materialist critique) necessarily be an apolitical or ethically vacuous project, as some might suppose,⁹ but rather is focused on (and maybe

Readings in Fiction (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 1–38, and *The Weather in Proust*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), esp. Part 2: Toward an Aesthetic Subject; Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); and Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁸ This is not to say that conventional (whether older or newer) historicist frames of critique have lost their usefulness—they will always be useful and can work hand-in-hand with many different approaches, including the ones I am sketching out here. I do not wish to partake in the debates that pitch critique against anti-critique, as I believe that all engagements with artworks can be considered interventions into those artworks, and thus are critical in some way. Plus, I’m a pluralist. I’m personally interested in different modes of playing with texts, via creative supplementarity, recombination, parataxis, collocation, and the like. But I support all reading strategies that might help us amplify the world’s expressivity.

⁹ Alexander Galloway has recently argued that recent strands of philosophical realism somehow “ventriloquize the current industrial arrangement,” have no real relation to or alignment with material history (and are therefore amoral and “dangerous”), and that “there is little to differentiate the new philosophical realism from the most austere forms of capitalist realism,” and therefore these new modes of realist thinking are “politically retrograde”: Alexander R. Galloway, “The Poverty of Philosophy and Post-Fordism,” *Critical Inquiry* 39 (Winter 2013): 348, 364. Part of the problem with Galloway’s argument is the assumption that SR and OOO (and even actor-network theory) flatten everything out in their ontologies such that all objects are just as “meaningless” or “absolute” as every other object, which is a real distortion of the work that has been done by figures such as Jane Bennett, Levi Bryant, Graham Harman, Bruno Latour, and others. Galloway’s

even affirms) a pluralism of being and worlds. To do so, as the political theorist William Connolly has argued, “is to worry about the excesses of humanism,” which “too often supports a consummate conception of human agency; it is not alert enough to multiple modes of proto-agency in other aspects of nature and culture that often exceed, overlap, and perplex us. It thus readily becomes too enamored of its own agency.”¹⁰ Making things (such as a novel, or a poem) that are weird even more weird is, I will argue, an ethical act, one invested in maximizing the sensual and other richness of the world’s expressivity.

My own purpose in crafting speculative reading modes follows from a desire to capture the traces of the strange voluptuousness and singular, in- or post-human tendencies of textual objects, but without mystifying texts and/or risking some kind of neo-sanctity, or theology, of texts, which are always co-agential with us in “earthy” ways—which is to say, enworlded with us. Our consciousness is as much formed by real-world experience as it is by experience in imaginary worlds, and the lines between the two are so entangled as to be impossible to separate (and do we want to live entirely outside of our illusions, anyway?—these can be therapeutic, after all).¹¹ I’m influenced by Jane Bennett’s “vibrant” materialism in which objects, which could be texts, are seen to “act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own,” outside of human will and human design¹²—the “quasi” here is important because it helps us to see the ways in which something, including a human or a text, is neither fully a subject nor fully an object, but a sort of “constructor of intersubjectivity” (which could also be interobjectivity), a “station” or “relay” between being and relation, between the “I” and the “It.”¹³ Persons are thingly, too, after all, especially when we consider the ways in which selves are epiphenomena of consciousness, and therefore also aesthetic.¹⁴ *Human persons, as real objects* (as essay is a good example (unfortunately) of argument by weak, or false, analogy.

¹⁰ William E. Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹¹ On this point, see L.O. Aranye Fradenburg, “Living Chaucer,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 33 (2011): 41–64.

¹² Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), viii.

¹³ See Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence Schehr (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 227.

¹⁴ See Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), for a rich exploration of the thingliness of persons. On the self as epiphenomenon of the brain, see Francesco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), and

Harman would aver), can make important contact with another object (such as a haiku), “not through impossible contact with its interior life, but...by brushing its surface in such a manner as to bring its inner life into play.”¹⁵

My thinking here is also influenced by Julian Yates, who has suggested that a post-human literary studies influenced by speculative metaphysics might “reanimat[e] aesthetics as a contact zone in which the presence of things is understood to manifest via the installed thoughts and feelings of their human screens.”¹⁶ Michael Witmore, also under the sway of speculative realist philosophy, has suggested, in Borgesian fashion, that “a text might be thought of as a vector through a meta-table of all possible worlds” (because “a text can be queried at the level of single words and then related to other texts at the same level of abstraction”),¹⁷ and this might lead—fruitfully, I think—to a re-consideration (neglected somewhat within SR circles) of the narratologist-metaphysicians of the 1960s through 1980s, such as Thomas Pavel, who were influenced by set theory and modal realism (possible world theory).¹⁸ This is all by way of saying that I believe there are many avenues by which to craft a productive convergence between SR and new modes of reading literary texts, especially if we want to give to texts any sort of agential realism that doesn’t always devolve to their supposed role(s) in well-worn historical contexts.

