

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: The Objects Within: An Applied OOO Literary Criticism

Abstract approved:

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For centuries, continental philosophy has clung to the belief that the world only meaningfully exists through human perception—that, in other words, when a tree falls in the forest, it does *not* make a sound. Literary theory, which has strong roots in continental philosophy, followed suit, remaining tied to humanism even as philosophy has begun its “posthuman turn” to admitting nonhuman actants into philosophic consideration. This thesis attempts to reconcile literary criticism with the posthuman turn, considering nonhuman objects at work in literary texts and demonstrating the ways that those objects can reflect back to us the limits of our own subjectivity, and in the process can open up new ways of ethical being-in-the-world.

In particular, I take up a variety of posthumanist theories, including speculative realism (Quentin Meillassoux), object-oriented ontology (Graham Harman, Timothy Morton, and Ian Bogost), vibrant materialism (Jane Bennett), and actor-network theory (Bruno Latour), all of which reject the notion that the world only exists as it is perceived by humans, instead insisting that, though we as humans can never objectively know what the world is like outside of our perception, this

does not mean that we cannot speculate about this very real world. I apply these theories to a selection of literary texts, each of which demonstrates that, though the field of posthuman philosophy is relatively new, literature has been post-humanist for decades and nonhuman objects have long played important roles in literature.

In Chapter 1, I explain how the modernist poetry of William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens prefigures object-oriented ontology's assertion that objects exist outside of human perception. In Chapter 2, I examine Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Bluebeard* and Joel and Ethan Coen's film *Burn After Reading* to show examples of moments when human perception fails to grasp the real nature of nonhuman objects, just as Harman writes that objects withhold their reality from our perceptions of them. And in Chapter 3, I present what is, in my opinion, the most important aspect of my project: I argue that by allowing readers to project themselves into the subjective experience of nonhuman characters, literary works like Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Crossing*, and less traditional forms of literature like the videogames *Portal*, *Shelter*, and *Flower*, can teach us the limits of our own subjectivity, reminding us that we are not, as enlightenment idealists would have it, *the measure of all things*, but rather just a few entities among many, all of us enmeshed in the same network of being.

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THE OBJECTS WITHIN: AN APPLIED OOO LITERARY CRITICISM

by

Matthew J. Dodson

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Arts

Presented May 14, 2014
Commencement June 2014

Master of Arts thesis of Matthew J. Dodson presented on May 14, 2014.

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Matthew J. Dodson, Author

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank my thesis committee: Flo Leibowitz and Neil Davison, for being such enthusiastic and willing readers though my thesis is slightly outside of your specializations, and especially to Evan Gottlieb and Ray Malewitz, without whose gentle nudges toward posthumanism this project would not have been possible. Thanks for pointing me in a direction and setting me loose to explore such an exciting field and for the wonderfully helpful feedback throughout the process.

I'd also like to thank my incredible graduate colleagues and friends here at OSU, whose support and encouragement stands out so starkly against the horror stories I've heard about vicious, cutthroat graduate programs at other schools. Special thanks (in no particular order) to Jesse Johnson, Kaely Horton, Amelia England, Clare Braun, Nazifa Islam, Sean Crouch, Adam Michaud, Bill Fech, Dahlia Seroussi, Becca Schneider, Sierra Laverty... this list could go on for so long if I listed everyone's name, so I will stop here. Just know that *all* of you helped to make this a wonderful experience for me, and I thank you for that!

Thanks also to my family—Mom, Dad, Abby, Emily, Aunt Nancy and Uncle Charles, Harrison and Candy, and all of the Rolands and Dodsons—who encouraged me to follow my passions for books and mountains out here, 2,349 miles away, to Oregon to pursue a master's degree in literature. Thank you for always being there for me, and know that I love you all very, very much!

And thanks to Graham Harman, Timothy Morton, Ian Bogost, Jane Bennett, Cary Wolfe, and all the other posthumanists and object-oriented ontologists and

vibrant materialists whose work has inspired and provided the foundation for this thesis. It was much easier to motivate myself to work on this project knowing how vibrant, ongoing, exciting, accessible, and unpretentious your work remains, despite its increasing academic profile. I look forward to keeping up with and participating in this field's development.

Finally, thanks to all my friends and mentors from Belmont, without whom I would not be here at OSU today: Kenny, Ben, Kate, Cait, Ally, Kdub, Andrew, Nathan, Jill, and Jesse; and Dr. Trout, Dr. John, Dr. Cox, and Dr. Paine.

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INTRODUCTION – LITERARY CRITICISM AND THE PROBLEMS OF HUMANISM

Literature is a humanism. For centuries, literary critics have accepted this as fact; most universities still house Literary Studies in Humanities departments, grouping them alongside philosophy and other human-centered disciplines, and for the most part, this is a natural fit—after all, literature is built from language, and language is an inherently anthropogenic and anthropocentric institution. Literary criticism has followed suit in all of its iterations, each new theory dealing with a new set of human issues: psychoanalysis with the faults of human consciousness; Marxism with the problems of human greed; new historicism with human culture and history; and deconstruction with the empty self-reference of human language. It is no wonder that literature has felt itself at home in the Humanities, since each of these brands of criticism calls into question our typical notions of what it means to be human.

But while literary critics have consistently challenged our assumptions about what it means to be human, they seem to have taken for granted what it means to be *humanist*. They have assumed that to be humanist is to affirm that the world only meaningfully exists through human discourse, or that human concerns are all that matter when reading a work of literature. But this position stands in stark contrast

to the one put forth by John Dewey and the other members of the American Humanist Society in their 1933 “Humanist Manifesto.” According to the manifesto, “Humanism believes that man is a part of nature and that he has emerged as a result of a continuous process” and further “Humanism recognizes that man’s religious culture and civilization, as clearly depicted by anthropology and history, are the product of a gradual development due to his interaction with his natural environment.”¹ In contrast with literary theory, which places all of its focus on human concerns, the American Humanist Association (AHA), as early as 1933, acknowledged that there is more to the world than human discourse, that the “natural environment” plays a role in shaping culture alongside discourse, power, economy, religion, and so forth. The humanism put forth by literary criticism, then, has strayed far from its secular-humanist ties to the AHA, if it was ever influenced by the association at all. There are multiple definitions of humanism at work here, and the humanism on which literary criticism is founded focuses much more exclusively on humans than the humanism of the AHA, which admits that natural environment plays a role in the world as well.

In the eight decades of scientific and technological development that have followed the publication of the “Humanist Manifesto,” we have gradually come to understand that nonhuman things matter far more than Dewey and the other American Humanists even imagined. Today, we are constantly confronted with new stories about melting ice-caps, super-flu viruses, the northward creep of malaria,

¹ “Humanist Manifesto I.”

pine bark beetles, and so many other things over which human discourse has no control. Granted, some of these things have been assisted in their activity by human waste and greed, but to assert that pine bark beetles only meaningfully exist as they are perceived by humans is to ignore the havoc they are wreaking on the pine tree populations of the Colorado Front Range, where dead forests fall into heaps of tinder which the slightest spark, in the dry prairie wind, will ignite into a massive forest fire with little warning. Similarly, we have come to realize that we know far less than we thought about what it means to be human in the first place, since biotechnology and genomic sequencing has allowed us to realize that, as Donna Haraway puts it,

human genomes can be found in only about 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such, some of which play in a symphony necessary to my being alive at all, and some of which are hitching a ride and doing the rest of me, of us, no harm.²

Or in other words, “To be one is always to *become with* many.”³ Not only do nonhuman things play a role in shaping culture, but they also play a role in shaping each and every one of us creatures formerly known as “human.” In light of these

² Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 3-4.

³ *Ibid*, 4.

developments, it seems not only foolish but hazardous to remain in the trenches of humanism.

Thankfully, some scholars in Humanities fields have begun working to rectify this oversight. In particular, philosophy has recently begun to recover from its linguistic turn to consider nonhuman elements. Just as the linguistic turn destabilized our understanding of language at work in society, so the “posthuman turn” attempts to destabilize our understanding of ourselves as humans in relation to the rest of the world. And while there are countless variations on philosophies *beyond the human*, they are all grouped loosely under the umbrella of posthumanism. As Rosi Braidotti describes it, posthumanism

introduces a qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet. This issue raises serious questions as to the very structures of our shared identity—as humans—amidst the complexity of contemporary science, politics and international relations. Discourses and representations of the non-human, the inhuman, the anti-human, the inhumane and the posthuman proliferate and overlap in our globalized, technologically-mediated societies.⁴

⁴ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 1-2.

For some posthumanists, particularly those in the sub-field of transhumanism, to move beyond the human is to develop technologies that allow humans to transcend the limits of their own subjectivity, with the ultimate goal being immortality. This is not the posthumanism I am concerned with here. Rather, I am concerned with the posthumanism developed by Cary Wolfe, among others, which seeks not to advance humans to a new height of power, but rather to rethink what it means to be a human subject in a nonhuman world. It is not *posthuman*-ism—that is, a move beyond the limits of humanity—but *post-humanism*, a reaction against the Enlightenment notion that the world exists as it is mediated by human perception.

But as I just noted, posthumanism only reacts against one very small part of humanism, and not the entire field. While it certainly rejects the reduction of reality to perception characteristic of so many post-Kantian philosophers, to imply that there is nothing more to humanism than this is to ignore the positive aspects of many other tenants of humanism. Despite the good it has done in the past, Wolfe argues that we need to move beyond the limits of humanism if we are to admit nonhuman things into our philosophical consideration. As he puts it,

even if we admire humanism's suspicion toward "revelation and religious authority" ... and even if we take the additional posthumanist step of rejecting the various anthropological, political, and scientific dogmas of the human that Foucault insists are in tension with Enlightenment per se, we must take

yet another step, another post-, and realize that the nature of thought itself must change if it is to be posthumanist.⁵

In other words, posthumanism need not be a wholesale rejection of humanism, but rather an effort to “rethink our taken-for-granted modes of human experience... by recontextualizing them in terms of the entire sensorium of other living beings and their own autopoietic ways of ‘bringing forth a world.’”⁶ While it still takes up humans as its main field of study, this sort of posthumanism at last considers the nonhuman things that have been so long ignored by the rest of the Humanities fields.

