Actual Qualities of Imaginative Things
Notes towards an Object-Oriented Literary Theory[1]

Jon Cogburn and Mark Allan Ohm

Louisiana State University

WHEN CONSIDERED AGAINST the context of dominant twentieth century meta-philosophical tropes, speculative realism might appear first and foremost as an attempt to move away from *textualism*, the view that we must understand reality in terms of linguistic categories. While such a view is perhaps today most associated with deconstructionism's 1980s heyday, it is actually a perennial temptation, arguably going back to Plato's Socrates. Simply put, since philosophical discourse takes place via language it is *very* easy for one's bad philosophy of language to leak out and corrupt one's metaphysics.

Consider, for example, a representative passage by Robert Brandom.

> A complementary order of semantic explanation, by contrast, begins with what discursive practitioners actually *do*, that is, with the practical discursive process of rectifying and amplifying their commitments. It seeks to make the notion of objective modal relations intelligible in terms of this process, via pragmatically mediated semantic relations.[2]

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[1] With apologies to Gilbert Sorrentino, *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2000).

[2] Robert Brandom, *Between Saying and Doing: Towards Analytic Pragmatism*

Brandom justifies this by claiming that metaphysical posits such as "facts" and "objective modal relations" are "reciprocally sense dependent" upon linguistic entities such as "propositions" and "pragmatically mediated semantic relations." Reciprocal sense dependence means that concepts of one domain are parasitic on concepts in the other domain. Thus, we are forced to understand reality in terms of linguistic categories.

We applaud Brandom's non-caginess about this. However, as students of H.P. Lovecraft we of course find this mystifying. If Lovecraft is successful, then one *can* use language to express an inexpressible reality. His entire corpus is to some extent an extended meditation on this very problematic. Assuming that his stories are not nonsense, it follows that (pace textualism) our linguistic, mental, and worldly concepts do *not* a threefold cord make.[3]

Even though few defend textualism as explicitly as Brandom or 1980s deconstructionists, one might argue that something like a plurality of contemporary analytic and continental philosophy simply makes no sense unless something like textualism is understood as being presupposed. Certainly, speculative realism (and Lovecraft for that matter) irritates many academic philosophers because if it ends up being successful much of the point might be robbed from textualist philosophies. In our Whig histories of speculative realism and object-oriented ontology (Sections I through III below) we make clear the precise nature of this threat.

But articulating a general Lovecraftian ontology is not sufficient for defeating textualism. One must also articulate a regional ontology of texts themselves. Barring this, one

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(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 195, original emphasis.

[3] In "Expressing the Inexpressible" Jon Cogburn and Neal Hebert discuss this issue with respect to horror fantasy novels and fantasy role playing. In *Weird Realism* Graham Harman discusses the same issues, arguing that Lovecraft's approach is not inextricably tied to horror. See Jon Cogburn and Neal Hebert, "Expressing the Inexpressible" in *Dungeons and Dragons and Philosophy*, ed. Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox (Chicago: Open Court, 2012), 133–50, and Graham Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Washington: Zero Books, 2012).

could at best be accused of a radical dualism between text and world. Perhaps more importantly, it is our hope that a non-textualist ontology of texts might once and for all block the infiltration from bad philosophy of language to bad metaphysics. While such a project is a lifetime's labour, we hope that the suggestions that follow (in Sections IV through VIII) are enough to begin damming the seepage. If so, then from this point forward we could confidently declare metaphysics first philosophy, epistemology second, and the epistemology of linguistic understanding finally a distant third (though no less interesting for all that).

I. The Speculative Turn

Besides a deep fondness for Lovecraft, perhaps the only non-trivial belief held in common by the original four speculative realists (Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman, and Quentin Meillassoux) is the Hegelian conviction that metaphysics buries its own undertakers. In *After Finitude* Meillassoux argued trenchantly that the phenomenological tradition had, through Martin Heidegger and the French philosophers of the 60s, degenerated into a naïve neo-Kantianism only plausible to those who have forgotten the lessons of the period between Kant and Hegel. Meillassoux coined the term "correlationism" (of which textualism is just one example) to name the neo-Kantian thesis that one cannot think being without simultaneously thinking of a subject cognising being. If true, correlationism prohibits us from claiming knowledge, or (in stronger forms) even talking meaningfully, of a reality independent of human minds cognising it.

Rather than discuss the speculative realist critique of correlationism,[4] we concern ourselves here with very briefly

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[4] For an explanation of how correlationism implodes from within, see Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2006) as well as Graham Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). For an account of the history which had to be forgotten for correlationism to rise to the level of philosophical common sense, see Frederick Beiser, *The*

explaining how the position came to seem inevitable in continental philosophy.

First step. In *Heidegger Explained* Harman traces the genesis of contemporary continental philosophy to Heidegger's 1919 emergency war lectures, translated now as *Towards the Definition of Philosophy*.[5] At a crucial point in the first lecture series, Heidegger argues that even when we are presented with a completely novel object we never see it as mere object, but rather immediately perceive possible uses for it, even if we do not know the proper uses. Decades later Heidegger returned to this theme first in the lecture series that formed the rough draft of *Being and Time* (i.e. *History of the Concept of Time*), and then in *Being and Time* itself as the famed tool analysis.[6] On the standard reading of this,[7] Heidegger's main

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Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) and Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism, 1781-1801* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008). For an interpretation of Hegel understood correctly as both responding to the issues raised by Beiser and Priest and as (sadly, pace Beiser's own *Hegel*—see Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (London: Routledge, 2005)) defending metaphysical positions still worth taking seriously, see Robert Stern, *Hegelian Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). In light of all this material, one can characterise speculative realism precisely in terms of two theses: (1) the "back to Kant" movements that birthed analytic and continental philosophy (Marburg and Southwest schools, respectively) resulted in the unwitting twentieth century triumph of academic Fichteanism, and (2) this is a bad thing. On Robert Brandom's Fichteanism, see Paul Franks, "From Quine to Hegel: Naturalism, Anti-Realism, and Maimon's Question *Quid Facti*" in *German Idealism: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Espen Hammer (London: Routledge, 2007), 50-69. For relevant material on Brandom and the *quid facti*, see Jon Cogburn, "Review of Robert Brandom's *Reason in Philosophy*," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* (2011), 45, 465-76, and Jon Cogburn, "Critical Notice of Robert Brandom's *Between Saying and Doing: Towards an Analytic Pragmatism*," *Philosophical Books* (2010), 51:3, 160-74.

[5] Graham Harman, *Heidegger Explained* (Chicago: Open Court, 2007). Martin Heidegger, *Towards the Definition of Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2008).

[6] Martin Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*, trans. Theodore Kisiel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009). Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010).

[7] In Section III below, we discuss (and endorse!) Harman's critique of this traditional interpretation.

point is an anti-reductionist one. The world in which we find ourselves is first and foremost full of alethic and deontic modalities, that is, replete (respectively) with possibilities and permissibilities. And these permissibilities only make sense relative to a teleological realm ordered by a rich set of referential relations. The podium refers to the papers that one ought to set upon it. The papers refer to the audience to whom they ought to be read, etc. etc. For Heidegger, we never experience objects merely as bare objects, nor as bundles of static properties, but rather first and foremost in terms of these normative modes.[8]

Good enough thus far. But then the second step concerns how Heidegger uses this bit of phenomenology to critique the philosophical tradition. For the orthodox Heideggerian, the phenomenological primacy of proprieties (the relational, teleological realm of alethic and deontic modalities) shades into a critique of explanations that try to reduce such proprieties to a realm of "objectively present" (non-modal, non-teleological) things that just are what they are in themselves. Heidegger thus sought to set on its head the standard model of metaphysical or scientific reduction that would try to reduce the proprietary to a non-modal realm. Rather, Heidegger suggests in *Being and Time*, this actually works in reverse. Supposedly foundational ("originary") things such as Platonic forms or Aristotelian or Cartesian matter are actually themselves "founded," arrived at by a process of abstraction where we take everyday objects and try to intellectualise away from all of the modal, normative proprieties that relate them to their broader world.

[8] One might attribute this point to Kant originally, as it is one take on his quip that intuitions without concepts are blind. By attributing to Kant the view that concepts are first and foremost inferential proprieties, Jonathan Bennett, *Kant's Analytic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966) and Robert Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy: Animating Ideas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009) both come close to doing so. However, Mark Okrent, "On Layer Cakes," http://www.bates.edu/philosophy/files/2010/07/onlayer.pdf (accessed January 8, 2013) shows that what is distinctive about Heidegger in this context is that the proprieties fundamentally concern the appropriateness of acting in certain ways, and that properly linguistic inferential propriety is founded on this.

Understanding speculative realism and object-oriented ontology requires grasping precisely how one can accept all of the above and still not fall prey to the correlationist equivocation of being with being for us. As Harman shows in *Tool-Being*, correlationism only follows from Heidegger's critique if one maintains a traditional conception of the way human and non-human reality is divided.[9] That is, correlationism only follows from Heidegger's critique if one thinks (on the one hand) that a non-human world would have to be something like that described in Descartes' metaphysical physics, and (on the other hand) that the modal and valuative dimension of reality must be a function of the human mind. It is only then that the idea that Cartesian objects are metaphysically founded on a more originary modal world would entail that we can have no concept of a human-independent reality. Paradoxically then, the supposed correlationist overcoming of the Cartesian distinction between mind and reality only gets off the ground if one maintains a naïve (Cartesian!) view of that very distinction.[10] If anything is constitutive of speculative realism it is a willingness to actually take the anti-Cartesian journey suggested by Heidegger, but upon which he never really managed to himself embark.