Relative to the post-human and so-called “distant” and “descriptive” turns in literary-historical studies,¹⁹ I’m also interested in working on ways to see Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1991).

¹⁵ Harman, “On Vicarious Causation,” 203-204.

¹⁶ Julian Yates, “It’s (for) You; or, The Tele-t/r/opical Post-human,” *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 1.1/2 (Spring/Summer 2010): 228.

¹⁷ Michael Witmore, “Text: A Massively Addressable Object,” *Wine Dark Sea: Drifting in a Sea of Texts and Data*, December 31, 2010: <http://winedarksea.org/?p=926>

¹⁸ See, for example, David K. Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) and Thomas G. Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986). Those of us interested in human-independent realisms and object oriented ontologies could reap some new benefits, I think, in returning to certain signature works of mathematical-cybernetic-cognitive philosophy, such as Douglas Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

¹⁹ See, for example, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108 (2009): 1-21; Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002); Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991); N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics,*

what happens when I start looking for things in texts that don’t typically get observed because they don’t easily correspond or answer to traditionally humanist questions and concerns. And I want to see what happens when I work to recognize better how inhuman and weird texts are, especially when I recall that through a magical process called “lying to myself” I turn a small, rectangular object filled with black marks called a book into a world teeming with persons, animals, mountains, buildings, butterflies, continents, weather, cashmere sweaters, beer bottles, baseball teams, streetcars, crannied walls, centipedes, top hats, tables, clouds, various magical acts of transfiguration, and so on. And the idea might then be, not to necessarily make sense of a literary text and its figures (human and otherwise)—to humanistically re-boot the narrative by always referring it to the (always human-centered) Real (context, historical or otherwise, for example, or human psychology)²⁰—but to better render the chatter and noise, the movements and operations, the signals and transmissions, the appearances and disappearances of the *weird* worlds, and their figures, that are compressed in books (a different sort of realism that always exceeds the intentions of authors and readers, and thanks to language’s errant-deconstructive tendencies, cannot be fully captured in the nets of our semantics only²¹), and to see better how these teeming pseudo-worlds are part of my brain already, hard-wired into the black box of a kind of co-implicate, enworlded inter-subject-object-ivity in which it is difficult and challenging to trace the edges between self and Other, between the Real and the fabulated. And here I will maintain, again, that the fabulated is as much as part of the Real as the so-called non-fictional, or as Timothy Morton has recently put it, “Losing a fantasy is much harder

Literature, and Informatics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Eileen A. Joy and Craig Dionne, eds., *When Did We Become Post/human?* special issue of *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 1.1/2 (Spring/Summer 2010); Heather Love, “Close, but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” *New Literary History* 41.2 (2010): 371-391; Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London: Verso, 2007); Stephen Ramsay, *Reading Machines: Toward an Algorithmic Criticism* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007); and Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

²⁰ On recent debates over the question of context in literary and historical studies, see the recent issue of *New Literary History*, ed. Herbert F. Tucker, *Context?* (42.2: Autumn 2011).

²¹ What we may need instead of semantics is something like an alien semiotics, and those who work in more observational fields, like cultural anthropology and animal behavior, may provide some helpful models to follow.

than losing a reality.”²² This will thus necessitate allowing the lines between criticism proper and art to dissolve somewhat, or to at least relax their checkpoint procedures.