Even as philosophy adapts to the posthuman condition, literary criticism remains just as mired in the trenches of anthropocentrism. New Historicism still reigns in many literature departments as the supreme mode of interpretation, relegating literature to its human cultural context, and where that is not the case, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, and new criticism step in to fill the gap. What I aim to do in this thesis is to propose a new way of thinking about literature that considers nonhuman elements as they are depicted within the texts and in the process teaches us more about ourselves as humans, our abilities and limitations, and the ways our culture interacts with the myriad nonhuman things with which we share the world. My goals align with Wolfe’s, and more specifically with Braidotti’s assertion that

⁵ Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, xvi.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xxv.

we need to devise new social, ethical, and discursive schemes of subject formation to match the profound transformations we are undergoing. That means that we need to learn to think differently about ourselves.... The posthuman condition urges us to think critically and creatively about who and what we are actually in the process of becoming.⁷

By examining nonhuman things at work within literary texts, we can come to acknowledge that humanity is not—as Protagoras and a slew of contemporary literary critics would have it—the measure of all things, but rather just another thing among many others, none of which fully determines the value, importance, or existence of any other things. The posthuman turn in literary criticism means a decentering of literary criticism from ourselves and a problematization of the ways that literature depicts human subjectivity and being-in-the-world.

While I have just called my methodology new, this is perhaps misleading. As I will argue throughout this project, literature has long been considering nonhuman things as meaningful apart from human perception, even decades before the posthuman turn in philosophy. Take, for example, the poetry of Robinson Jeffers, whose influential anti-modernist career spanned from the publication of his first collection, *Flagons and Apples*, in 1912, to his death in 1962. Today, Jeffers is read mostly by regional scholars interested in Western literature, largely due to his radical political stance and the New Critics' refusal to take up his work in the

⁷ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 12.

academy. But at the height of his career, Jeffers was influential enough to grace the cover of *Time Magazine* in 1932, and his adaptation of *Medea* was a fantastic commercial success in its 1947 Broadway run. A contemporary of Eliot and Pound, Jeffers rejected the aloof and academic nature of high-modernism for an earthier poetry, which he viewed as “an ‘intensification’ of life, not a ‘refuge’ from it,”⁸ as Tim Hunt explains in his introduction to the 2002 *Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*.

After World War II, Jeffers’ fame began to decline due to his vocal criticism of Franklin Roosevelt and his isolationist political stance. Around this time, he published *The Double-Axe*, in which he put forth the clearest explanation (in his prose introduction) and demonstration (in the collection’s narrative poems) of a philosophy he called “Inhumanism.” According to Jeffers, Inhumanism “is based on a recognition of the astonishing beauty of things and their living wholeness, and on a rational acceptance of the fact that mankind is neither central nor important in the universe; our vices and blazing crimes are as insignificant as our happiness.”⁹ Reviewers often criticized Jeffers for what they interpreted as an anti-human philosophy, but against these critics Jeffers was quick to point out that “The attitude [of Inhumanism] is neither misanthropic nor pessimist nor irreligious... but it involves a certain detachment,” and “a clear shift of meaning and emphasis, from man to what is not man”¹⁰ in order to highlight the beauty of inhuman things and to call into question the human exceptionalism that Jeffers so vehemently rejected.

⁸ Jeffers and Hunt, *The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*, 6.

⁹ Ibid, 719.

¹⁰ Ibid.

And Jeffers did not just write *about* his philosophy; he put it into practice as well. He kept to himself and tended to his family while building, by hand, a granite cottage called Tor House on the California coast, writing about hawks, stones, salmon, skunks, and all sorts of other inhuman things. Tor House still stands today, turned by the Sierra Club into a museum of the poet's life and work.

In his inhumanism, Jeffers prefigures posthumanism by decades. In fact, Patrick Murphy exemplifies this in his 1989 article "Beyond Humanism: Mythic Fantasy and Inhumanist Philosophy in the Long Poems of Robinson Jeffers and Gary Snyder"—an essay which *also* predates the establishment of philosophic posthumanism, at least the brand to which Wolfe subscribes, by several years. Murphy calls the philosophies of Snyder and Jeffers "post-humanist,"¹¹ and explains that Jeffers' "Inhumanism does not remain reactive to humanism, but replaces it as the guiding philosophy for a humanity that seeks to achieve maturity."¹² Murphy's description aligns neatly with Wolfe's later assertion that "we must take yet another step, another post-, and realize that the nature of thought itself must change if it is to be posthumanist."¹³ As Jeffers demonstrates, literature has been post-humanist for a long time, so in reality, even if it has taken literary critics some time to recognize this fact.

Likewise, I am not the first to apply posthumanist ideas to literature—in fact, many of the central figures in the posthuman turn, including Wolfe and N. Katherine

¹¹ Murphy, "Beyond Humanism: Mythic Fantasy and Inhumanist Philosophy in the Long Poems of Robinson Jeffers and Gary Snyder," 66

¹² Ibid, 59.

¹³ Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, xvi.

Hayles, have their intellectual roots in literary studies, and many are professors of English at major universities. Furthermore, my study comes as a response to a few other theorists—Graham Harman, Timothy Morton, and Jane Bennett—who raise important questions about what a posthumanist literary criticism might look like. Harman, Morton, and Bennett are concerned with one particular vein of posthumanism called object-oriented ontology (often abbreviated to OOO in print and “triple-O” in speech), a philosophy that rejects the idealist claim that the world meaningfully exists only as it is perceived by humans. The conversation about an object-oriented literary criticism began in the spring 2012 issue of *New Literary History*, which contained articles on the topic by Harman and Morton and a response by Bennett. In the following section, I will explain in more detail the tenants of this fresh and vibrant school of thought, summarizing the methods that Harman, Morton, and Bennett propose.

While each of these methods adds to the critical foundation of my own study, they are not so much *applications* of OOO as they are proposed methodologies, and they unearth more questions than answers. And more troublesome for me, Harman’s and Morton’s proposed methods deal primarily with texts *as* inhuman objects, but not with the objects depicted *within* the texts themselves. My project comes as a response to these proposals, taking ideas from each and applying them to texts, but more specifically applying OOO and posthumanist theories in general to the objects *within* texts.

I – WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE OBJECT-ORIENTED?

OOO began in 2002 with the publication of Graham Harman's Ph.D dissertation *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*, in which Harman highlights Heidegger's tool analysis in *Being and Time* as the most significant philosophic moment in the first half of the twentieth century. In the tool analysis, Heidegger lays out a difference between two opposing states in which any object can exist: *zuhanden*, or readiness-to-hand, and *vorhanden*, or presence-at-hand. He explains that tools, when we use them, are ready-to-hand, in that we do not even notice their presence—we think not “I am holding a hammer which is driving this nail,” but rather “I am driving this nail.” But when a tool breaks, it becomes present-at-hand, its nature as a hammer becoming suddenly evident at the same time as its utility as a hammer vanishes.

The philosophical stakes of OOO are that it resists what has, for more than two hundred years, been the most prominent line of philosophical reasoning—namely, Kant's “Copernican revolution,” his assertion that the world only meaningfully exists as it is perceived by the human mind. In Harman's retooling of the tool analysis, “the true chasm in ontology lies not between humans and the world, but between *objects and relations*. Moreover, this duality holds equally true for all entities in the cosmos, whether natural, artificial, organic, or fully human.”¹⁴ From this anti-anthropocentric starting point, Harman crafts what he calls an “object-oriented philosophy” and what Levi Bryant later called “object-oriented

¹⁴ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 2.

ontology,” the name it most commonly uses today. Object-oriented ontology takes this tension between objects and relations as its primary field of study, including humans among those objects, but not holding them up as the gold standard to which everything else must be judged.

In particular, Harman argues that the tool analysis is significant because within the assertion that tools recede from our view when we use them is the implication that *all* objects withhold some part of themselves from *any* relation. Or in Harman’s words, “When the things withdraw from presence into their dark subterranean reality, they distance themselves not only from human beings, but *from each other* as well.”¹⁵ Any time an object is encountered by another object, the real nature of the object-being-encountered is never fully present-at-hand, never fully grasped by the object doing the encountering. Put simply, an object is not changed or altered by encounter. For instance, OOO asserts that when a researcher observes and describes a tree, the relation between researcher and tree is not fundamentally different than what occurs when a gust of wind hits the tree, when a beaver chews on the tree’s bark, or when nutrients in the soil interact with the tree to cause it to grow. In none of these cases does one object completely grasp the whole reality of the other object; the tree is essentially unchanged whether it is perceived by a researcher, rustled by a breeze, or enriched by nutrients. Even if the beaver chewed through the tree and caused it to fall, the tree would not then become some other entity than itself, some bastardized tree-form that exists only

¹⁵ Ibid.

for beaver and through beaver perception, despite the fact that the beaver certainly does perceive and interact with the tree. Thus there is something real and lasting about the tree which the tree withholds from any access, whether human or inhuman. The tree is still the tree, though it has fallen and may decay more quickly because of its fall.

In its resistance to philosophy's post-Kantian anthropocentrism, OOO takes part in two larger movements: posthumanism, as I have already discussed, and another subfield, speculative realism. While the speculative realists have ventured in vastly different directions since the term's inception at a workshop at Goldsmiths College in 2007, all of the branches share, in Kantian idealism, a common philosophic adversary. As Harman puts it, "The central problem at stake [in speculative realism] is none other than realism: does a real world exist independently of human access or not?"¹⁶ But the speculative realists are not merely realists: they do not bullheadedly insist on a real world independent of human perception. Rather, they acknowledge that the only way we, as humans, can understand or speak of a real world independent of human access is by accessing it through our perception—in other words, they admit that we are only ever able to *speculate* about this real world beyond our access since, after all, it is beyond our access.