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[9] Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002).

[10] Again, we see speculative realism overcoming the Fichtean consensus: (1) one of the many ways in which correlationism required forgetting the lessons of the period between Kant and Hegel involves the forgetting of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*, which can be understood as reacting to precisely this dialectic. See Iain Hamilton Grant, *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008). (2) The anti-correlationist must also respond to the Berkeley-Fichte conceivability argument (first articulated in George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philanous* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1988)) to the conclusion that to be is to be conceived. Reactions vary on this score, Meillassoux and Priest (op. cit.) take the argument to be valid, yet to paradoxically explode, since the person making it must transcend the very limits of conceivability entailed by the argument. Whereas Graham Harman, in *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2011), and Jon Cogburn, in "Moore's Paradox as an Argument Against Anti-Realism" in *The Realism-Antirealism Debate in the Age of Alternative Logic*, ed. Shahid Rahman, Giuseppe Primiero, and Mathieu Marion (Heidelberg: Springer, 2011) take the argument to be simply invalid.

But it is not enough to just refuse to take this third step in the Heideggerian route to correlationism; speculative realism is speculative precisely because all of the philosophers involved have taken up the task of articulating accounts of reality at variance with the correlationist's Cartesian account of mind and world.

II. Object-Oriented Ontology

Object-oriented ontologists such as Ian Bogost, Levi Bryant, Graham Harman, Tristan Garcia, Timothy Morton, and the authors of this paper get properly underway via another layer of critique, which can be seen as complementary to the Heideggerian phenomenological critique of objective presence. Heidegger's initial critique naturally lends itself to the critique of attempts to reduce or explain away various aspects of human reality such as art, mind, language, and morality in terms of a supposedly more fundamental realm of objectively present objects. Harman calls such reductive explanatory strategies "undermining," and notes that they all involve a philosophical degradation of objects.[11]

> The first critical response to objects asserts that they are not funda-
> mental. All of the dogs, candles, and snowflakes we observe are built
> of something more basic, and this deeper reality is the proper subject
> matter for philosophy. As the surf pounded the shores of Anatolia,
> Thales proposed water as the first principle of everything. Later came
> Anaximenes, for whom air rather than water was the root of the world.
> It is slightly more complicated with Empedocles, for whom things are
> composed not of one but of four separate elements: air, earth, fire, and
> water, joined and divorced through the forces of love and hate. And

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[11] See the discussion of undermining and overmining in Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Washington: Zero Books, 2011), the meditation on reductionism throughout Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: Re.press, 2009), as well as the discussion of "more than things" and "less than things" in Tristan Garcia, *Form and Object: A Treatise on Things*, trans. Mark Allan Ohm and Jon Cogburn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

finally with Democritus, atoms of different shapes and sizes serve as the root element of all larger things. In present-day materialism one speaks instead of quarks or infinitesimal strings. In all such cases, the critical method is the same: what seems at first like an autonomous object is really just a motley aggregate built of smaller pieces. Only what is basic can be real.[12]

Rejecting the explanatory presumption of undermining is old hat to many philosophers working in both continental and analytic anti-reductionist traditions, and is part of traditional phenomenology preserved by most speculative realists.

Object-oriented ontologists are distinct in endorsing a parallel critique of what Harman calls "overmining," which Harman and Garcia take to be the mirror image of undermining. Here is Harman again:

A different way of dismissing objects as the chief *dramatis personae* of philosophy is to reduce them upward rather than downward. Instead of saying that objects are too shallow to be real, it is said that they are too deep. On this view the object is a useless hypothesis, a *je ne sais quoi* in the bad sense. Rather than being undermined from beneath, the object is overmined from above. On this view, objects are important only insofar as they are manifested to the mind, or are part of some concrete event that affects other objects as well.[13]

If the pre-Socratics are the patron saints of undermining, then the British Empiricists, with their attempt to see objects as mere bundles of perceptible properties, are the patron saints of overmining. Much contemporary continental philosophy can only be seen as heir of this tradition, as overmining occurs whenever the nineteenth century "hermeneutics of suspicion" (e.g. Nietzsche, Marx, Freud) are married to phenomenology[14] in attempts to explain aspects of non-human

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[12] Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 8.

[13] Ibid., 10-11.

[14] Given the level of caricature, it pains us to admit this, but Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, *French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism*, trans.

reality such as atoms, quarks, numbers, and divinities in terms of relational networks such as discursive practices, social norms, class struggles, Freudian mechanisms, power, phallo-logocentrism, etc. etc. etc. Thus, object-oriented ontology is a natural outgrowth of the speculative realist critique of correlationism. Overmining explanations are almost always instances of correlationism in action, tying the very being of some putatively non-human phenomenon to provincial human practices.

Let us be absolutely clear here. The object-oriented ontologist is *not* urging people to stop providing undermining and overmining explanations. Nor is she saying that such explanations never yield important truths about objects. Successful undermining explanations tell us about the behaviour of objects' constituents and how these relate to the behaviour of the object. Successful overmining explanations tell us much about how objects relate to other objects, including human ones. The epistemic project of object-oriented ontology concerns how and when such explanations are successful, and when they wrongly shade into reductionism. The militant anti-reductionism of the object-oriented ontologists is not merely epistemic though. The metaphysical task is to characterise objects such that it is a part of their being to resist complete characterisation by undermining and overmining.

Mary H. S. Cattani (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990) had a point. It is impossible to really understand the *soixante-huitard* philosophers unless you at least initially apply the formula "= (late Heidegger + some combination of Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx)."

III. Three Ontologies[15]

Harman's "A Fresh Look at *Zuhandenheit*," republished in *Towards Speculative Realism*, can be seen as the first cast of the die that would lead to the object-oriented wing of speculative realism.[16] The main idea, developed at length in *Tool-Being*, is that the standard account of Heidegger's tool analysis (presented in Section I above) contains two related mistakes. While explaining how speculative realism rose out of the ashes of phenomenology we touched on the first mistake. This was the Cartesian error of seeing the valuative, modal,

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[15] Ontologies do not *really* individuate well enough to be so cleanly counted. In particular, we consider here neither Adrian Johnston's recent speculative labours in the service of a new materialism (the view is still being developed, though see footnote 23 for citations to important work), nor the Simondonian/Deleuzian metaphysical tradition. The latter *clearly* overlaps with various currents of object-oriented philosophy in essential ways: (1) the Simondonian/Deleuzian distinction between non-individuated/virtual and individuated/actual is replicated in the capacity metaphysics approach to object-oriented philosophy, (2) John Protevi's Deleuzian explanatory mode of getting "above and below the subject" (and the object!) in Chapters I and II of *Political Affect* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) has resonances with Garcia's differential model of objects, (3) a possible regress facing Simondon and Deleuze about the role of the seed/singularity with respect to individuation has similarities with a general issue about causation raised by Harman (albeit, biting the bullet with respect to the regress would arguably involve rejecting process ontology, and hence rejecting a central part of the Simondon/Deleuze project). For a preliminary discussion of this latter point, tying it to Harman's work, see Jon Cogburn, "Review of *Gilbert Simondon: Being and Technology*, by Arne De Boever, Alex Murray, Jon Roffe, and Ashley Woodward, eds. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012)," *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, (2014), 07/28, n.pag., as well as Jon Cogburn and Graham Bounds, "Vicarious Causation as Generalized Affection," in preparation. For a sustained discussion of Harman's philosophy in light of Simondon's, see Miguel Penas López's essay in this volume.

[16] Dialectical and temporal progress sometimes diverge. Note that Harman's "A Fresh Look at *Zuhandenheit*" was written in 1999 while speculative realism did not exist until 2007! Still, the authors of this paper are not alone in having been first moved by the fervour around Meillassoux's critique of correlationism and then experiencing Harman's radical reading of Heidegger as the decisive next step. Graham Harman, "A Fresh Look at *Zuhandenheit*" in *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Washington: Zero Books, 2010), 44–66.

relational world as somehow constituted by human beings. Harman shows how, in the context of Heidegger scholarship, this has often been articulated by taking Heidegger's pragmatist anti-representationalism as exhausting the entirety of the tool analysis.

For Heidegger, humans have a prelinguistic[17] understanding of the valuative, modal, and relational properties of objects which is actually grounded in our ability to appreciate the appropriate and inappropriate uses of objects. Then, for the Heideggerian philosopher of mind and language, linguistic and conceptual understanding is parasitic on this prior understanding. This is a radical inversion of the Cartesian, representationalist philosophy of mind, and has deep and complicated ties to the sense in which objective presence is understood privatively by Heidegger.

The tendency then, among many Heidegger scholars, is to take this pragmatist philosophy of mind not to be a consequence of the tool analysis, but rather to exhaust the entirety of the tool analysis.[18] Here *Zuhandenheit*, or "readiness to

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[17] Far, far too many commentators (paradigmatically Robert Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002)), try to foist an even more radical Cartesianism on Heidegger by claiming that for Heidegger understanding cannot be prelinguistic. This is a non-starter though. It is uncharitable both since the view itself is so implausible and because it only works as Heidegger exegesis via misunderstanding the German word "*Rede.*" See Okrent, "On Layer Cakes" for a definitive rebuttal on both counts.