Now might be a propitious time to craft new reading practices that would multiply and thicken a literary text’s sentient reality, and to also develop new practices of commentary that would seek to open and not close a text’s possible “signatures,”²³ which are never entirely collapsible to either the deep reality of the object itself, always partially hidden from us (call this history, or interiority), nor merely its sensual surfaces (what appears before us, as a sort of shifting series of spatio-temporal façades), but instead register what Graham Harman has termed “allure”: “a special and intermittent experience in which the intimate bond between a thing’s unity and its plurality of notes somehow partially disintegrates.”²⁴ In this scenario, “allure” names something (an experience, but also a time-space, of literary texts) that I think those of us who work in literary studies have been aware of for a very long time, but have not yet mapped in quite this ingenuous way—an “aesthetic experience” that “splits the atoms of the world and puts their particles on display.”²⁵ Or, more dryly and practically, one can only really (interpretively) work the vein of the split, or the rift, between what anything really is (again, always partially withdrawn from our sight) and the qualities and “notes” that stream out of objects all of the time, and our texts are like collapsed mine-shafts that, nevertheless, keep producing working mine-shafts. And literary critics might be like Zeno, laboring to split the paradoxical difference, to keep the allure coming. Maybe that’s not so dry, after all.

As Morton puts it, “*The aesthetic dimension is the causal dimension*,”²⁶ and for a long time now, literary critics have been analyzing aesthetic causality, albeit

²² Timothy Morton, “Introduction: Objects in the Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear,” in *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press/MPublishing, 2013), riffing on Jacques Lacan: “What constitutes pretense is that, in the end, you don’t know whether it’s pretense or not”: Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, Livre III: Les psychoses* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1981), 48.

²³ I am thinking here of Derrida’s comment, in an interview with Derek Attridge, that “[g]ood literary criticism, the only worthwhile kind, implies an act, a literary signature or countersignature, an inventive experience of language, in language, an inscription of the act of reading in the field of the text that is read”: Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 52.

²⁴ Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 143.

²⁵ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 173.

²⁶ Morton, “Introduction,” in *Realist Magic*; italics in original.

with the caveat that they are analyzing historical objects that, even when they are seen to move through time and in and out of different historical horizons and contexts (and thus possess a felicitous swarm-like motility), still have a somewhat narrowly-defined status as *static objects* that impose certain constraints (historical, semantic, and otherwise) upon their interpretation. To better describe aesthetics-as-[weird]-causality in the present, with regard to literature, outside of traditional frames of critical-historical reference, is partly what I’m hoping for. As Derek Attridge has argued, historical reconstruction is not adequate to demonstrating the ways in which a literary work represents a singular “event,” whereby “an object or a practice or a conceptual paradigm—hitherto nonexistent and apparently unthinkable—comes into being.”²⁷ The literary work’s “singularity,” its object-ness, however, is never “pure: it is constitutively impure, always open to contamination, grafting, accidents, reinterpretation, and recontextualization.”²⁸ One hopes for new modes of reading that would allow texts a certain anti-reductionist and autopoetic, yet also intermediate, ontology—something like the weather, an atmospheric medium with an unpredictable life of its own that nevertheless drenches us.

A WELCOMING PAVILION OF THOUGHT

Every culture is the terrible gush of its splendid outward forms. . . . Enough dialectical stuttering. We propose a theoretical device that amplifies the cognition of thresholds. It would add to the body the vertiginously unthinkable. That is, a pavilion.

—Lisa Robertson, “Spatial Synthetics: A Theory”

To talk about literature in relation to SR is difficult, of course, given SR’s emphasis on human-independent realities, for it is not really possible to disentangle the human entirely from the process of reading—what, after all, is a Henry James novel when it is not being read at all, or even by a machine that still produces outputs for humans to interpret?²⁹ This is a

²⁷ Derek Attridge, “Context, Ideoculture, Invention,” *New Literary History* 42 (2011): 681. See also Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004).

²⁸ Attridge, *Singularity of Literature*, 63.