I do not have the time here, nor would it be productive, to delve into a complete analysis of OOO and SR. There are too many layers to these rich

¹⁶ Harman, "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer," 184.

philosophies, to the extent that it becomes difficult even to consider OOO as a subfield of SR, or vice versa. Suffice it to say that the present study is heavily influenced by both, which are themselves part of the posthuman turn in philosophy. Over the course of this study, these ideas will come up again and again, and each time I will build on what has come before, allowing me to delve deeper into my analysis with each recurrence. But for now, this is enough explanation to allow me to summarize the intriguing trio of *New Literary History* essays that I mention earlier.

II – AFTER AN OBJECT-ORIENTED LITERARY CRITICISM

In “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer,” Harman begins by presenting an overview of OOO and SR, which I draw from in my own summary above. He then proceeds to respond to three major schools of literary criticism—new criticism, new historicism, and deconstruction—from an object-oriented perspective, explaining how each of these schools falls short of his own goals. In particular, Harman argues that “Instead of dissolving a text upward into its readings [as in new criticism, and to a lesser extent deconstruction] or downward into its cultural elements [as in new historicism], we should focus specifically on how it resists such dissolution.”¹⁷ According to the Harman method (or as he calls it, “*countermethod*”), we should view literary texts as objects, examining how such objects are more than the sum of their qualities and irreducible to either content or context. Harman suggests that

¹⁷ Harman, “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer,” 200

one way to do this is “to show how each text resists internal wholism by attempting various *modifications* of these texts and seeing what happens.”¹⁸ In other words, we might take a novel like *Moby Dick* and strip away elements and qualities until it becomes a fundamentally-different novel. The goal of such modifications is to understand how some literary works “withstand the earthquakes of centuries much better than others”¹⁹ and how they still influence readers even when divorced from their historical and cultural context—and here, *Moby Dick* is a good example, as are Homer’s *Odyssey*, Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, and any other text with a firmly-established position in our canon despite having been written in a very different culture and era. Would *Moby Dick* be the same, for instance, if the ship’s name were Quahog instead of Pequod? Or if the voyage had set sail from California instead of New England?

Or take a less academic example: Jim Davis’ widely-syndicated *Garfield* cartoons. In their original state, these comic strips poke fun at the lazy, sluggish sorts of indoor-only housecats that many of us know and love. In particular, they follow the daily life of twenty-something bachelor Jon Arbuckle and his fat, orange, lasagna-loving tabby. The comics often involve Jon moping over his dull life in Muncie, Indiana while Garfield sardonically mocks his owner, or vice versa, as when Jon complains about Garfield’s laziness. And the silly punchlines often rely on the ironic fact that both the cat and his owner live identically dull and uninteresting lives. Take this strip, for instance:

¹⁸ Ibid, 201-202.

¹⁹ Ibid, 201.



Here, Jon's existential question "What if these are my final moments?" loses its angsty edge when we realize, in the final frame, that he is merely angry at Garfield for sleeping so much. Garfield's exaggerated response further solidifies this reading. The result is a mildly-amusing commentary on pet ownership and speculation on the interior monologues of housecats. But what if we removed Garfield from this sequence? This very question forms the basis of Dan Walsh's *Garfield Minus Garfield*, a marvelous repurposing of the original *Garfield* comics in which all of the characters have been removed except for Jon Arbuckle, who is left to ponder his boring existence alone. Here is Walsh's interpretation of the above sequence:



Whereas the original strip softens the edges of Jon's existential angst, here, his questions are left hanging and unresolved. As a result, we are able to see into his dark psyche and the depths of his loneliness and anxiety. The comic becomes at once darker and more hilarious without Garfield, and thus we can safely claim that *Garfield* is not the same essential object without Garfield in it. Or as Walsh puts it,

“It’s a completely different comic once Garfield is removed. It becomes more surreal and dark, more ‘Monty Python’ than ‘Dick Van Dyke,’ more ‘South Park’ than ‘The Simpsons.’”²⁰ Consider another pair of comics, beginning with Walsh’s:



Here, we as readers have no idea why Jon is so furious at his toaster, which seems to have been acting of its own accord to make excessive quantities of toast while Jon reads the morning paper. The absurdity of the scene is remarkable, especially compared to the clichéd commentary on annoying pets delivered by Davis’ original:



When we consider *Garfield* with Harman’s methodology in mind, we can see that good things can certainly come from the sort of analysis-by-subtraction that Harman prescribes. Once Garfield is removed from the comics, we as readers become more aware of the real nature of the comic-as-withdrawn-object, since we notice that all of Garfield’s “dialogue” in the original occurs in Jon’s imagination, making him no less lonely and neurotic in the original comics as he is in Walsh’s

²⁰ Walsh, Dan. Qtd. in Orndorff, “When the Cat’s Away, Neurosis Is on Display.”

revisions. Without Garfield, the comics take on *more* meaning than they otherwise would, so by subtracting from them, we actually gain understanding. And in fact, I find it quite in keeping with Harman's emphasis on the weirdness of reality that *Garfield* becomes so absurd and existential after Walsh's modifications.

The Harman method certainly provokes thought, and fits the needs of those of us in literary criticism who are interested in canonicity and the development of genres, conventions, and styles. At the very least, it leads to hilarious webcomics like *Garfield Minus Garfield*, and to interesting debates like the one I recently had with a colleague who challenged my two claims, first, that *Moby Dick* would be the same essential novel even if the whale never made an appearance; and second, that it would *not* be the same without the encyclopedic "Cetology" chapter. Our friendly disagreement in this discussion might suggest a potential issue in Harman's methodology: the literary canon has been contested for years, and though this method does give us new ways of thinking about how works enter and remain in the canon, it does not provide us with any way to come to a decision about what to canonize or how to justify our choices. According to Harman's interpretation of canonicity, works of literature enter the canon solely on their merits, solely because they somehow transcend other written texts and manage to speak to readers across time and space. Yet this interpretation completely ignores the political and social factors contributing to the canon, including the basic fact that the canon is merely a set of texts about which literary scholars have written extensively, and *not* some pre-existing body of texts that scholars have discovered in a vault somewhere.

Despite Harman's admission that "If literary canons have been dominated by white European males, then this may be cause for shaking up the canons and reassessing our standards of quality,"²¹ his method, as it has been developed so far, does not deal with how we might address works and authors that have been *excluded* from the canon. For instance, removing inhuman elements from Robinson Jeffers' poetry will not tell us anything about why, for several decades late in his life and after his death, Jeffers' poetry was not only ignored but actively resisted in academia. To do that, we would need to consider the social landscape of the era, examining how, in the McCarthyism of the 1950s, being a radical pacifist and isolationist would lead to government censorship of even well-known and respected poets like Jeffers. Alternately, Harman's method cannot explain why, until the 1970s, Zora Neale Hurston's work lay unread, gathering dust in the Smithsonian libraries. To consider this, we would have to take into considering the scathing reviews her work received from black, male academics who took objection to her depictions of their race and gender, along with a host of other cultural factors.²² By treating texts as mere objects, Harman's method leaves unanswered many significant questions about the contents and cultural contexts of these text-objects. It does provide a foundation for what an object-oriented literary criticism is *not*—namely, new criticism, new historicism, or deconstruction—but it does not provide an adequate example of how to actually begin moving literary criticism beyond the human.

²¹ Harman, "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer," 200-201

²² Wright, "Review of Their Eyes Were Watching God."

Morton's method in "An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry" is similar to Harman's in that both focus primarily on literary texts as objects, as "an entity in its own right."²³ Morton contends that poems are physical objects made of ink and paper, and as such, they cause readers to recognize their own status as objects no more or less real than the ink-and-paper poems. As he puts it, "To write poetry is to force the reader to coexist with fragile phrases, fragile ink, fragile paper: to experience the many physical levels of a poem's architecture. Since there is no top object, no bottom object, and no middle object, sheer coexistence is what there is."²⁴ The article's title comes from a clever repurposing of Percy Shelley's claim in "A Defence of Poetry" that poetry "is the perfect and consummate surface and bloom of all things; it is the odor and the color of the rose to the texture of the elements which compose it,"²⁵ and while this statement may seem merely metaphorical, Morton argues the opposite: that poetry, as an agent and an object, confronts the reader with the real and literal surface of things, the physical aspects of what it means to coexist with other objects without asserting dominance over them.

But like Harman, Morton does not present practical instructions for applying his theories to literature; his goal, after all, is to present a defense of poetry in object-oriented terms, not to create a new field of criticism. However, his methodology does offer up an enticing possibility: if poems present readers with the "surface and bloom of all things" and with real characteristics from "the odor and

²³ Morton, "An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry," 222

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry and Other Essays*, 57. Qtd. in Morton, "An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry," 216.

color of the rose to the texture and of the elements which compose it,” then it would seem that what matters most about a poem’s object-orientation is not that the poem is made up of ink and paper—if so, then the only odors and colors we would experience would be the black of ink and the smell of old books—but rather that poems present their *subjects* as objects. Take William Carlos Williams’ short poem “The Hurricane” as an example, quoted in full below:

The tree lay down
on the garage roof
and stretched, you
have your heaven,
it said, go to it.²⁶

The subject of the poem is, ostensibly, a hurricane. The present-at-hand subject—that is, the one we actually experience in the poem—is a tree. In the poem, Williams illuminates the tree, as an object, as it interacts with the garage, and the implied results of this interaction are the destruction of both garage and tree. The hurricane is on the outside, only hinted at, only implied.

Of course, as a reader I am interacting with the text-object of the poem. But it is worth noting that I first read this poem online at Poets.org; there, the physicality of the poem receded from my view, since the only physical thing with which I was interacting was a digital simulacrum displayed on the screen of my laptop computer.