[18] Strangely, even though their interpretations contradict, we think that Mark Okrent, *Heidegger's Pragmatism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) has equal validity as a useful interpretation of Heidegger as does Harman's account. It seems overwhelmingly clear to us (as it does to Herman Philipse, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Being: A Critical Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998)) that Heidegger contradicts himself over and over again on these very issues, and (here we depart from Philipse) that Okrent and Harman present the two most philosophically fruitful consistifications of Heidegger's *oeuvre*. The most plausible and interesting Heidegger that experienced a great turn in thought is Okrent's. The most plausible Heidegger that articulates one great idea is Harman's. Though Okrent's Heidegger is indispensable for the philosophy of mind, at the end of the day we do agree with Harman that the pragmatism must be seen as one instance of a broader metaphysical reality.

hand," simply is the modal serviceability of objects in the world for human manipulation and *Vorhandenheit*, "objective presence," is the function of humans' thinking of such objects as abstracted from their serviceability.

Harman examines the notion of privativity in Heidegger and argues that the pragmatist analysis is radically incomplete. First, the pragmatist reading ignores the fact that human practical engagement with the world is equally privative! When I pre-linguistically understand the Tupperware container in terms of the uses to which it should be put, I am equally abstracting away from all sorts of properties of the container. Harman shows that Heidegger's discussion of "withdrawal" applies both to the way (some) practical, modal properties disappear when we intellectualise *and* to the properties that disappear when we take something as something via practical comportment.

Harman's second point, the genesis of his speculative realist break from correlationist anthropocentrism, is that there is nothing unique about human beings in this regard. Just as another human might isolate a distinct set of properties of the container from those that become manifest when I interact with it, so too would a dog, match, ray of light, and neutrino. For all of these things too, the container presents a different face, actualising different properties as others withdraw.

The key point here is that Harman is not trying to undermine Heideggerian theories of perception and understanding. His point is that the *Zuhandenheit/Vorhandenheit* reversal is not merely a model of understanding, but a model of the interaction of any two objects. In this manner one can (and should) be a non-correlationist phenomenologist.[19]

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[19] Just as correlationism only arose by forgetting the proper lessons of post-Fichtean German Idealism, contemporary phenomenology only came to mirror logical positivism's anti-metaphysical stance by forgetting the tradition of Austrian phenomenology. For a discussion, see Raphaël Millière, "Metaphysics Today and Tomorrow," trans. Mark Allan Ohm, Workshop on Contemporary Metaphysics and Ontology at the École Normale Supérieure, http://atmoc. files.wordpress.com/2012/06/milliere_metaphysics_today_and_tomorrow1. pdf (accessed January 8, 2013).

Harman's guerrilla reading of Heidegger naturally suggests a picture of objects in themselves as capacities (in *The Democracy of Objects*, called by Levi Bryant "virtual proper beings") that are actualised in causal engagement with other objects.[20] Undermining and overmining are avoided by giving a non-reductionist account of "ontological emergence," as Cogburn and Silcox do in "The Emergence of Emergence: Computability and Ontology."[21] Cogburn and Silcox characterise genuinely ontological emergence as happening when there is no algorithm for detecting instances of the properties that emerge upon an object's interactions with others.[22]

Though capacity metaphysics[23] versions of object-oriented ontology were developed in reaction to his insights into Heidegger and Bruno Latour, it is clear from Harman's recent work that he himself would reject the views of Bryant, Cogburn, and Silcox. In 2005's *Guerrilla Metaphysics* and elsewhere[24]

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[20] Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011).

[21] Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox, "The Emergence of Emergence: Computability and Ontology," *American Philosophical Quarterly* (2011), 48:1, 63–74.

[22] Though the theory presented in "The Emergence of Emergence: Computability Theory and Ontology" is motivated by Harman's *Tool-Being,* it is built on some of Cogburn and Silcox's earlier work. See Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox, "Computing Machinery and Emergence," *Minds and Machines* (2005), 15:1, 73–89, and Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox, "Computability Theory and Literary Competence," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* (2006), 46:5, 369–86.

[23] Just as we have recruited Graham Priest as a possibly unwilling speculative realist, we should note that Nancy Cartwright, *Nature's Capacities and their Measurements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) should henceforth be taken as a key departure point for the capacity metaphysics approach to object-oriented ontology. In particular, those who wish to defend the approach from a Harmanian or Garcian critique will need to avail themselves of the debates surrounding Cartwright's justly canonical text. We are encouraged and excited by Adrian Johnston's recent interventions with respect to Cartwright. See Adrian Johnston, "Second Natures in Dappled Worlds: John McDowell, Nancy Cartwright, and Hegelian-Lacanian Materialism," *Umbr(a): A Journal of the Unconscious* (2011), 71-91, and Adrian Johnston, "Points of Forced Freedom: Eleven (More) Theses on Materialism," *Speculations* (2013), 4, 91-98.

[24] Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005). See also especially essays eight and nine from *Towards Speculative Realism*, as well as the entirety of *The Quadruple Object.*

Harman presents a novel reading of Edmund Husserl just as significant as his earlier take on Heidegger. Harman begins with Husserl's insight that we do not perceive objects as mere bundles of qualities. Then, analogously to his externalisation of Heidegger, Harman goes on to argue that objects themselves are not mere bundles of qualities for each other. And for Harman these sensual objects are not something that is created merely when humans and the world interact, but when any two real objects interact. Put together with his account of Heidegger, this yields Harman's fourfold ontology, where things split across two axes into real and sensual objects and real and sensual properties.[25]

So, minimally, Harman would hold that capacity metaphysics neglects the impact that Husserl's insight has for anti-correlationists. But, in addition, Harman would likely see such approaches as instances of undermining and overmining,[26]

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[25] This is a little misleading, as Harman's sensual objects do a great deal of work with respect to the vicarious causation problematic, and this is independent of his reading of Husserl. See Jon Cogburn and Graham Bounds, "Vicarious Causation as Generalized Affection," which understands Harman's relation to the "affection argument" (with scheme-content problems one of the two engines of German Idealism) analogously to his relation with Heidegger. For Harman, an affection problem arises whenever any two objects interact, and the regress of sensual objects is the solution to this problem. So a real theoretical virtue of sensual objects is that they both answer to Husserl's worry and the generalised affection argument.

[26] This is clear from Harman's discussion of Garcia in Graham Harman, "Object-Oriented France: The Philosophy of Tristan Garcia," *continent.* (2012), 2:1, 6–21. We should note that we find this criticism to be *prima facie* compelling, and hope that it does not undermine the aspects of capacity metaphysics that we use throughout this paper (our picture of a text as an engine that creates interpretation is clearly to interpret texts as capacities). We think that the basic picture does not fall prey to Harman's critique because we have attempted to state it in a way consistent with the regressive model of causality bruited in footnote 15. To be clear though, we are not certain exactly how this all will ultimately pan out. In addition, we still have reservations about Harman's full four-fold metaphysics. One could interpret Husserl as just arguing that one directly perceives an object's *individuality*, understood as a property of the object, not a new kind of object to be distinguished from the real one. Of course if trope theory is the correct metaphysics, then the property instance ("abstract particular") might be an object of sorts, but again the object's individuality would be no different from its colour or mass in

since the virtual proper being of an object is still determined by its capacity to actualise in different ways in response to different objects. Consider his analogous comments on materialism.

> [According to the materialist, the] tiny bulk of the atom may be viewed as a substrate for unifying all of its qualities, but this very substrate is taken to be nothing more than a certain set of palpable qualities such as hardness and resistance. In other words, there is no need to regard the atom as an object at all … In this way, materialism both undermines *and* overmines objects by treating them as ultimate elements that are actually nothing but sets of qualities.[27]

One could, even without appeal to Harman's reading of Husserl, make exactly this comment with respect to capacity metaphysics generally.

Very recently, in *Form and Object*, Tristan Garcia has presented a radically novel third approach to object-oriented ontology, one which, pace Harman, actually *defines* the objectivity of an object in terms of its active resistance to undermining and overmining. For Garcia an object just is the difference between that which composes that object and that which the object composes (including relations into which the object enters).[28]

These three approaches (Bryant, Cogburn, and Silcox's capacity metaphysics, Harman's fourfold, and Garcia's differential model) are all instances of what might be called pure ontology, in that they characterise the properties of any object whatsoever. But they readily lend themselves to regional

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this respect. This being said, it is not clear to us if abstract particulars (or the property of individuality more abstractly conceived) will do the work of solving the problem of vicarious causation.

27 Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 14, original emphasis.

28 For Garcia's own take on his divergences from Harman, see Tristan Garcia, "Crossing Ways of Thinking: On Graham Harman's System and My Own," trans. Mark Allan Ohm, *Parrhesia* (2013), 16, 14-25, and Harman's response: Graham Harman, "Tristan Garcia and the Thing-in-itself," *Parrhesia* (2013), 16, 26-34.

ontology, where specific kinds of objects are characterised in terms of how the properties of the pure ontology are manifested and affected by the kinds in question.[29] After adding the category of intensity to his initial differential model, in Book II of *Form and Object*, Garcia provides uniformly illuminating regional ontologies of over a dozen such things, including time, art, value, adolescence, and death. Cogburn and Silcox actually developed their view while working on the ontologies of games. In works such as *Alien Phenomenology, Or What it is Like to be a Thing* Ian Bogost has built on his expertise with video games to develop a much finer grained regional ontology.[30] Timothy Morton has done likewise with respect to the ontology of the environment in works such as *Realist Magic*.[31]

The fecundity of object-oriented ontology for regional ontology is why there have been as of this writing dozens of conferences and meetings devoted to a wide panoply of applications, including architecture, visual arts, communication studies, technology studies, and environmental studies. All such investigations explore what a given kind of object must be like given that objects in general are as articulated by object-oriented ontology. Indeed, such is the task of this paper with respect to texts.