²⁹ Claire Colebrook, however, has ruminated such a situation of “radical rhetorical abandonment,” when she writes that, “it is because of the pure and inhuman materiality of the text—its existence outside and beyond any present and governing intention—that sense is possible,” and that “[a]s the end of humanity comes to be more and more apparent, and as the prospect of a future without humans promises to be literally the case, we would be better served to think of processes of textual complexity that could not

pleasurable activity, after all (reading, interpretation, commentary), and not one some of us are willing to relinquish even as we embrace post-human modes of analysis. With Michael Witmore, I would aver that, “what makes a text a text” is “its susceptibility to varying levels of address,” and a reader (any reader, whether a computer or a human) is the “maker of a momentary *dispositif*,” of the “continual redistribution of levels of address” to the text, and what some of us want now is “a phenomenology of these acts [of reading], one that would allow us to link quantitative work on a culture’s ‘built environment’ to words of the kinesthetic and imaginative dimensions of life at a given moment.”³⁰ What some of us also want, in relation to making that readerly *dispositif* as creatively active as possible, is a (critically) recombinatory poetics of texts themselves (which might be computational but could also be humanly Borgesian-cognitive), to see *what texts can do* (a “potential” literature³¹) when they are not constrained by either their most manifest properties or their so-called historical environments (there’s that rift again, that vein of allure); or, as Harman has posed it, “Why not imagine that a letter by Shelley was actually written by Nietzsche, and consider the resulting consequences and *lack* of consequences?”³² I’d like to point out, however, that Borges’s Pierre Menard beat Harman to that punch:

Menard...has enriched, by means of a new technique, the halting and rudimentary art of reading: this new technique is that of deliberate anachronism and the erroneous attribution. This technique, whose applications are infinite, prompts us to go through the *Odyssey* as if it were posterior to the *Aeneid* and the book *Le jardin du Centaure* of Madame Henri Bachelier as if it were by Madame Henri Bachelier. This technique fills the most placid works with adventure.³³

be returned or contained by what we mean, must have meant or can imagine”: Claire Colebrook, “Matter without Bodies,” *Derrida Today* 4.1 (2011): 18, 19.

³⁰ Witmore, “Text: A Massively Addressable Object.”

³¹ “Who has not felt, in reading a text—whatever its quality—the need to improve it through a little judicious retouching? No work is invulnerable to this. The whole world of literature ought to become the object of numerous and discerningly conceived prostheses”: François Le Lionnais, “Second Manifesto,” in *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*, ed. and trans. Warren Motte (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 31.

³² Graham Harman, “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism,” *New Literary History* 43 (2012): 202.

³³ Jorge Luis Borges, “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings* (New York:

The task now might be to out-Menard Menard. Some will say this is fiction. We will call it critical (non-intentionalist) play, or if you prefer more sophisticated neologisms, we’ll call it ontography (fittingly, a fake academic occupation originally fabricated by the ghost story writer, M.R. James), a sort of “aesthetic set theory”—“a general inscriptive strategy” that would uncover “the repleteness of units and their interobjectivity” without “necessarily offering clarification or description of any kind.” Similar to “a medieval bestiary, ontography can take the form of a compendium, a record of things [such as a list] juxtaposed to demonstrate their overlap and imply interactions through collocation.”³⁴ This would be a process of assembly and re-assembly (of what Ian Bogost calls “carpentry”), engineered simply to see what *might* happen, what *might* occur, when we randomize (and also re-construct) literary objects, which would then be one way (among many possible ways) of simultaneously defamiliarizing and registering the, or a, world. This is also a way to produce shocks to the systems of our thought by “patiently engraving and linking together apparently disparate things in the manner of a still life.”³⁵

The simple act of placing two “unlike” textual and other objects alongside each other, that are not believed to have any relation to each other, culturally-historically or otherwise (such as Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale* alongside Lars von Trier’s film *Breaking the Waves*, or *Beowulf*’s Grendel alongside a Chechen suicide bomber, or an Old English poem alongside a Tony Kushner play, as I have done in my own work³⁶), can be a productive act of what Harman calls “vicarious causation,” where two sensual objects “touch without touching” each other on the “interior” of the reader’s attention, and all parties “break free of the epistemological deadlock and reawaken the metaphysical question of what relation means.”³⁷ The encounter is rife with “accidents” (sensual façades,

New Directions, 1962), 44.

³⁴ Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 38.

³⁵ W.G. Sebald, “An Attempt at Restitution,” in W.G. Sebald, *Campo Santo*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2005), 200.