And as Harman reminds us, “An object is not a bundle of qualities, and for this

²⁶ Williams, Litz, and MacGowan, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume 2, 1939-1962*, 158.

reason a thing cannot be reproduced simply by duplicating all of its qualities and bundling them together. At most this would give us an externally convincing simulacrum of the thing, not the thing itself.”²⁷ The fragile paper and ink on which Morton bases his “defense of poetry” do not affect me now, in this case, as I read digital simulacra of poems on a screen—and cases like this are becoming all the more common as the act of reading is shifting online. Therefore it is not the physicality of the poem that confronts me, as a reader, with my objectivity, but rather what is contained *within* the poem.

Bennett recognizes these objects-within when, in “Systems and Things: A Response to Graham Harman and Timothy Morton,” she states that “Texts are bodies that can light up, by rendering human perception more acute, those bodies whose favored vehicle of affectivity is less wordy: plants, animals, blades of grass, household objects, trash.”²⁸ Williams’ poem “lights up” the tree, which otherwise would have remained ready-to-hand, receding from my view as that-which-shades-garage, thereby reminding me that I coexist with it and that I cannot, by ignoring it or refusing it ontological reality, protect myself if it happens to fall on me. Bennett explains that this lighting-up occurs in the context of a complex network of objects and actants that come together in the poem: garages, trees, William Carlos Williams, free verse, hurricanes, and also the thoughts and images brought forth in my mind by the poem’s words—images which are no less real objects than the physical ones they evoke or imply.

²⁷ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 73.

²⁸ Bennett, “Systems and Things,” 232.

Bennett takes issue with Harman's and Morton's methods in that, although they acknowledge texts as objects (or, as Bennett prefers to call them, bodies), they ignore the fact that "there are also, it seems, some features of the text-body that are not shared or shared differentially by bodies that rely more heavily on smell and touch, and less heavily on conveyances that are words."²⁹ In other words, a poem is not merely a physical object just the same as an apple or a rock, but it also has certain qualities that make a text, which by its nature is not the same as an apple, a deck of playing cards, an octopus, or even a piece of paper with random ink splatters—and these *certain qualities* are signifiers and the objects that they signify.

III – APPLYING OOO TO LITERARY TEXTS

For Bennett, "the stakes of the turn to things in contemporary theory is how it might help us to live more sustainably and with less violence toward a variety of bodies" because literary texts "can help us feel more of the liveliness hidden in such things and reveal more of the threads of connection binding our fate to theirs."³⁰ Texts can do this, I argue, because they cause readers to rethink their relationships with the objects they depict; I call these objects the *objects within*. In a theoretical system that constantly reminds us that objects withdraw from view, it is important to find new ways of representing things so that they remain before us a bit longer, exposing sides of them that we do not normally acknowledge or encounter.

Literature provides for us the ability to hold these objects and relations in place for

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

a moment while we examine their coexistence with other objects, some of which are ourselves.

Here I agree with Bennett: the stakes of the posthuman turn in literary criticism are inherently ethical and ecological in that they force readers to acknowledge their contextual and contingent coexistence with radically other objects. And my goal in this study is to illustrate how texts accomplish this feat. Before I delve into my literary case studies, I will lay out a brief outline of my methodology for illuminating the objects depicted within texts. For my foundation, I draw on Harman's OOO as he presents it in *The Quadruple Object* and *Prince of Networks*. But in practical application, my method hues closer to Bennett's *Vibrant Materialism* and the brand of OOO that Ian Bogost presents in *Alien Phenomenology*, both of which look at specific objects in specific contexts to see how they recede from view or interact in weird and uncanny ways—something Harman does only in theory or in passing to illustrate his larger philosophic points.

In short, I will examine three ways in which texts light up the objects within, each of which builds on the previous in order to further clarify how an object-oriented literary criticism, as Bennett claims, “can help us live more sustainably”—or as Timothy Morton puts it, how it can allow us to more completely think “the ecological thought,” the thought that “thinks big and joins the dots [and] thinks

through the mesh of life forms as far out and in as it can.”³¹ These are the three questions I will pose:

First: how do texts expose objects in their moments of relation? In chapter 1, I examine the poetry of two of Robinson Jeffers’ modernist contemporaries, William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens. Just as Jeffers prefigured posthumanism with his own theory of inhumanism, so Williams prefigures OOO in his assertion “no ideas, but in things.”³² By presenting objects in his poetry without imposing symbolic meaning onto them, Williams creates an early version of what Ian Bogost would later call “ontography.” As Bogost puts it,

To create an ontograph involves cataloguing things, but also drawing attention to the couplings of and chasms between them [because] things... exist not just *for us* but also *for themselves* and *for one another*, in ways that might surprise and dismay us. Such is the ontographical project, to draw attention to the countless things that litter our world unseen.³³

In “The Hurricane,” for instance, Williams draws readers’ attention to the “couplings of and chasms between” the tree, the garage, and a very strong wind. But as we see in the final line of his poem, Williams nevertheless does translate the objects in his poem, adding symbolic meaning when he writes that the tree “said” to the garage, “you have your heaven... go to it.” While Williams sets out to present only things, he

³¹ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 18.

³² Williams, Litz, and MacGowan, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume 1, 1909-1939*, 263.

³³ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 38.

ultimately *does* present ideas. For this reason, Wallace Stevens' poetry might be a more accurate form of ontography; he, like Williams, presents ideas along with things, but unlike Williams, Stevens acknowledges that he is doing this. In "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," for instance, Stevens presents thirteen distinct translations of a single blackbird, showing how each of these translations does not fully grasp the full reality of the bird, which remains the same despite its transient changes. His poetry acts as reverse-ontography, drawing our attention to things by presenting their absence, similar to Theodor Adorno's theory of negative dialectics. Taken together, Williams and Stevens prove that literature has been considering objects and relations long before theory and criticism caught up.

Second: how do texts light up the moments in which objects recede from view?

In chapter 2, I present two examples of literary texts in which a particular object withdraws from relations and rebels against human intentions to create disastrous results. In Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Bluebeard*, abstract expressionist Rabo Karabekian's career is ruined when his paint reacts with chemicals in his canvas and self-destructs, destroying his masterpiece. And in Joel and Ethan Coen's film *Burn After Reading*, an unlabeled compact disc wreaks havoc on a dim-witted cast of characters all of whom misinterpret the disc as an opportunity for quick financial gain, leaving several characters dead and so completely baffling the CIA that no one knows quite what to do about any of it. By illustrating the ways that perception fails to grasp the reality of things, *Bluebeard* and *Burn After Reading* remind us that we

are mistaken if we assert, as idealists have for centuries, that the world exists as it is perceived by humans, since that perception is so consistently wrong.

And third, how do texts help readers to understand what it is like to be a thing?

In chapter 3, I will present a few texts that allow readers to understand what Thomas Nagel would call the “what it is likeness” of inhuman things by projecting ourselves into the subjective worlds of the texts and the experiences of the inhuman characters within them. Videogames make ideal texts for this subjective projection because they allow the player to inhabit and interact with the gameworld through simulation. The first section of my final chapter will explore three such videogames—namely *Portal*, *Shelter*, and *Flower*—analyzing how each game allows the player to better understand the limits of her own subjectivity by bringing her into close contact with the subjectivity of an inhuman thing. In particular, these games generate empathy and compassion in the player, both of which Cary Wolfe argues are the foundations of posthumanist ethics. But in the final section of my study, I will call into question Wolfe’s compassion-based ethics by examining Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Crossing*, in which compassionate identification leads Billy Parham to care *so* deeply for a wolf that he completely ignores all other living things, endangering himself and others around him just to protect the wolf. While compassionate ethics is certainly beneficial, in situations like this, when compassionate ethics breaks down, posthumanism must uncover alternative modes of ethical decision-making that take into account the myriad inhuman things that are by nature excluded from networks of compassionate, face-to-face encounters.

And ultimately, I will show how the answer to each of these questions helps us, as humans, to better understand that *we* are objects too, that just because we perceive the world as subjects does not mean that the world only exists for us. By forcing us to realize the limits of our own subjectivity and the object-nature in ourselves, literature can follow through on Bennett's lofty goal for an OOO literary criticism. It can help us to, in Wolfe's words, "think differently about ourselves."

CHAPTER 1 – HOW TEXTS ILLUMINATE OBJECT RELATIONS

The first way that literary and artistic texts light up the objects within is by capturing them in their moments of interaction, making visible what would normally pass unnoticed. In *Reassembling the Social*, Bruno Latour explains that for most of our lives, we exist and interact with the world without realizing that all action takes place within a complex network of actors both human and inhuman. For instance, I can go to the grocery store and buy a tomato without ever thinking of the migrant worker who picked my tomato, the price of the oil used to fuel the truck that delivered my tomato from the farm to the distribution center, the photoreceptor cells in the tomato leaves that produced chlorophyll to enable the vine to bear fruit... the list goes on. Only in instances of distance, disruption, and malfunction do these connections become visible, and even then just for a fleeting moment. If the store runs out of tomatoes, only then do I wonder whether the produce truck failed to show up, only then do I remember that the tomato supply is scarcer during winter, or only then do I remember the network of consumers many of whom, like me, must have really wanted a tomato that day. These moments do not last long, but briefly, the connections between actors in the network are visible.

Often, these “occasions [of] momentary visibility,” as Latour calls them, occur in situations of total breakdown, moments when, like Heidegger’s hammer, objects break and show their present-at-hand realities to us.¹ But Latour explains that these are not the only moments when connections become visible; rather, “the resource of fiction can bring... the solid objects of today into the fluid states where their connections with humans may make sense.”² What he means is that fiction—and by this I take him to mean literature, art, and all forms of artistic representation—can illuminate the reality that objects exist without our permission and outside our control, relating to one another whether or not we perceive those relations. In essence, literature can allow us to see into the unseen worlds of objects and relations, capturing and exposing those relations so that we can observe their surprising and unexpected results.