Some of the initial ideas concerning texts as engines to generate thought experiments were presented by Cogburn and Silcox in the paper "Against Brain-in-a-Vatism."[32] While this

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[29] There is actually an important philosophical point here. For the object-oriented ontologist, the pure ontology cannot itself overmine. As a result, regional ontology will always have a kind of autonomy.

[30] Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, Or What It Is Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

[31] Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2013). Our impression is that we owe to Morton the insight that for object-oriented ontologists all objects are both aesthetic and interpreters (a view we characterise in Section VI below), but this impression comes merely from reading various internet blogs, so we are not at all certain that it is correct.

[32] Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox, "Against Brain-in-a-Vatism: On the Value of Virtual Reality," *Philosophy & Technology* (November 2013), n.pag.

was in context of their broader project of thinking through a capacity metaphysics with respect to games, we do not think that the theory is committed to the aspects of that view that Harman would find problematic. Moreover, the fact that we are now able to directly motivate the view in terms of how textual objects actively resist their own undermining and overmining strongly suggests a provisional affinity with Garcia's metaphysics. We should note here that although we do not discuss in this paper the extent to which the mechanics of Harman's fourfold are needed for a full account of the textuality of a text, such a discussion (as well as engagement with Garcia's own writings about art and representation) will prove fruitful for the further articulation of an object-oriented literary theory.

IV. Text as Object

Until very recently nearly every literature major in the United States was subjected to a "theory" class where students worked through a text such as Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction*.[33] Assignments invariably involved writing different interpretations of random texts according to whatever hermeneutic of suspicion was being covered at the time: Freudianism, Marxism, Structuralism, Deconstructionism, etc. Now that "theory's empire" has begun a period of decline in literary study, the benefit of hindsight reveals what was lost during its ascent.

    Simply put, such approaches systematically robbed their practitioners of the ability to say anything illuminating about specific texts. This is because the central idea of theory was to mine the hermeneutics of suspicion so as to give critics general procedures to unmask "what is really going on" in any given text. But when applied to works of art the effect is too often that of wearing blue tinted glasses and then saying that everything is blue, or evidence of class struggle, the will

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[33] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction,* Anniversary Edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

to power, castration anxiety, the failure of the metaphysics of presence, phallo-logocentrism, etc. etc. etc. And what really happened is that one too often either cherry picked works that could easily be read in terms of one's hermeneutics, or one ignored everything about a work that did not validate the story. The end result is that there are no longer any textual objects, but rather just an encompassing inter-textuality equally present in Dr. Seuss and the Constitution of the United States. In the wake of such depredations, theory has largely been abandoned altogether, and textual objects are now usually reduced to their relative historical, cultural, sociological, empirical contexts, conditions of production, reception, or the correlation between the biography of the author and text à la Sainte-Beuve.

Again, there is nothing wrong with interpreting a literary text using one's favourite hermeneutics of suspicion or (post-theoretical) social science. What is wrong is identifying texts as mere vehicles for such a priori application of theory and social science. With all we have said above, it should be clear that this is the very pinnacle of overmining, and that there is a very clear sense in which the autonomy of the textual object has been attacked. When texts are overmined nothing can be learned from them, since the philosophy undergirding the critical method always already provides all of the answers. And perhaps the very pinnacle of perversity in this regard is Stanley Fish's "reader response criticism," which is the apotheosis of theory obliterating practice. If, as Fish claims, the individual artworks themselves have no meaning whatsoever, then there is no hope of anyone learning deep truths articulated in the artworks. Never in the history of thought has necessity so shamelessly been trumpeted as virtue.[34]

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[34] For an account of what is right about Fish, see the discussion in Cogburn and Silcox, "Computability Theory and Literary Competence." We should probably also mention "post-modern" literary criticism of the type associated with John Fiske. For a proper excoriation of this tendency as well as the Frankfurt School type Marxist approaches that Fiske was attacking, see Noël Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Carroll shows that both approaches uncritically rely on a very implausible neo-Kantian account of judgments of taste.

Contrast Fish's nihilism with the traditional view, coming out of nineteenth century literary realism (and naturalism), that texts (even fictional ones) represent the actual world. Whatever its other problems, this view respects the autonomy of the text at least in the sense that it respects the fact that part of why we study texts, *even fictional ones*, is to learn about the actual world. Though we do not seek to revive literary realism (or naturalism), it will be clear from what we go on to say that we do think that this is the most important test case for a hermeneutics that avoids overmining and undermining. Can one's hermeneutics make sense of the actual truth of fictional texts?

Given the discussion in the recent anthology *Theory's Empire*, one would expect to be able to appeal to the analytic philosophy of art for some kind of material support in the war against overmining, but this is certainly not so with respect to our desiderata of understanding truth in fiction.[35] That is, contemporary analytic philosophy of fiction, which (if taken to exhaust what one might say about texts) overmines just as badly as does traditional theory and contemporary post-theoretic historicism.

Prior to the mid-seventies the issue of truth from fiction was a going concern, with giants such as Monroe Beardsley and Morris Weitz proposing mechanisms by which one could infer actual truths from fictional texts. However, after Mary Sirridge critiqued these views in her canonical article "Truth from Fiction?" the issue disappeared.[36] Indeed, Sirridge's arguments make it very doubtful that use of linguistic-turn standbys such as entailment, presupposition, and meta-languages could be of even minimal help in elucidating the way a good reader might infer actual truths from fictional texts.

Since Sirridge's paper, analytic philosophers have followed continental hermeneuts of suspicion and largely given up on

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[35] Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral, eds., *Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

[36] Mary Sirridge, "Truth from Fiction?," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (1975), 35:4, 453–71.

the task of understanding truth in fiction, instead focusing on three main issues: (1) discerning a semantics for fiction that might aid metaphysical programs that take certain putatively non-fictional objects (e.g. numbers) to be ficta,[37] (2) trying to understand the extent to which we are irrational when reacting emotionally to fiction,[38] and (3) trying to discern the extent to which moral properties of artworks are relevant to their aesthetic properties.[39] These are important tasks. But for our purposes what is interesting is that, as with theory's empire, one can read thousands of pages about these debates and have no idea that actual truth in fiction ever even existed as a philosophical concern.

It is clear that a text is overmined in all three cases: (1) when (with continental aestheticians) one simply interprets it according to a priori hermeneutic principles, (2) (with post-theory historicists) one is only concerned with facets of the text's historico-cultural milieu, and (3) (with analytic aestheticians) when one only examines texts to the extent that they provide test cases for broader philosophical debates such as the three from the previous paragraph.

Undermining is a bit more complicated on this score. For nobody, as far as we know, thinks that textual meaning can be derived from the *material* composition of the texts. But then what would it be to undermine a text? In this regard, it is important to realise that undermining can happen whenever putatively intrinsic properties are put forward as providing a total explanation of an object. From this perspective we take it that the relevant textual properties are the representational ones. This is a bit confusing because representation is a relation between a medium and the represented world. However,

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[37] For a great overview of how extant theories of fiction contribute to metaphysical debates about fictionalism, see Joseph Dartez, *Ficta as Mentalia: Surveying Theories of Fiction in Search of Plausible Ontology* (Louisiana State University Electronic Thesis & Dissertation Collection, 2009).

[38] See Eva Dadlez, *What's Hecuba to Him: Fictional Events and Actual Emotions* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

[39] For the most recent word on these debates, see Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion, and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

this worry disappears once one realises that what the text represents in some sense depends solely upon the text, and is thus intrinsic. What is non-intrinsic then is whether the text's representation successfully represents the actual world.

Thus, the canonical undermining strategy with regard to a text is the view that all of the modal and valuative properties of the text can be derived from its representational purport. In analytical philosophy one might understand this purport along the lines of David Lewis, as the set of possible worlds where the text is true.[40] This is approximately fine as far as it goes.[41] The problem occurs if one thinks that such representational properties are, to use the Heideggerian term, "originary."

Two immediate problems. First, as Graham Priest convincingly both argues and shows in *Towards Non-Being: The Logic and Metaphysics of Intentionality*, fiction does not just represent non-actual but possible entities, but also impossible entities.[42] Thus, the representational purport of a text cannot be identified with a set of *possible* worlds. Second, texts do not just represent what is the case, but give us guidance concerning what ought to be the case. Unless one can explicate the normative facts being represented, it is not clear how one could derive such

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[40] David Lewis, "Truth in Fiction," *American Philosophical Quarterly* (1978), 15:1, 37–46.

[41] See Ruth Ronen, *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) for a wonderful application of Lewis's ideas to literary theory. We should note here that Lewis's own view is slightly more complicated than what we have presented above, as for Lewis the story has to also be told as true in the worlds in question. This actually causes serious problems in determining what the proper set of possible worlds is for a work where the proper understanding of the text requires recognising distance between author and narrator.

[42] Graham Priest, *Towards Non-Being: The Logic and Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). In the appendix to Chapter 6, "Sylvan's Box," Priest actually tells a story that contains a metaphysical impossibility. It is important to realise that such worries are in no way "non-mimetic," as they represent impossible states of affairs. One should note that Priest also argues that certain true contradictions are not just possible, but actual. In *Beyond the Limits of Thought*, some of these concern the limits of representation. Such cases are also clearly mimetic though, when one paradoxically represents the non-representable, one is still successfully representing.

instructions from the mere set of possible worlds consistent with the factual propositions of the text.