³⁶ See Eileen A. Joy, “Like Two Autistic Moonbeams Entering the Window of My Asylum: Chaucer’s Griselda and Lars von Trier’s Bess McNeill,” *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 2.3 (2011): 316-328; “Exteriority Is Not a Negation, But a Marvel: Hospitality, Terrorism, *Beowulf*, Levinas,” in Eileen A. Joy et al., eds., *Cultural Studies of the Modern Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 237-267; and “On the Hither Side of Time: Tony Kushner’s *Homebody/Kabul* and the Old English *Ruin*,” *Medieval Perspectives* 19 (2005): 175-205.

³⁷ Harman, “On Vicarious Causation,” 173.

or clusters of “notes”), a certain “frosting-over [of the objects] with peripheral qualities,” which then forms a carnal realm unfolding “in a space that always lies somewhere between objects in their duels with one another.”³⁸ It is here, in this carnal realm, where objects don’t quite line up with each other, that reading might be configured as an accounting, or description, of the sticky residues of accidents that reveal the places where objects both do, and do not, bleed into one another.

I want to note here as well that a concern for play, for pleasure, and also for enjoyment, can be an importantly ethical matter, especially in academic disciplines (literary studies, historical studies, philosophy, etc.) that are often suspicious of pleasure and enjoyment, privileging instead what some term “strong,” “skeptical,” “sober,” “serious,” and “rational” critique. I will note here that if there is one thing I am skeptical of, it is the idea there is such a thing as “rational clarity,” or Reason (with a capital “R”), with its strong investments in post-Enlightenment modes of disenchantment, and I realize that is a heretical thing to say in a journal dominated by the discipline of philosophy. But intellectual (and other forms of) “enlightenment” come in many forms, not all of them “rational.”³⁹ Certain forms of enchantment may also be necessary components of ethical and political life.⁴⁰ On this count, I depart somewhat from one of the editors of the journal, Fabio Gironi, that what is important now in the development of SR thought is a certain commitment to Enlightenment values, where “[t]o value reason means unwavering vigilance concerning the validity of our epistemic principles” as well as avoiding the “slippery slope of uninhibited conceptual inventiveness,” while I also admire his fierce and elegantly intelligent commitment to the potentially emancipatory power of the discipline of philosophy.⁴¹ In my mind, it is precisely “uninhibited conceptual inventiveness” that will get us anywhere, and that will also make Derrida’s “university without condition” more possible.⁴² There is no good reason to put a limit

³⁸ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 187.

³⁹ This is where much current work in neuroscience on embodied, affective cognition is important; see, for example, Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Picador, 1994).

⁴⁰ See, for example, Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁴¹ Fabio Gironi, “Between Naturalism and Rationalism: A New Realist Landscape,” *Journal of Critical Realism* 11.3 (2012): 383.

⁴² See Jacques Derrida, “The University Without Condition,” in *Without Alibi*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford

University Press, 2002), 202-237.

to thought within the setting of the university; one must allow in the mad, the chimeric, the deviant, the teratological.

Part of my interest in SR and OOO is precisely because I see the (acid-trip) modes of thought opened within these intellectual realms as possible allies in transversally re-wiring the sensorium of reading with an eye toward increasing the pleasures and enjoyment of, not just reading, but of a heightened contact with the world itself, in all of its extra-human (but also co-implicate) vibrations, with what Harman has called “the sheer sincerity of existence.”⁴³ And with Anna Klosowska, I want “a different [critical] theory of pleasure,” one “grounded in presence,” where pleasure isn’t “conceived through an avaricious Marxist critique along the lines of symbolic capital, or [through] a cultural studies reading that would [negatively] label pleasure’s material and imaginative parameters,” surrounding it “with yellow tape as the crime-scene of simulacrum.”⁴⁴ In weird reading, we might discover a non-projective, non-hermeneutic wedge against our usual ontological intransivity. This may be playful (skating dangerously, or perhaps seriously-pleasurably, around the edges of decadence), but it is also non-destructive. It might make of our work a welcoming pavilion of thought.

University Press, 2002), 202-237.

⁴³ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 135.

⁴⁴ Anna Klosowska, “Like We Need It,” unpublished paper, presented at the 44th International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, May 8, 2009. This is not to, in any way, malign or unfairly parody the often brilliant work undertaken under the banners of “Marxist” and/or materialist “Cultural Studies,” but only to ask that we reserve some room for the radicalizing potential of enjoyment(s) that don’t always proceed through theories of lack, power/knowledge, or false consciousness.