Latour’s framework serves as a good foundation, but as Graham Harman explains in *Prince of Networks*, it is a bit too anthropocentric to stand as the primary basis for an object-oriented study. Whereas Harman begins by praising Latour’s actor-network theory for taking seriously the ontological role of inhuman objects, he quickly criticizes ANT for over-privileging human discourse. To explain his critique, Harman cites an example from Latour’s *The Pasteurization of France*: namely, Louis Pasteur’s “discovery” of microbes. As Latour tells it, Pasteur and microbes exist in a complex web of interrelation, since Pasteur would not have been famous and microbes might not have become a scientific truth had magnifying glasses, scientific

¹ Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 80.

² Ibid, 82.

funding, glass flasks, Louis Pasteur, and many happy accidents not all interacted to produce optimal conditions for the “emergence” or “discovery” of microbes. Thus both Pasteur and the microbe are co-actors in a network of objects. But Harman argues that Latour ultimately privileges Pasteur, as a human, over microbes:

from this symmetrical starting point, Latour draws a strange asymmetrical conclusion. For on Pasteur’s side of the relation, Latour holds that Pasteur was merely modified... by his encounter with microbes. But on the microbe’s side of the relation, he holds that the microbes were first *created* in 1864.... We begin with a two-way correlate and end with a one-way tyranny. We were promised that Pasteur and the microbe co-define each other, and end up ascribing godlike powers to Pasteur and mere nullity to the microbes.³

While Latour begins from a flat ontology, he ends by framing inhuman objects as nothing more than their relations to human subjects. Traces of this anthropocentrism can even be seen in Latour’s assertion that fiction can help make sense of objects’ “connections with humans.” But he never moves beyond this connection to humans, remaining in what speculative realist Quentin Meillassoux calls “correlationism,” the philosophic position defined by “disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another.”⁴ For Meillassoux and Harman, inhuman objects

³ Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 182.

⁴ Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, 5.

must be taken seriously *separate from*, or even *despite*, their connections with humans, and this is my goal in this chapter.

In order for texts to really show us the perseverance of objects, they must not depict them solely in relation to humans, and this means refraining from making any sort of value judgment on the objects and relations they depict. In other words, these kinds of texts cannot portray objects as existing only *for humans* or in relation to human intentions. Ian Bogost expands on this in *Alien Phenomenology*, explaining that the goal of his particular brand of OOO is to remind us that we humans, in the words of Levi Bryant, “are no longer monarchs of being, but are instead *among* beings, *entangled* in beings, and *implicated* in other beings.”⁵ From this foundation, Bogost develops the concept of *ontography*, a term he draws from Harman and molds into his own form of object-oriented analysis. He defines ontography as the artistic representation of object coexistence, writing that “ontography involves the revelation of object relationships without necessarily offering a clarification or description of any kind.”⁶ So when texts reveal objects in their moments of relation without imposing meaning or value onto those objects or relations, they act as ontographs, showing us that objects “exist not just *for us* but also *for themselves* and *for one another*, in ways that might surprise and dismay us” and drawing our attention to “the countless things that litter our world unseen.”⁷

In this chapter, I will present a few texts that act as ontographs, exposing object relations without attempting to categorize or impose order onto them. I will

⁵ Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 40. Qtd. in Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 17.

⁶ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 38.

⁷ Ibid, 50-51.

begin with a foray through modern American poetry, examining how the poems of William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens present objects without imposing symbolic meaning onto them. With his famous assertion “no ideas but in things”⁸ as its mantra, Williams’ imagistic poetry prefigures ontography by treating things as they exist in themselves instead of using metaphor and symbolism to morph them into abstract, anthropocentric ideas. And though he rejects imagism as a label for his own poetry, Stevens adds to Williams’ object-oriented focus the necessary caveat that, in Bogost’s words, “all things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally,” in that objects are not reducible to their perception, purpose, value, or the signifiers used to denote them.⁹ In particular, Stevens acknowledges the difficulty of representing object relations in language, since language is always necessarily a translation of reality, no matter how close it may come to representing reality as it actually exists. Yet this is what all artists and authors must do if they aim to be object-oriented, and indeed, Stevens does manage to shed light on object relations, though his strategies for doing so differ slightly from those of Williams.

In “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” for instance, Stevens depicts a musician struggle to meet his audience’s demand that he play “A tune beyond us, yet ourselves / A tune upon the blue guitar / Of things exactly as they are,” but each time he tries to play such a tune, the guitarist must grapple with the fact that he must translate reality, that he can never play things *exactly* as they are.¹⁰ So instead

⁸ Williams, Litz, and MacGowan, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume 1, 1909-1939*, 263.

⁹ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 11.

¹⁰ Stevens and Stevens, *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, 133.

of presenting things as they actually are, Stevens instead presents translations *as* translations, acknowledging that there can be multiple translations of any one object, all the while demonstrating that no matter how many times an object is translated, it still remains the same object and cannot be reduced to any of these translations. Stevens, in his attempt to play “things exactly as they are,” and Williams, in his insistence on representing “no ideas but in things,” seem to have prefigured the object-oriented view proposed by Bogost and Bryant, making their poetry an ideal ontographic medium in which to examine objects in their Latourian actor-networks.

1.1 – HOW MUCH DEPENDS UPON A RED WHEEL BARROW?

In the opening pages of his collection *Spring and All*, William Carlos Williams explains that “There is a constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world.”¹¹ In his poetry, Williams attempts to break down this barrier by presenting the world as it actually exists, stripping away the symbolism typical of his poetic predecessors. As he puts it,

nearly all writing, up to the present, if not all art, has been
especially designed to keep up the barrier between sense and
the vaporous fringe which distracts the attention from its
agonized approaches to the moment. It has always been a

¹¹ Williams, Litz, and MacGowan, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume 1, 1909-1939*, 177.

search for “the beautiful illusion” [but] I am not in search of
the beautiful illusion.¹²

Williams argues that literary texts have traditionally been used to build a barrier between human readers and the objective world by imposing order and symbolic meaning onto the objects they depict, thereby creating a “beautiful illusion” in which the world appears neat, tidy, and full of meaning for the humans that perceive it. In OOO terminology, the beautiful illusion is Kantian idealism, the notion that the world only meaningfully exists for human and through human perception. Williams rejects this notion, and his poetry stems from that rejection.

Williams published *Spring and All* in 1923, just four years after T.S. Eliot, in his 1919 essay “Hamlet and his Problems,” coined the term *objective correlative* to signify “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula for [a] *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.”¹³ For Eliot, merely *presenting* objects in literature is useless unless those objects also act as catalysts for emotional response—unless, that is, they are presented as sensual translations of objects rather than the objects themselves. But for Williams, presenting reality in such a relational way can only ever be, as he calls it, an illusion. Because of the barrier between the reader and her immediate contact with the world, objects in literature and art can indeed take on symbolic, correlative meanings when readers encounter them. But if the objects don’t *actually* mean

¹² Ibid, 178.

¹³ Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*, 66.

these things, Williams wonders, then what is the use of presenting those meanings *as reality*?

Williams believes that poetry should communicate directly with reality. The refrain “Say it, no ideas but in things” shows up many times in his poetry, most notably in his suburban epic *Paterson*, in which he attempts to present a realistic and detailed portrait of his hometown of Paterson, New Jersey.¹⁴ As this refrain suggests, Williams prefers to write about things as they actually exist outside of the realm of symbolism, which is precisely where Eliot’s objective correlative seeks to place all objects. Take, for instance, the 22nd poem in *Spring and All*, commonly referred to as “The Red Wheelbarrow”:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens¹⁵

In “The Red Wheelbarrow,” a wheelbarrow, some rainwater, and the chickens are not doing anything in particular; they are merely existing in close proximity. The poem reads like a Latour Litany, Bogost’s term for the lists of dissimilar objects that pepper the writings of speculative realists and actor-network theorists like Harman, Bennett, Latour, and others. For instance, Bogost cites the following list from

¹⁴ Williams, Litz, and MacGowan, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume 1, 1909-1939*, 263.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 224.

Latour's first book, *The Pasteurization of France*: "A storm, a rat, a rock, a lake, a lion, a child, a worker, a gene, a slave, the unconscious, a virus."¹⁶ By presenting, as a single set, a collection of objects that we would not normally associate with one another, Latour Litanies serve as brief reminders of the multitude of objects that exist in the world. Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow" acts in a similar way, presenting objects together without prescribing any particular human purpose or use: the wheelbarrow is not hauling dirt, the water not irrigating a field, the chickens not laying eggs.

The poem functions as an ontograph, a set of inhuman objects existing in relation to one another, linked together by nothing but their proximity. Since these exist in the poem divorced from their uses or perceptions, any relations happening between them can exist only at an aesthetic level. As Morton writes in *Realist Magic*, "If things are intrinsically withdrawn, irreducible to their perception or relations or uses, they can only affect each other in a strange region out in front of them, a region of traces and footprints: the aesthetic dimension."¹⁷ "The Red Wheelbarrow" exposes the aesthetic nature of these relations. As we are told, the wheelbarrow is red, but that redness is not changed as the rainwater glazes over its surface; similarly, the whiteness of the chickens is in no way diminished by the grayness of the sunlight filtering down through rainclouds; nor are the chickens changed by their nearness to the wheelbarrow. Each object in this particular set exists first *for*

¹⁶ Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, 192. Qtd. in Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 38.

¹⁷ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 18.

itself, and only afterward in relation to other objects, relations that do not equal or alter the real objects themselves.