The deepest problem for textual undermining is in fact the one articulated by Heidegger. Representation itself is not originary, but is rather founded upon a complex set of modal and normative phenomena. In his essay on truth, reprinted in *Basic Writings*, Heidegger considers the face on a given unit of currency.[43] With such cases humans naturally possess the ability to recognise that the face represents a real human. This is fine as far as it goes, but the mistake happens when this naturalness leads us to treat representation as an ultimate explainer of normative phenomena such as truth. Again, it is fine to say with the representationalist that P is true just in case the state of affairs that P represents is actual. But Heidegger notes that then knowing that P is true will require knowing both what state of affairs P represents and knowing that this state of affairs is actual. But then the ability to determine that states of affairs are actual is in some sense prior to the ability to know that a sentence is true. This prior ability is what Heidegger tries to articulate with his theory of truth as unconcealedness.

Let us return to the representational purport of individual words. Knowing what "money" represents requires knowing the representation of "money," which requires being conversant with the proprieties regarding how money ought to be treated. So the meaning of "money" cannot be like pieces of string connecting the representation to all of the bits of money in the world, or even *all possible worlds*. Instead, we only have a word for "money" because money already has normative force in the actual world. We are only able to use the word "money" correctly because of our sensitivity to this normative force.[44]

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[43] Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008).

[44] We should note that the application of this key Heideggerian insight to representational accounts of mind and language was independently made by Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Brown and Blue Books* (Mineola: Dover Books, 1965) and Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge:

This is not a mere terminological quibble! The ideologies that support textual undermining have real world consequences, perhaps most notably with respect to legal reasoning and our approach to religious texts. For the former, note that constitutional originalists absurdly hold that the representational purport of a document written hundreds of years ago could be sufficient to adjudicate issues such as how powerful a weapon individuals should be able to purchase or what kinds of software innovations are copyrightable. Taking representation to be originary is almost always a necessary step in not realising the sense in which textual meaning is often underdetermined.[45] Contrariwise, once one realises that representation itself is founded on a background of modal proprieties, one realises that normative reality can change (minimally in the sense that radically novel kinds of objects such as video games bring new norms with them) and that as a result representational purport will not always clearly apply in novel situations.

The textual underminer is probably best represented in our culture by the biblical literalist, who is most concerned with claiming that the actual world is a member of the set of possible worlds consistent with the Bible. This is unfortunate for all sorts of reasons, mostly because biblical literalism brings with it so many other pernicious beliefs and actions. Consider literalist's beliefs with respect to the text itself. Biblical literalists typically believe that the Bible is consistent and that Moses wrote the Pentateuch and Jesus's disciples wrote the gospels. Or consider historical beliefs unrelated to the composition of the text, such as the belief that in the early Roman Empire people had to travel to areas where they did not work in order to register for a tax census. Or consider false, legalistic approaches to morality of the very type condemned by Jesus and Saint Paul. If one thinks of the Bible as a list of propositions that simply mirror the facts that make

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Harvard University Press, 1997).

[45] On this point, see Mark Wilson, "Predicate Meets Property," *The Philosophical Review* (1982), 91:4, 549–89.

them true, then one is much more likely to think of moral reality as representable by such a finite set of propositions.

The moral rot of textual undermining is actually an instance of a broader spiritual psychosis. The problem is that representations are accorded magical powers. But then believers accord magical powers to their own representations of reality. Massive weirdness results, for example people who think that the primary spiritual fact about humans is whether or not they accept a history of the world that includes the resurrection. This makes no sense; it is as if the state of one's soul depended upon whether one believes that the Gettysburg Address was delivered on a Thursday.

V. Truth in Fiction

The object-oriented ontologist is correct, and we desperately need an understanding of what texts must be like such that they resist their own undermining and overmining. Since texts are linguistic, they are clearly representational. But they are more than that. They do not just tell us what reality is like; they give us guidance. And (as we will argue) sometimes in order to guide us to a truer conception of reality the texts must misrepresent that very reality. Likewise, since texts are socio-cultural entities, they are clearly interpretable by hermeneutic strategies devised by humans. But again, they are more than that, for there are surprises in individual texts either at variance with or simply not covered by hermeneutic strategies.

If one had a good theory of the actual truth of fictional texts, then one could easily thread the Scylla and Charybdis of undermining and overmining. For since the work is fictional, its truth cannot be explained by the actual world being an element of the set of possible worlds determined by its representational purport. Since the work is true, it cannot be explained away as mere symptom of class struggle, castration anxiety, the metaphysics of presence (or the overcoming thereof), power, etc.

Breaking from the representationalist paradigm requires taking care in exactly how the problem of truth is formulated. First, we should not define truth *tout court*, because the end result of this would probably be just that the vast majority of (if not all) texts end up being simply false. Instead we will define the extent to which a text is true. Moreover, we must define this with respect to some subject matter. For example, a science fiction novel can be very true psychologically while being nonsense with respect to the laws of physics, or (as was often the case in bad 1950s science fiction) the reverse. Second, we should not (as Cogburn and Silcox do in "Against Brain-in-a-Vatism") define the truth of a text in overly representational terms. It should be *a consequence of* our definition that someone reading a true text will end up having more of the relevant kinds of linguistically assertible true beliefs. Posing the definition in terms of true beliefs would both fail to capture key ways that texts can be true, but also draw us back into a pre-Heideggerian naivety where representational media are treated as originary. So with these caveats we put forward the following:

> X is true (false) with respect to subject area Y to the extent that
> imaginatively complicit readers of X will,
> all else being equal and as a result of reading X,
> better (worse) partake in reality normative with respect to Y.

This is a mouthful. What might it mean to say that a novel is psychologically true to the extent that all else being equal one who reads it better partakes in reality normative with respect to psychology? To partake well in psychological normative reality is to be more likely to do the things involving psychological reality that one ought to do. So a novel is psychologically true to the extent that, all else being equal, reading it helps one develop virtue with respect to the things that psychology attempts to treat.[46]

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[46] Clinical psychology in general makes a hash of this, as it misconstrues the normative nature of things like "mental health." When psychologists address this issue they tend to (as in the new DSM) equate mental health

And "having true beliefs" is, albeit important, just one such virtue. Thus, while we agree with Mary Sirridge that people imaginatively complicit in *The Scarlet Letter* are more likely to arrive at the ethical and psychological insight that "unacknowledged guilt leads to perdition, whereas expiated guilt leads to salvation," we also think that the book helps a sympathetic reader's general pre-linguistic attunement to ethical reality.[47] Being non-judgmental goes far, far beyond what kind of sentences one is likely to utter and extends into every facet of one's behaviour towards others. The properly complicit reader of *The Scarlet Letter* is better attuned to reality normative with respect to how we treat people.

Now to illustrate actual falsity of fictional texts, let us consider Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*. The book is false with respect to economics, because it can only overcome a reader's imaginative resistance if she accepts that all of a modern, industrialised society's large scale infrastructure could be privately financed.

The false beliefs are not limited to possible worlds! Rand's fictional character Nathaniel Taggart is based on the actual James J. Hill, who ran the Great Northern Railway. As a result of this, fans make much of the fact that (in common with Taggart's fictional company) the Great Northern was supposedly privately financed and did not receive land grants. But this is not correct, since the Great Northern was actually the second renaming of the Minnesota and Pacific Railway, which was a public railroad formed out of massive land grants and millions of (and this is nominal!) dollars' subsidy. While Hill did privately finance the purchase of this in a fire-sale, the idea that anyone could actually build such a railroad without land grants and other public inducements is dangerous lunacy.[48]

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with the ability to function well in one's society. As if all societies nurtured health in equal amounts.

[47] See Sirridge, "Truth from Fiction?" and Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1994).

[48] I should note that there are plenty of reflective libertarian fans of Ayn Rand who do not have this economic belief. I cannot imagine Roderick

Of course, having false economic beliefs is just one way that one can be out of synch with normative reality with respect to economics. And one can be out of synch with any other layer of reality as well: moral, mathematical, historical, metaphysical, psychological, etc. But we think our examples here are enough to illuminate the definition.

In the next section we suggest a theory of how texts manage to embody the properties isolated by our truth definition. But first we must clarify two points, the second of which illustrates our ontological need. First, one might think that our definition, as well as our blithe discussion of "normative reality," completely precludes any concessions to relativism. Are we committed to a text just having one truth for everyone? No we are not. Our picture of true texts is that they are engines for helping people partake in normative reality, including developing relevant true beliefs. But this is consistent with normative reality being multi-faceted and with different people discerning different true beliefs from the same texts. Indeed, part of what makes a great work great is that it remains a productive truth engine through reinterpretations motivated by historical changes and cultural differences. The analogy we would like to suggest here is to what direct reference theorists such as Alva Noë have to say about differences in perception.[49] A dog's sense of smell is quite different from that of a boy, but this does not mean that a boy and his dog are not both directly perceiving smell properties that actually exist in the world. Likewise, if I get radically different truths from a text than from the same reader of that text thirty years ago, that does not mean that we have not both discerned truths.

Long, who himself sometimes engages in libertarian critiques of large scale infrastructure, asserting it. This kind of libertarian would note that of course one cannot be a railroad tycoon without corruptly harnessing the resources of the state with respect to funding, eminent domain, and help in co-opting and crushing labour movements, but so much the worse for railroad tycoons. We are not endorsing this train of thought (and in fact both quite like passenger rail), rather just noting this so that the above is not read as putting forward a comic-book version of contemporary libertarianism.

49 Alva Noë, *Action in Perception* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

Our second issue provides even more motivation. Suppose that Timothy Leary et. al. were right all along about LSD, and that it really does grant mystical insight into reality. Then suppose that someone has laced my copy of Justin Bieber's ghost-written memoir (published when he was 16) *First Step 2 Forever*[50] with enough of the drug that when I read it I absorb it through my fingers, I get fantastically high. After I come down I am a better person.