On a physical level, the poem's line breaks reinforce the *for-itselfness* of each object, since the lines are broken so that the objects themselves stand alone on single-word lines, separated by enjambment even from their own qualities. For instance, in the second short stanza, "a red wheel / barrow," we begin with what Harman would call sensual qualities: we first encounter redness and wheeliness, both modifiers describing what sort of barrow we are dealing with. Only afterward, on the next line, do we encounter the barrow itself. After this stanza, a line break separates the barrow from the next set of qualities, which themselves are listed "in front of," as Morton says, the object itself: "rain" before "water;" "white" before "chickens." By listing the objects in this way, with their modifiers and qualities in front of them, Williams reinforces that things exist first for themselves, and only afterward do they enter into any sort of relations. But despite their separateness, these objects nevertheless exist in close proximity, and "so much depends / upon" their nearness to one another. And in fact, it is this opening stanza that gives the poem its energy, since without it, we would have nothing more than a list of barnyard objects rather than an ontograph that functions as a single unit. Though he does not impose symbolic meaning onto these objects, Williams reminds us that this particular combination of objects in this particular ontograph is worthy of consideration on its own merits, since each object within it exists for itself regardless of its relation to anything else, and since they, together, form a unit on which so much depends.

As it manifests in “The Red Wheelbarrow,” Williams’ refrain “no ideas but in things” stands in stark contrast to Eliot’s objective correlative. In fact the two poets align, respectively, with the philosophic viewpoints of speculative realism and its adversary, correlationism. Just as Williams takes as his central problems “the beautiful illusion” and the barrier between the human reader and the objective world, so Harman explains that “The central problem at stake [for SR] is none other than realism: does a real world exist independently of human access or not?”¹⁸ Williams’ interest in representing reality as it actually exists prefigures the speculative realist desire to speculate on the nature of the inhuman world as it exists prior to human perception. On the other hand, Eliot resists realism, implying that objects are accessible to us only as symbolic expressions of human emotion. His use of the term *correlative* hints at the subject-object correlation implied in correlationism. Since he ties objects to human emotions rather than allowing them to stand alone, Eliot reinforces the correlation between subject and object, preventing us from considering objects except in relation to subjectivity.

While this may be an oversimplification of Eliot’s position, it certainly seems to ring true for Williams, who writes in *Spring and All* that “Crude symbolism is to associate emotions with natural phenomena such as anger with lightning, flowers with love” and that “Such work is empty [... and] very typical of almost all that is done by the writers who fill the pages every month.”¹⁹ Just as, earlier, Williams claims that “nearly all writing” has been searching for the beautiful illusion, here he

¹⁸ Harman, “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer,” 184.

¹⁹ Williams, Litz, and MacGowan, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume 1, 1909-1939*, 188.

indicts his fellow modernists poets—among them Eliot—for clinging too tightly to this “crude symbolism.” In fact, Williams found himself at odds with Eliot throughout his career, and *Spring and All* comes about as a reaction to Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. In his *Autobiography*, Williams calls *The Waste Land* an “atom bomb” that had been dropped on poetry, noting that “Critically, Eliot returned us to the classroom just at the moment when I felt that we were on the point of an escape to matters much closer to the essence of a new art form itself—rooted in the locality which should give it fruit.”²⁰ While Williams attempted to move poetry toward a meaningful engagement with the real world, Eliot and his followers reinforced the very barrier between the reader and reality that Williams fought so hard to tear down. What Williams resists in Eliot’s poetry is the same thing that Harman, Bogost, and other speculative realists resist about correlationism.

Williams returns often to the “constant barrier” between reader and world, especially in his 1948 collection *The Clouds*, in which several poems grapple with the fact that objects exist independently of human perception, and that perception can never fully grasp their full reality. Take, for instance, his short poem “The Thing”:

Each time it rings
 I think it is for
 me but it is
 not for me nor for

 anyone it merely
 rings and we
 serve it bitterly
 together, they and I²¹

²⁰ Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams*, 174.

²¹ Williams, Litz, and MacGowan, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume 2, 1939-1962*, 167-68.

In this poem, an abstract entity (“the thing”) resists being defined or correlated to humans (“they and I”). When it rings, it rings for itself, not for any perceiver. The speaker of the poem finds himself often mistaken, however, and assumes that it rings for her, though she knows that this is not true; those who perceive it are certainly able to hear and respond to it, but this does not mean that its ringing is *for* those perceivers. And as a result, “they and I” are subject to the thing’s whims, forced to “serve it bitterly” by responding to that which is not directed toward them, but which exists in and of itself.

In the collection’s next poem, “The Mind Hesitant,” Williams reiterates this position in more concrete terms, using “the river” as his object instead of the abstract thing; the speaker explains that

Sometimes the river
becomes a river in the mind
or of the mind
or in and of the mind

[...]

And the mind hesitant
regarding the stream
senses
a likeness which it

will find—a complex
image²²

In this poem, the speaker explains how, when a person perceives a river, it becomes a sensual image of a river in the person’s mind, just as Harman explains that humans and other things never perceive real objects, but only sensual translations of those

²² Ibid, 168.

objects. But despite this barrier between the reader and real world, there remains a real river toward which the poem points. The river in this poem, like the rainwater and chickens in “The Red Wheelbarrow,” exists prior to human perception. When a perceiving subject encounters it, it becomes a new object in the subject’s mind, an image which, though it resembles the real river, is decidedly not real, at least according to Harman’s real-sensual dichotomy. But despite the fact that it remains a translation, this image of a river only exists because there actually is a real river to which it corresponds. The real river exists for itself, and only afterward as a river “in the mind / or of the mind / or in and of the mind.” This theme continues throughout *The Clouds*, and likewise throughout the rest of Williams’ career, as he presents real objects in his poetry and grapples with the fact that perception is always incomplete.

Instead of presenting objects as objective correlatives, Williams’ brand of realistic imagism presents readers with a flat ontology in which nothing is more worthy of consideration than anything else—wheelbarrows and chickens, rainwater and the color red, rivers and things, readers and the texts they are reading: all are equally real in Williams’ world.

1.2 – A BLACKBIRD AND A BLUE GUITAR

While Williams’ flat poetic ontology does function in an object-oriented way, it only represents the first half of Bogost’s assertion that “all things equally exist, but

they do not exist equally.”²³ What Bogost means is that though no object exists any more or less than any other, it is certainly not the case that objects are equal or reducible to any other objects; additionally, an object is not wholly defined by its relations with other objects, its purposes or uses, or its appearance in human perception. In other words, there are countless ways in which things can exist, and at least as many ways in which things can be perceived or interacted with by other things. So while Williams does follow through on his intention to present “no ideas but in things,” he does not recognize the differences between things. And perhaps even more problematically, Williams never seems to acknowledge that poetry itself, as a linguistic endeavor, cannot ever present objects themselves, but only translations of those objects. As Harman explains, “An object is not a bundle of qualities, and for this reason a thing cannot be reproduced simply by duplicating all of its qualities and bundling them together. At most this would give us a convincing simulacrum of the thing, not the thing itself.”²⁴ So despite Williams’ assertion that poetry should concern itself with “no ideas but in things,” what he actually presents in his poetry are linguistic representations of the characteristics of objects, which themselves are merely translations of reality, not reality itself.

For this very reason, Wallace Stevens, a contemporary of both Eliot and Williams, rejects the label of imagism for his own poetry. As John J. Enck writes, “irresponsible historians have drawn few lines between [Stevens] and the rest [of

²³ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 11.

²⁴ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 73.

the imagists].”²⁵ But to label Stevens as an imagist is to ignore the stark contrasts between his own work and theirs, particularly Stevens’ resistance of the academic conceits of Eliot, Pound, H.D, and others loosely associated with the group. Enck explains that “Stevens enjoys nature and art without fretting over their precise boundaries,” and that he resists the imagists’ “popular tricks: fragments from dead authors, setting up the past as a conventional backdrop to sketch a vanished nobility, geographical borders to denote political or religious allegiances, and a rivalry with the naturalistic stage in consistent characterization.”²⁶ While his poetry does “begin in Imagistic tendencies,” Stevens is not simply another imagist just like the rest. And in fact, Stevens often criticized imagism, nowhere more directly than in an aphorism published in *Opus Posthumous* in which he writes that “Not all objects are equal. The vice of imagism was that it did not recognize this.”²⁷ Stevens resists Williams’ flat ontology because it is *too* flat, negating the differences between objects and implying that they are reducible to their linguistic representations. But though he is critical of imagism, Stevens nonetheless desires to communicate truths about the real world in his poetry and feels pressure from critics who want those truths to be exact replicas of reality. His central poetic concern, then, is the uncertainty caused by attempting to write realistic poetry while acknowledging that poetry can never be exact in its presentation of reality.

Stevens addresses this uncertainty in “The Blue Guitar,” a poem that begins with a guitarist frustrated by his audience’s demand that he play “A tune upon the

²⁵ Enck, *Wallace Stevens: Images and Judgments*, 7-8.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 42.

²⁷ Stevens and Bates, *Opus Posthumous*, 161. Qtd. in Enck, *Wallace Stevens: Images and Judgments*, 11.

blue guitar / Of things exactly as they are.”²⁸ However, since the best the guitarist can do is approximate reality in his music—since in order to present reality he must translate it, morphing it into melody and lyrics—the guitarist responds that “Things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar,” and therefore that he cannot meet his audience’s demands. The guitarist’s struggle with his demanding audience reflects Stevens’ own struggle with critics who want to impose the flat realism onto his poetry. It is worth noting here that Stevens’ poem takes inspiration from Pablo Picasso’s “The Old Guitarist,” a painting from the artist’s “blue period” depicting a decrepit old man deep in contemplation and holding loosely to a blue-hued guitar. This allusion adds another layer of translation, since Picasso’s painting itself is just an approximation of reality. In the second stanza, the poem’s narrative voice shifts, and Stevens writes, this time through the poem’s third-person narrator, that “I cannot bring a world quite round / Although I patch it as I can.” In other words, the best the poet can do, when confronted by those “irresponsible historians” who associate him too closely with Williams’ imagism—with, that is, the belief that poetry should be exact in its representation of the world—is to patch together a translated version of the world, and all the while to acknowledge that poetry inherently involves such a patching.

Immediately after the above passage, Stevens explains that though poetic objects are never the same as the real objects they depict, poetry can still speak meaningfully about the real world. The stanza continues,

I sing a hero’s head, large eye

²⁸ Stevens and Stevens, *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, 133.

And bearded bronze, but not a man,
 Although I patch him as I can
 And reach through him *almost* to a man.
 If to serenade almost to a man
 Is to miss, by that, things as they are,
 Say that it is the serenade
 Of a man that plays a blue guitar.²⁹

When he presents an object in his poetry, Stevens acknowledges that he cannot present the actual object, but always just a translation, an *almost* actual object. But if, as Williams insists, translation always misses the reality of the object it is translating—"if," as Stevens writes, "to serenade *almost* to a man / Is to miss, by that, things as they are"—then Stevens nevertheless refuses to give up on the act of translation. As he explains later in the poem,

Poetry is the subject of the poem,
 From this the poem issues and
 To this returns. Between the two,
 Between issue and return, there is
 An absence in reality,
 Things as they are.³⁰

Despite the approximate nature of translation—despite the patching and ordering and imposition of meaning that poets, by the nature of their craft, must do—there

²⁹ Ibid, 133-34, emphasis mine.

³⁰ Ibid, 143.

remains a gap between the reader and reality, and beyond that gap things exist for themselves and as they really are. And poetry, Stevens claims, can shed light into this absence, even though the only direct, unmediated thing a poem can represent is poetry itself.

Though Stevens' objection to imagism might seem, at first, to contradict OOO's view that objects do indeed exist equally, the opposite is true: by acknowledging, as Bogost does, that objects "do not exist equally" and that poetry always involves translation and approximation, Stevens allows poetry to become even more object-oriented than Williams does. Take, for instance, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," in which each stanza represents a translation of the real blackbird into a sensual representation, each translation different from all the others. In the first stanza Stevens writes, "Among twenty snowy mountains, / The only moving thing / Was the eye of the blackbird."³¹ Then, in stanza two, "I was of three minds, / Like a tree / In which there are three blackbirds." On the poem goes like this, reframing the blackbird in all sorts of contexts: crossing an icy window, casting shadows over wary passersby, and perched in the limbs of a cedar tree. It reads almost like a reverse-ontograph, presenting the *same* object in different contexts, enmeshed in different sets of relations, rather than a single set of objects in one assemblage. By constantly reframing the blackbird through these vignettes, Stevens acknowledges that the blackbird in the poem is just an approximate, sensual translation of a blackbird, yet he also manages to remind readers that these translations still refer to something real.

³¹ Ibid, 20-22.

In other words, “Thirteen Ways...” demonstrates that though the blackbird can mean many different things when interpreted in different ways, none of these meanings fully grasps the reality of the blackbird, which always remains the same despite, as Harman calls them, the “accidental, transient changes” happening to its sensual qualities.³² The blackbird really is there, sitting in the cedar limbs, even though the poem never fully grasps it. In stanza five, for instance, the speaker interprets the blackbird metaphorically as an embodiment of aesthetic beauty:

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

In this particular translation, the blackbird *does* serve as an objective correlative, causing a certain emotional response in the speaker, who marvels at the beauty of its cry and the haunting silence that follows. On the other hand, when we read in stanza four that “A man and a woman / Are one. / A man and a woman and a blackbird / Are one,” the blackbird does not evoke an emotional response, but the speaker still interprets the bird metaphorically, this time as an example of one of the many animals with which the human soul is entangled in cosmic oneness. For the speakers of stanzas four and five, the blackbird is symbolic, draped with superimposed meanings, something altogether different from the blackbird as it actually exists free from human symbolism.

³² Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 198.

Not all of the poem's thirteen speakers rely so heavily on symbol and metaphor in their translations of the bird. For instance, in stanza eight, the speaker acknowledges the blackbird as worthy of epistemic consideration, asserting that

I know noble accents
 And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
 But I know, too,
 That the blackbird is involved
 In what I know.

Whereas some poets and philosophers—read: Eliot and Kant—might assert that “noble accents / And lucid, inescapable rhythms” comprise all of knowledge, this speaker insists that the blackbird is worth of thought as well. However, by pairing the blackbird with these accents and rhythms, she molds it into a sensual image in an aesthetic statement *about* knowledge. This blackbird is still a translation.

Even when the blackbird is presented with the smallest amount of human intervention, as in the poem's final stanza, it remains merely an approximated aesthetic ornament:

It was evening all afternoon.
 It was snowing
 And it was going to snow.
 The blackbird sat
 In the cedar-limbs.

Here the speaker describes a scene in realistic terms, resisting symbolism in order to paint an accurate linguistic portrait of reality. But, as evidenced by the metaphor

“it was evening all afternoon” and the speaker’s prediction that “it was going to snow,” even this sparse description still translates the scene. Meanwhile, the blackbird sits there in the snow not minding the darkness of the day or the threat of more snow. Likewise, in each stanza, we as readers can see that behind each translation there remains a real blackbird to which the speaker refers, a blackbird that is unchanged despite all thirteen translations.

In “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” Stevens demonstrates the difficulty of ontography, the impossibility of completely grasping the full reality of objects in any representation, especially when language is involved. But despite these difficulties, Stevens nevertheless attempts to communicate reality. By presenting multiple translations of an object and refusing to privilege one translation over another, he illustrates that the blackbird remains the same despite its transient sensual changes. Stevens’ poetic ontography works on the same level as Theodor Adorno’s “negative dialectics,” in that reality is depicted by showing what it is not—namely, a translation. Adorno writes that “As the subject-object dichotomy is brought to mind it becomes inescapable for the subject, furrowing whatever the subject thinks, even objectively.”³³ In other words, when a perceiving subject encounters the world, everything she encounters becomes an object in her perception, and because of this, she becomes trapped in the binary mode of thinking that everything she encounters really *is* an object, even outside of her perception. In order to resist this binary trap, we must suspend our judgment and observe things without categorizing them as either subject or object; or as Adorno puts it, “in

³³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 6.

philosophy we literally seek to immerse ourselves in things that are heterogeneous to it, without placing those things in prefabricated categories.... Philosophical contents can only be grasped where philosophy does not impose them.”³⁴ So whereas dialectics attempts to label and categorize things, philosophy involves a suspension of judgment and attempt to know things as they really are. As Bennett reminds us in *Vibrant Matter*, “Adorno also acknowledges that the human experience nevertheless includes encounters with an out-side that is active, forceful, and (quasi) independent,”³⁵ and that we should suspend judgment and observe what she calls the “thing-power” through which things resist being translated into anthropocentric concepts or into the subject-object binary that privileges perceivers over non-perceiving entities.

Because of his negative-dialectic approach, Stevens, like Williams, is an ontographer. Whereas Williams tends to present a single perspective on a set of diverse objects, in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” Stevens presents many translations of a single thing, or as Bogost puts it, “a profusion of particular perspectives on a particular set of things.”³⁶ Read through the lens of OOO, Stevens’ objection to imagism is not so much a negation of its thing-centric perspective as it is an expanding of imagism’s scope that in turn makes it *more* object-oriented, reminding us that objects “exist not just *for us* but also *for themselves* and *for one another*.”³⁷ While Williams illustrates that all objects exist no more or less really

³⁴ Ibid, 13.

³⁵ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 17.

³⁶ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 52.

³⁷ Ibid, 11.

than one another, Stevens reminds us that objects are not reducible to their perceptions, relations, purposes, or translations.

1.3 – LIGHTING UP THE OBJECTS WITHIN

By working within the confines of language and patching up their representations of the world as best they can, Williams and Stevens present readers with something close enough to reality to be felt and experienced. Their poetic ontography goes beyond translating objective reality into objective correlatives, and instead allows reality to speak for itself and on its own terms. And though all of these representations of objects are necessarily translations, they nonetheless point toward real objects, demonstrating Bennett's claims that "Texts are bodies that can light up, by rendering human perception more acute, those bodies whose favored vehicle of affectivity is less wordy."³⁸

Take, as a concluding example, Williams' "The Hurricane," a poem I mention in my introduction, and one also first included in his collection *The Clouds*:

The tree lay down
on the garage roof
and stretched, you
have your heaven,
it said, go to it.³⁹

³⁸ Bennett, "Systems and Things," 232.

³⁹ Williams, Litz, and MacGowan, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume 2, 1939-1962*, 158.

In the poem's five short lines, we read about how a hurricane has enough power to fell a tree, and similarly how a falling tree can crash through a garage roof, squashing everything inside. When I read this poem, I am not brought into direct contact with hurricanes, trees, or garages, but I am reminded of their existence and power. In particular, I remember the time when, during a strong spring storm in Tennessee, I awoke one night to a sharp crashing noise outside the house. When I stepped outside the next morning, I saw that a gigantic maple tree had fallen in the driveway, directly on top of my housemate's car, crushing it flat. The tree's stout branches had just missed my own car by a few inches, so that in order for me to back out of the driveway, I had to use a chainsaw to cut away several large limbs. True, the tree and the wind and the cars that I imagine, upon reading "The Hurricane," are sensual objects in my mind. But they *refer* to real objects, to physical things with tangible powers, powers my housemate felt quite directly on that spring morning. By presenting these objects-in-translation in his poem, Williams illuminates in my mind those real objects to which his words refer.