It might look like our definition of truth in fiction would entail that Bieber's drug laced memoir is ethically true. But this is not correct, because my ethical transformation did not come about as a result of *reading* the wretched book, which is required by the definition. But, to be fair, this just pushes the problem back. What is it about reading that allows books to have such an outsized effect on us? This then is what Sirridge's question now becomes, what is it about true (false) texts that makes it the case that reading *qua* reading better (worse) aligns us with normative reality? Without an answer to this question we are no closer to our goal than when we began.

VI. Interpretation as Thought Experiment

When skilled fiction writers such as Stephen King describe their craft, they almost invariably describe it in a strangely passive manner.[51] The process stereotypically works like this. King wakes up in the middle of the night with some very vivid scene impressing on him, and then stays up until morning trying to figure out how that scene fits into a plausible evolution. In doing this he will determine a setting and central problem. His phenomenology then is that there is a fact of the matter about how the setting will evolve in response to the problem. His primary job at this point is just to get the facts of the evolution correct. During writing he is often surprised by what his characters end up doing.

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[50] Justin Bieber, *First Step 2 Forever: My Story* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012).

[51] Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft,* Tenth Anniversary Edition (New York: Scribner, 2008).

Importantly, it is not just that the initial set-up is a gift of the muse. Plot is also something writers experience as an external object with its own autonomy. The writer's attentiveness to the muse regarding plot is attentiveness to how the set-up really would plausibly evolve, were the set-up incarnate in the actual world. A good book must first and foremost get both of these things (set-up and plot) correct. And this is our central claim concerning how texts paradigmatically put readers in accord with normative reality.

Let us return to Mary Sirridge, whose critical intervention had the unintended effect of largely killing off the debate surrounding the actual truth of fictional texts. Interestingly, Sirridge is clear at the end of the article that she does not think that the failure of linguistic turn mainstays means that fictions cannot teach us about the actual world:

> works of fiction are by no means alone in not being able to serve as direct evidence about the actual world. Cooked-up counterexamples may defeat proposed criteria meant to apply to kinds of things in the actual world. Thought experiments are often used to clarify hypotheses and to do them in. Counterfactual analysis is often used to support the corresponding positive claim. No one supposes that the "facts" adduced in these cases are genuine—in fact, they are usually so chosen that we can assume that certain things are unproblematically true, as we could not in actual life … We seem to have no satisfactory explanation of how these methods work epistemologically.[52]

In defence of the cognitive status of thought experiments, Sirridge notes that they "form one of the mainstays of philosophical thinking." Eva Dadlez follows Sirridge here,[53] persuasively arguing that if one takes thought experiments in ethics to have *any* positive epistemic weight, then one cannot gainsay the positive epistemic weight of fiction.

However, attending to writers such as King shows that the issue is considerably more general than just thought experi-

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[52] Sirridge, "Truth from Fiction?," 470-71.

[53] Dadlez, *What's Hecuba to Him.*

ments in ethics. For all thought experiments have the same structure as interpretations of fictional works. First there is a set-up, which will often involve physical impossibilities such as frictionless planes. Then the system evolves. Centrally, scientists are interested in the way in which the actual world would evolve, were the set-up incarnated, even in cases when the set-up is physically impossible in some respect.[54]

Consider, for example, the clear null-interpretation of Johannes Kepler's *Somnium*. The set-up for the experiment is a young man transported to the moon by demons. The evolution concerns what he would experience. In the evolution the young man floats slowly down to the moon's surface and must breathe through a sponge. In addition, even though the moon is orbiting the earth, from the moon he sees the earth moving across the sky. So even though the set-up was impossible (in the 1620s), the evolution of the impossible system did tell us three important things about the actual world: (1) that the moon has less gravity than earth, (2) that gravity is related to atmosphere, and (3) that people on the orbiting Earth would see the stationary sun as moving across the sky.

Here is an interesting thing. Though it is a classic thought experiment motivating the Copernican revolution, Carl Sagan and Isaac Asimov have called it the first science fiction novel. This is because, like Stephen King, most authors view novels as machines for generating thought experiments. The author

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[54] In this context we should cite Lewis's later claim that "fiction might serve as a means for the discovery of modal truth" (David Lewis, "Postscripts to 'Truth in Fiction'" in *Philosophical Papers I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 278, albeit keep in mind all of the caveats we offer in this section. Also one should consider the argument in Tobias Klauk, "Thought Experiments in Literature" in *Counterfactual Thinking/Counterfactual Writing*, ed. Dorothee Birke, Michael Butter, and Tilmann Köppe (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2011), 30-44. Klauk argues that fiction should not be explicated in terms of thought experiments, because thought experiments in science and philosophy are characterised by (a) imagining a scenario, (b) considering whether and how the scenario answers the question, and (c) using the answer to the question. But Klauk is only able to make his argument because he does not consider questions like "what is reality like?" or "how should one be?" and does not count the transformation of oneself with respect to normative reality as a possible use of the answer.

is the first interpreter, working through a set-up and, (if the novel is true), correctly describes the evolution. In writing the novel, she typically attempts to use language to create a machine that will convey this first interpretation to the reader. Of course: (1) as we will discuss below, the machine will get away from the author, yielding interpretations that she never foresaw, interpretations that may be better than the null-interpretation the author was aiming to build a machine to develop, (2) the set-up/evolution pair of an interpretation generated by a text-machine is typically recursive, containing stories inside of stories, where parts of earlier set-ups and evolutions become incorporated into contained set-ups and evolutions. *All* postmodern, and much modern, writing builds off of these two properties. The fact that in standard novels the author's intent concerning what kind of thought experiment should be generated is not decisive can lead a good author to design texts where the intent of the author is actually to produce a text-machine radically under-determined (leaving it very unclear which thought experiment should be produced) or over-determined (producing inconsistent thought experiments) with respect to the interpretations. The fact that set-up/evolution is recursive in the way at which we have gestured is part of what allows authors to produce text-machines that yield so-called "meta-fictional" interpretations, where the text should be interpreted as commenting on itself in some way.[55]

Let us also note that contra Lewis, interpretations of true fictions do not describe mere possibilia, but rather *actual* possibilia, as the plot describes the way the actual world would plausibly evolve if such a set-up were incarnate.[56] And related

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[55] The connection between recursivity, self-reflection, and paradoxes is formally complicated. It should be unproblematic that fiction is expressively rich enough to do the relevant work. For a great discussion tying these themes convincingly to recent continental philosophy, see Paul Livingston, *The Politics of Logic: Badiou, Wittgenstein, and the Consequences of Formalism* (London: Routledge, 2012). Priest's *Beyond the Limits of Thought* is also extraordinarily helpful in thinking about meta-fiction.

[56] The metaphysical task involved in differentiating mere possibility from

to this, we should note that our use of "interpretation" is liberal here. We do not mean to just note what literature professors produce when writing articles. In our theory, there is no reason to go through yet another linguistic epicycle when producing an interpretation. *Any* imaginatively complicit reader of fiction is producing an interpretation while reading, an interpretation produced via sensitivity to the (true or false) window into counterfactual reality produced for her by the text-machine. This happens even if she is completely lost to herself while reading. Perhaps she can later articulate, expand, and alter the interpretation while discussing the novel with friends. But the text-machine generates interpretations (again, these are merely recursively nested set-up/evolution pairs) for anyone reading it, even if that person is constitutively unable to talk about the text.[57]

So here we have a general ontology of stories, which are machines producing recursively nested set-up/evolution pairs, the proper teleology of which is to get people in accord with some aspect of normative reality. The proper interpretations of many such stories, in science and literature, have set-ups that are impossible in some respect. But in discerning facts about how the actual world would plausibly evolve if that impossibility were incarnate we align ourselves with normative reality. In science this alignment is usually constituted by the ability to better design and predict the evolution of closed environments. In life, the abilities paradigmatically involve the extent to which we are able to craft worthwhile lives.

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actual possibility is horrendous. See Laura Schroeter, "Two-Dimensional Semantics" in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2012 Edition), http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/two-dimensional-semantics/ (accessed January 13, 2014). We should also note that much more philosophy of science is needed to account for the objectivity of our judgments concerning whether a plot really does describe the way the world would evolve or not. We do not think that these reduce to mere intuitions, as with the way one might think of an ethical thought experiment.

[57] These abilities do come apart in certain types of aphasia, where people cannot talk but can still read and via behaviour it is clear that they understand what has been read. A surprising amount of philosophy and aesthetics cannot accommodate even the *possible* existence of such people.

Let us not make too much of these differences though. There is no *metaphysical* difference in kind between a physics textbook and a novel. Both allow readers to grasp, within margins of error, how the actual world would evolve after set-ups that are often impossible. This being said, there are obviously other differences between the two, most notably the norms involving form and content, or rather the connection between those formal properties of the text relevant to a given interpretation (and by "content" we mean to solely reference our understanding of interpretation) and those formal properties that are so relevant. In physics, the connection is treated much more loosely in the sense that two different accounts of the same thought experiment might be expressed in radically different ways. In literature, (for reasons articulated by Nelson Goodman in a discussion of plagiarism and also earlier by Cleanth Brooks) this is not possible.[58] We read literature with openness to the idea that what now seems contingently formal might in fact play a key role in articulating the content of the work according to some other interpretation. With poetry, form and content are even more inseparable. Mathematics is a weird hybrid of natural science and poetry. The basic descriptions of the mathematical structures themselves are treated like natural science descriptions, where form and content are loosely related. But with respect to proofs establishing properties of those structures, form is highly relevant to questions of individuation. Philosophy is, perhaps, even weirder in the norms employed with regard to separating form from content. In philosophy we typically take our own intuitions concerning abstract matters to be guided merely by content. But recent experimental philosophy has shown that this is not typically the case. Differences in wording can produce radically different intuitions about basic issues in ethics such as whether one can believe an act to be right without being motivated to do that act.[59]

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[58] Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1947); Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976).

[59] See, for example, Derek Leben, "Cognitive Neuroscience and Moral

Much more needs to be said on this issue, and doing so will, we think, show not only what is unique about fiction *qua* fiction, but also provide the ground for arguing that fictional narrative is the originary concept, with other types only arrived at by operating on the norms in various respects involving the relations to formal properties of the text and the content summoned in interpretation. For example, consider how one might also argue that a norm constitutive of reading a text as fiction is that the circumstances of its production can be relevant to its proper interpretation.[60] To the extent that this is plausible for fiction, one might be able to see its falsehood for other literary genres as a consequence of the reading norms involving the relation between form and content (or rather content relevant form and content irrelevant form). For one can only translate a physics thought experiment into a radically different form without loss of content if the circumstances in which the physics thought experiment were thought up are taken to be irrelevant.

Much clearer examples can be given with respect to scientific modelling; it is usually very clear which properties of physical models are content irrelevant. Say that I build the planets in my model out of styrofoam when, for the purposes of providing the relevant window into counterfactual reality, I would have lost nothing by using rubber balls. If there is anything to Nelson Goodman and Cleanth Brooks's canonical arguments, they show that part of what is distinctive about aesthetic objects (and this holds when, as the object-oriented philosopher takes to be fundamental, one looks at the natural world itself from an aesthetic point of view) is

Decision-Making," *Neuroethics* (2011), 4, 163-74. For an extended and provocative meditation on the relation between style and content, see Harman's *Weird Realism.*

[60] Our departure from the New Critics on "the intentional fallacy" might render our view more Garcian than Harmanian, though the emphasis on texts as machines that generate interpretations has the most in common with the capacity metaphysics view. Again, we do not think that this implicates it in the problems for capacity metaphysics that Harman isolates, but of course we might be mistaken here. In this context we would love to see how a fourfold hermeneutics differs from our own.

that such distinctions are always provisional. With respect to some interpretation, using rubber rather than styrofoam makes all the difference in the world. But this interpretation too will neglect some formal features as irrelevant. For the object-oriented ontologist who follows Harman's reading of Heidegger, reality just is inexhaustible in this very way, the way that Goodman articulates with respect to paintings.

Let us restate this with an exclamation point. For an object-oriented philosopher, the property of aesthetic objects isolated by Goodman and Brooks is in general a property of all objects! The Husserlian "scientific world-view" involves pretending that this is not the case in order to better predict things. And this is why for the object-oriented philosopher, as opposed to the naturalist underminer, one can say that fictions are engines that generate recursively structured set-up/evolutions, and that physics is a species of fiction.

But objects in and of themselves are aesthetic. And even in physics this has to be allowed for. As Mark Steiner has shown with respect to mathematical parts of modelling, what seemed to be contingently formal at one time can end up years later being shown to have empirical import.[61] For physics to do what it does, one must be able to relax the regulative ideal that nature herself separates the content relevant and content irrelevant form of objects. These are separated in acts of interpretation that objects engender whenever they interact with one another, acts which never exhaust the reality of the interpreted objects.

VII. Objections and Explications

Here we want to consider three possible objections as a way to be clearer both about what we have said as well as how one might further develop the view. First, what we have described in terms of set-up and evolution might seem only to describe

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[61] Mark Steiner, *The Applicability of Mathematics as Philosophical Problem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

very conventional, mimetic literature. [62] In particular, while we have allowed impossible set-ups, our doctrine that true fictions yield correct interpretations that get the evolution correct (in the sense of describing what the actual world would do were the set-up incarnate) seems to entail that novels which yield interpretations with improbable and impossible evolutions are one and all false. But, do not many books succeed precisely because they flaunt these? At one end, books such as Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*,[63] a good narrative can evolve in implausible ways. At the other end lay much experimental fiction.

This is not actually correct though. First, our definition of the actual truth and falsity of fictional texts only concerns truth or falsity with respect to some subject matter. So a physically false interpretation might nonetheless be psychologically true, and even *in virtue of* the fact that the evolution of the text is physically impossible. Second, actual reality is improbable and true fiction must teach this. For a quotidian example, note the incredibly low prior probability of the exact performance of a set of one hundred coins that you just tossed. For less quotidian examples, note that if Graham Priest is correct, then the actual world is in fact logically contradictory. In this respect, remember that the recursive nature of the set-up/evolution pair entails that part of the evolution can be set-up for new evolution. This not only allows meta-fiction, but makes sense of the full draw of writers such as Lovecraft. Lovecraft does

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[62] We thank the reviewers of *Speculations* for this objection as well as some of the examples we use. For a great discussion of how the unnatural *does* place constraints on theories of fiction, see Jan Alber, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson, "Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology: Beyond Mimetic Models," *Narrative* (2010), 18:2, 113-36. The article focuses on three sources of the unnatural: storyworlds, minds, and acts of narration. It would take us too far afield here to consider each of these in depth, but we think enough is said above to show how our theory of fictions (as machines that generate recursively stacked set-up/evolutions with the teleology of bringing the reader into alignment with normative reality) can explain the mechanisms at work in the texts discussed in the article.

[63] Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

not only create a text which is an engine for interpretations that grant us sensitivity to what would actually happen were an impossible set-up incarnate. When you read Lovecraft in the dark of night you also wonder if anything like those set-ups are actual. Maybe reality itself contains horrifyingly indescribable things that are impossible with respect to any human conceptual scheme. In this sense, the best fantastical writing forces us to be deeper two-dimensionalists about the set-up itself, not just what would actually follow.

That is, one would only think that the holdovers from mimeticism in our theory tell against unnatural fiction to the extent that one is a naturalist about reality. But we think that unnatural fiction truly teaches that reality itself is not natural.

Surely there will be a remainder of fiction that does not fit well with our theory. To address this, let us define a technical term here, "Carrollism,"[64] which construes philosophies of art as in the business of providing necessary and sufficient conditions, and then uses experimental art to argue against all such purported philosophies. This is a mug's game though, just because artists are so good at self-consciously creating art that counter-exemplifies philosophical definitions. And there is no reason for philosophers to play along. Instead of providing necessary and sufficient conditions for various concepts, the philosopher of art should rather be providing relevant genetically necessary conditions for the practices in question. For example, instead of trying to ascertain the extent to which cruelty works in the definition of "humour," we should see if the practice of humour would be possible in a world without cruelty. Our claim is analogous with respect to fiction. A world without textual machines that produce reader sensitivity to recursively nested set-up/evolution pairs would be a world without fiction.

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[64] See Noël Carroll, *Philosophy of Art* (London: Routledge 1999) for a book structured around this very conceit. It is still an excellent book though, because Carroll only plays the game with respect to trying to define "art," and half of the book himself making sense of the relevant concepts (form, representation, etc.) independently of the definition of art.

This does not mean that everything we call "fiction" automatically must fit our theory. However, to the extent that an aesthetic theory is complete, it must be the case that the genetically necessary conditions for the practice are such that anything that does not satisfy the conditions and is also an instance of the *explanandum* (e.g. experimental fiction that does not do what we have alleged) is parasitic on work that does. So, for example, while mimeticism is not necessary for artistic painting, non-mimetic paintings must be understood parasitically with respect to mimetic ones, and in fact could not exist as an autonomous practice. That is non-mimetic painting must best be thought either as really mimetic (as most abstract expressionists actually described their work) or in some sense making a comment upon a tradition founded in mimetic art.[65]

A second criticism is that our focus on thought experiments leads to a narrowly scientistic view. If all that matters with respect to truth or falsity in a certain respect is that the actual world really would evolve in that respect were the set-up manifest, then is not this just to view truth or falsity in terms of the scientific virtue of predictive value? We do not think that this is the case. Intuition pumps in ethics, and philosophy general, do work as narratives in the way we have suggested. However, there is something correct about the worry. Interpretations can be morally true only to the extent that they are affectively engaging, and it should be clear that a theory of what makes a text affectively engaging will have to use resources far beyond those marshalled by us thus far with respect to a text's correct interpretation. And, moreover, having the correct affective states in certain contexts is a paradigm way that we are in accord with normative reality. So one would need to say much more about how thought experiments achieve this. This leads to our third criticism.

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[65] One of Danto's most powerful late period essays (Arthur Danto, "Art and Meaning" in *Theories of Art Today*, ed. Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000)) makes a surprisingly powerful independent argument for this claim with respect to all art.

Finally, we have said nothing at all about the tropes via which literature does much of its work (e.g. allegory, antanaclasis, irony, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche) nor about narrative voice in itself or as opposed to other voicings relevant to the text.

We agree that this would be a problem if anything we have said undermines good theories about how these tropes work. We do not think that this is the case. But this is not enough, one's basic theory of actual truth of fictional texts and ontology of fiction should in addition shed lights on these very tropes. In this respect, we confess a kind of Simondonian[66] hope here. Just as Gilbert Simondon modelled physical, vital, psychic, and collective objects in terms of various types of individuating processes, our intuition is that characteristic modes of treating content relevant and content irrelevant form is involved in all of these tropes. For example, for metaphor to work, the connection of a predicate to a subject must be understood to be *both* irrelevant (human beings are not firecrackers) and essential. One must prize apart form and content in distinct ways in the same interpretation so that the sentence is both false and true.

A less speculative example might be from narratology, where different takes on narrators reliably yield different interpretations in exactly the sense we mean. One who wrongly (albeit at the author's later drunken insistence) identifies the narrator and author of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* is likely to read the book as a how-to manual for beatnik kicks. But once one realises that the book was the sixth time he had rewritten the material and that it was exhaustively rewritten multiple times, one starts to see how much distance there is between narrator and author. And once one realises how fallible the narrator is in every respect then the novel is far more satirical and much sadder. These different interpretations are non-linguistically experienced by most fair minded readers of the text, the

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[66] For an excellent overview, see Arne De Boever, Alex Murray, Jon Roffe, and Ashley Woodward, eds., *Gilbert Simondon: Being and Technology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

first when the book is read in high school, the second when returned to decades later. People who read it decades later and do not separate narrator from author are likely to see the book as simply obnoxious. While these different interpretations are experienced viscerally while reading the text, they can all be made explicit in terms of the thought experiment machinery of recursively nested set-up/evolutions. Of course the explications themselves will involve affectively weighted language (e.g. "then Dean Moriarity once again showed how pathologically selfish he is by. . ."). But only a philosophical naturalist would take anything we have said to preclude this.

The furthest end of our Simondonian hope would be to characterise different stances towards the narrator entirely in terms of how the reader differentiates content relevant form from content irrelevant form. But we must add a caveat; we do *not* think that one could do this entirely in terms of formal properties of a text. This would fail for the same reasons Sirridge showed traditional approaches to the actual truth of fictional texts failed. Moreover, one cannot even begin to characterise the formal content of a text without *already having* begun to attribute content to it. This is similar to the way that formal properties of paintings are partly a result of what is depicted, for example in the unpainted lines of sight of the people or animals in the picture. This too is another way that form and content do not clearly separate with respect to aesthetic objects.[67]

VIII. Necessary Fictions

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* contains a discussion of *The Gospel from Outer Space*, written by fictitious author Kilgore Trout:

> The flaw in the Christ stories, said the visitor from outer space, was that Christ, who didn't look like much, was actually the Son of the Most

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[67] McDowell's *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996) is to some extent an extended meditation on just this problematic, which (as noted earlier) was one of the engines moving forward German Idealism.

Powerful Being in the Universe. Readers understood that, so, when they came to the crucifixion, they naturally thought, and Rosewater read out loud again:

Oh, boy—they sure picked the wrong guy to lynch that time!

And that thought had a brother: "There are right people to lynch." Who? People not well connected. So it goes.[68]

While this is certainly right as part of an explanation for why Christians have often been so horribly cruel to one another and to non-Christians, it is not clear to us that the space alien really gets the new Gospel correct.

The visitor from outer space made a gift to Earth of a new Gospel. In it, Jesus really was a nobody, and a pain in the neck to a lot of people with better connections than he had. He still got to say all the lovely and puzzling things he said in the other Gospels.

So the people amused themselves one day by nailing him to a cross and planting the cross in the ground. There couldn't possibly be any repercussions, the lynchers thought.

The reader would have to think that, too, since the new Gospel hammered home again and again what a nobody Jesus was.

And then, just before the nobody died, the heavens opened up, and there was thunder and lightning. The voice of God came crashing down. He told the people that he was adopting the bum as his son giving him the full powers and privileges of The Son of the Creator of the Universe throughout all eternity. God said this: From this moment on, He will punish horribly anybody who torments a bum who has no connections![69]

By our account there is some truth to the space alien's interpretation, as one who shares it is all else being equal more likely to treat bums who have no connections better. But we think not as true as the correct interpretation of the gospel stories. For one whose kindness is based in fear of horrible punishment is not as in accord with normative reality as much as one whose kindness is not so grounded.

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[68] Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five* (New York: Dial Press, 1999), 94.

[69] Ibid., 94-95.

In this context, consider Reinhold Niehbur's favourite Bible passage, Ephesians 4:32: "And be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you."[70] To Niehbur, all of the Bible leads a reader to be in accord with the norm expressed in this one sentence. But, pace Vonnegut's space alien gospel, how might this work in the actual Bible?

Following others, we interpret it this way.[71] There is initially an impossible set-up, a real creature somehow creating reality. This creature, despite all appearances to the contrary, assures us that her kingdom is coming, a kingdom just as impossible, where the suffering of innocents is somehow redeemed. Then there is an evolution. A central trope of the story is that this impossible being has no idea how to respond to the wickedness of her creation, for example actually acting surprised when witnessing the aftermath of the first murder. By her understanding of humans, the best thing one could hope for would be for one's offspring to thrive, and she promises this over and over again to various people. But most of her interventions leave things even more messed up than before, and after throwing a temper tantrum at the much suffering Job, she decides it is better to largely leave us to our own devices. But then she does just one more thing, sending a son who tells us things that we do not want to hear and acts in ways at variance with the political and religious powers of the time, and so we torture and kill him. Then, even though this impossible being possesses the power to destroy us, and even though it is clear that she regards the wellbeing of one's offspring as among the greatest goods, she does not get revenge for what we have done to her offspring. In fact her son successfully petitions for our forgiveness from the very instrument of

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[70] Justin R. Hawkins, "Reinhold Niehbur's One Scripture Passage," *Fare Forward: A Christian Review of Ideas* (2013), http://www.patheos.com/blogs/fareforward/2013/03/reinhold-niebuhrs-one-scripture-passage/(accessed September 24, 2013).

[71] Our reading of the Old Testament is from Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (New York: Vintage, 1996).

his torture. This is of a piece with the very messages that got him killed in the first place.

One might argue that a fiction correctly interpreted in this manner is not only true, but also necessary. Necessary in two respects. First, the transcendent nature of God and the kingdom of heaven might be such that it is disastrously misleading to think that we could talk about either except as impossible beings. To think that one can have any inkling of how this could be the best possible world, or for that matter even a minimally acceptable one, is to warp one's soul. Voltaire's *Candide* was right about this, and as a result the kingdom of heaven must be approached as an impossibility for which one nonetheless hopes.[72] While the impossibility of the set-up might thus be necessitated by great mystery, we hope that we have said enough to dispel any deep mystery about how we achieve a description of it. Frictionless planes and point masses are likewise impossible entities, but nonetheless unavoidable.

This points to the second way in which one might take religious texts to be necessary fictions, not the sense in which God and the kingdom of heaven are necessarily fictional, but in the sense that they are also indispensable for the Bible to be true. Imagine if one were to do to the whole Bible what Thomas Jefferson attempted with the Gospels, assiduously removing all mention of the impossible. Call this the Jefferson Bible. Would such a book be just as true as the text that involved impossible set-ups? In logic we might express this question by asking whether the Bible we have is a conservative extension of our imagined Jefferson Bible. We would like to argue that it is not.

In the standard Bible, God is presented as deserving the highest praise and also powerful enough to create and destroy worlds. Then humans do to her the worst thing one can do to someone. They kill her child. Yet she does not destroy the world, but rather forgives humanity.

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[72] Voltaire, *Candide*, trans. François-Marie Arouet (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1991).

If this is a true story it is because reading it in the Bible brings one more into conformity with the normative reality expressed in Ephesians 4:32. It, combined with worship of the very God the Bible attempts to describe, will lead the person to be forgiving and more hopeful.

We are *not* saying that only Christians are forgiving and hopeful. Rather, we are merely noting that if the Jefferson Bible is not as good as the actual Bible at engendering forgiveness and hope, then the Jefferson Bible is not as morally true as the actual one. The Bible's God is very much like a frictionless plane in that her power and praiseworthiness are taken to be infinite limits of qualities (such as relative smoothness in the case of friction) that we do perceive. To say that such a being herself responds with forgiveness to the worst offense one can commit is to affirm in the strongest possible manner the praiseworthiness of forgiveness and love.

This kind of thing is, we suspect, a core facet of all good fiction. Could a non-fictional book be just as psychologically, anthropologically, and ethically true as *Huckleberry Finn*? If not, then the fiction is necessary in exactly the way we have suggested the Bible might be.

There is a final sense in which one might argue fictions to be necessary.[73] If we return to the kind of pragmatist account of understanding that Okrent gets from Heidegger, then we see that the essential thought is that thinking is grounded in a certain sort of behavioural sensitivity to normative counterfactual facets of reality, facets concerning what ought to be the case if something were actually to be.

Consider Heidegger's hammer. Grasping the hammer requires not representing it in some Cartesian medium, but rather an understanding of its appropriate uses, which (according to Okrent) does not require language. However, this behavioural sensitivity will involve different things one *could* do with the hammer that one has not actually done. And with our account of true fictions, a true narrative is one that correctly limns the counterfactual facts about the actual world. This is

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[73] We would like to thank Ridvan Askin for pushing us on this point.

consistent with Harman's guerrilla Heidegger, because the nail and neutrino also have their own interpretations of the Hammer, which is itself an inexhaustible reservoir of being.

But note that counterfactuals are already in a sense fictional since they concern states of affairs that are not actual. Many true stories about what the actually existing hammer would do involve states of affairs that will never actually come to be and new future objects that will never exist. It is true that one could use this hammer to build a birdhouse that one never does actually build.

Thus, if Okrent's Heidegger is correct (again, interpreted as one instance of the broader theory of being Harman finds), then fictions are necessary in a more originary sense than what we have claimed with respect to Mark Twain. The good writer's ability to discern what would really happen were some set-up incarnate is just a development of an ability that is fundamental to all cognition. Non-fictional, true propositions only get their content because the concepts involved can occur in true fictions. But then fictions themselves are genetically necessary in the very strongest sense. One could not have non-fiction without also having fiction.[74]