I call this power of reference "lighting up the objects within." It is certainly true that texts are objects, as Harman and Morton insist; as Morton puts it, "To write poetry is to force the reader to coexist with fragile phrase, fragile ink, fragile paper: to experience the many physical levels of a poem's architecture."⁴⁰ Yet literature can do much more than just presenting readers with a physical object made of ink and paper. As Bennett argues—and as Williams and Stevens demonstrate—texts can shed light on the nontextual objects with which we interact on a daily basis,

⁴⁰ Morton, "An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry," 222.

revealing in the process those objects' recalcitrant power. In "The Hurricane," I am reminded that I cannot control the wind, that if a tree began to fall on me, I would be powerless to stop it. When I am presented with such a stark reminder of my own fragility, it becomes very difficult for me to maintain that wind and trees only meaningfully exist in relation to myself as a human subject. If that were the case, then by turning my head at the last moment, looking away from the tree that is careening down toward me, I would be able to negate its meaningful existence and in doing so save myself. Despite the fact that the poem does not allow me to touch a tree or to feel hurricane winds, it nevertheless reminds me that objects have reality outside of my own perception, and that to those objects, I am just another thing in the world. Lighting up the objects within means holding objects in view, exposing them to analysis so that we can better understand the inhuman world around us. With objects and relations in view, a new world opens to our exploration, one in which we humans are no longer the sole actors, and in which we can better understand and embody our own places in the network.

CHAPTER 2 – HOW TEXTS ILLUMINATE WITHDRAWN OBJECTS

Now that I have laid the foundation for how texts capture objects in their moments of interaction, I can proceed one step further to address the consequences of these interactions. Specifically, I wish to show how, in these captured moments of interaction, texts highlight the ways that objects withdraw from view, and I will do so by examining two texts—Kurt Vonnegut’s novel *Bluebeard* and Joel and Ethan Coen’s film *Burn After Reading*—that illustrate moments when objects resist human agency and remain more than the sum of their relations at any given moment. But before I begin with the texts, let me review the concept of withdrawal.

In *Prince of Networks*, Harman builds his object-oriented philosophy by revisiting Husserl’s phenomenology, which tells us that, when we view a hammer, “We never see all faces of the hammer at once, but always see it from a certain angle and distance, in a certain colour and intensity of light, and always in a certain mood.”¹ Since we cannot see all faces of the hammer at once, the sensual translation of the hammer is never complete in our minds; it is never the same thing as the real hammer that exists for itself and outside the mind. There is a gap, then, between the real hammer and its sensual counterpart, between the hammer as it actually exists

¹ Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 180.

and the thing I see lying there on the workbench—the same gap that William Carlos Williams works to bridge in his poetry, as I discuss in the previous chapter. Harman names this gap “withdrawal,” since there is something about the hammer that I do not perceive, whether simply because, from my point of view, the underside of the hammer is not visible, or because the hammer has the capacity to break and render its typical uses impossible. Either way, the hammer withholds something of its reality, never allowing all of itself to be encountered at any one time. Yet the hammer still exists, despite the changes happening to its sensual counterpart and regardless of whether anyone even perceives it at all. For this reason, Harman has recently begun to use the term “withhold”² to describe the resistant action of objects, since it is not the case that objects withdraw into some nether realm of mystical absence, but rather that there is always something about them that we cannot experience. As such, I will adopt this new terminology in this chapter, alternating at times between the two terms depending on the behavior of the objects in question.

Harman is not the only theorist to develop a term for objects’ capacities to resist interpretation and perception; in *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett highlights something very similar to Harman’s *withholding* in her own conception of “the recalcitrance of things.” She writes that, one day, she noticed a strange collection of objects in a gutter near her Maryland home, and in that moment she “realized that the capacity of these bodies was not restricted to a passive ‘intractability’ but also included the ability to make things happen, to produce effects” and that “In this

² Harman, “ENG 575 -- Seminar Discussion with Graham Harman at Oregon State University.”

assemblage, *objects* appeared as *things*, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics.”³ Bennett uses the term *thing* instead of *object* because, as she noticed at that moment, the bits of rubbish she encountered in the gutter resisted her attempts to reduce them to either side of the subject-object binary, seeming instead to switch back and forth between agential being and inanimate matter. Bennett’s things, like Harman’s objects, persist as real actors in real networks, regardless of what labels humans attempt to impose onto them, and even regardless of whether humans are ever conscious of them.

As I demonstrate in the previous chapter, literary texts can present readers with objects in their moments of interaction, calling the reader’s attention not only to translated text-objects, but also to real things outside the text. In this chapter, I will dwell for a moment longer in these object interactions, because while texts can indeed remind us of the multitude of objects with which we coexist, they can also reveal much more about these objects than that they merely exist. When texts capture the moments in which objects interact, one of the surprising consequences is that we can observe these moments from multiple angles, turning them before us to see different sides of the action. As Harman and Husserl insist, we can never see all sides of an interaction at once; nevertheless, texts can highlight many more perspectives than we could otherwise see, allowing us to pass quickly between them. When we view object relations through these multiple perspectives, we can see the ways that perceptions fail to accurately represent objects. For instance, by

³ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 5.

observing how an object “means” different things for different characters, both human and inhuman, and by noticing the inconsistencies between the sensual objects created in each case, we can see that the real object itself is something much more than any of these sensual object, which are merely translations or representations of the real object, never exhausting or grasping its full reality. Like Wallace Stevens’ blackbird, which persists as a real object through thirteen anthropocentric representations, things are not defined by our perception of them.

In short, texts can illuminate moments when objects withhold something of themselves, and can do so by presenting examples of moments when translation fails—the same sort of negative dialectics I mention in relation to Adorno and Stevens in the previous chapter. As Morton writes in *Realist Magic*, “Withdrawal means that at this very moment, this very object, as an intrinsic aspect of its being, is incapable of being anything else: my poem about it, its atomic structure, its function, its relations with other things.... Withdrawal just is the unspeakable unicity.... An open secret.”⁴ Though they cannot prevent recalcitrant things from withholding themselves, texts can at least hold them in our view a bit longer, allowing us to more fully understand *that* they are withholding, if not *what it is* they actually withhold. In this chapter, I will present two examples of such moments of withdrawal, two “open secrets” opened up even further.

I will begin with Kurt Vonnegut’s *Bluebeard*, in which fictional Abstract Expressionist painter Rabo Karabekian’s career is ruined when his paint, called Sateen Dura-Luxe, reacts with chemicals in the canvas and self-destructs, leaving a

⁴ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 16-17.

pile of paint chips and a blank canvas where his masterpiece once stood. Because the Sateen Dura-Luxe withholds the fact that one of its chemical ingredients has the capacity to generate such a destructive chemical reaction, Karabekian's career takes on a completely new direction. And as he reflects on that career in this journal-style autobiography, we can see in fascinating detail how integral this obstinate paint has been in the painter's life. Next, I will examine Joel and Ethan Coen's *Burn After Reading*, in which a compact disc containing, among other things, ex-CIA agent Osborne Cox's "memoir"—which in reality is a series of drunken rants he recorded after losing his job—becomes the center of a complex espionage debacle resulting in the deaths of many of the characters with whom the disc comes into contact. All of this happens because the Cox Memoir, as I will call it in this chapter, falls out of the gym bag of a divorce lawyer's unsuspecting secretary, only to be found by two gym employees too bumbling and dim-witted to understand the disc's contents. Both of these objects, Sateen Dura-Luxe and the Cox Memoir, actively rebel against human attempts to impose meaning onto them, illustrating Bogost's idea that object withdrawal levels the ontological playing field, or in his own words, that

we can no longer claim that our existence is special as
existence.... If we take seriously the idea that all objects recede
interminably into themselves, then human perception becomes
just one among many ways that objects might relate. To put

things at the center of a new metaphysics also requires us to admit that they do not exist just for us.⁵

As I explain in chapter one, texts can reach beyond their pages to give readers a better understanding of the real objects with which they share the world. Similarly, in this chapter, I will argue that by showing particular instances when objects withhold something from their relations, these texts highlight the withdrawn natures of whole categories of similar objects, from works of abstract art in *Bluebeard* to government surveillance data in *Burn After Reading*.

2.1 – PAINT MISBEHAVIN’

Critics have generally panned Vonnegut’s 1987 novel *Bluebeard*, insisting that it represents Vonnegut at his worst and complaining that the novel’s convoluted plot leads nowhere in particular except to the author’s own “idiosyncratic responses to this or that,” as Vonnegut himself admits in the author’s note with which the book begins.⁶ Even biographer Charles J. Shields calls *Bluebeard* “an overlong, bumptious treatise on the value of Vonnegut’s oeuvre as a writer, couched in an argument about aesthetic theory, at the center of which was Kurt’s increasing friction with [then wife] Jill.”⁷ With reviews like these, it is clear that *Bluebeard* does not fit into the sort of exploration of canonical value that Harman proposes in “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer,” nor has it been

⁵ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 8-9.

⁶ Vonnegut, *Bluebeard*, n.p.

⁷ Shields, *And So It Goes*, 380.

canonized to the extent of some of Vonnegut's other novels—*Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Cat's Cradle*, and *Breakfast of Champions*, in particular.

Yet these critics generally miss the intricacies of the novel, not the least of which are its self-deprecating and reflective protagonist and his sophisticated take on art and aesthetics. As Loree Rackstraw argues in *Love As Always, Kurt*, "None [of the novel's critics] seemed to recognize the cultural and political significance of those artistic departures from the conventional he celebrated in the novel."⁸ Because Vonnegut uses clear, simple language to lay out his aesthetic position—or because he uses uncomplicated language to discuss the realm of "high art" at all—reviewers mistake this simplicity of voice for a lack of philosophic merit, especially since Vonnegut has always straddled the fence between high and low art, refusing to allow himself to be categorized into either camp. In *Bluebeard*, Vonnegut does not merely present readers with an idiosyncratic rant on his own frustrations as an artist; rather, the novel is a complex and well-researched discussion of aesthetic theory, one which aligns both with Abstract Expressionism's focus on objects as agents in the artistic process, as well as Timothy Morton's later object-oriented aesthetic theory, all framed within a fascinating tale of the vitality of one particular object: Sateen Dura-Luxe. While supposedly-inanimate objects are important actors in other Vonnegut novels—I'm thinking here of ice-nine in *Cat's Cradle* and the Mandarax translating device in *Galapagos*—nowhere does a material thing have a more singular or direct impact on a character's life than in *Bluebeard*.

⁸ Rackstraw, *Love as Always, Kurt*, 133.

Put simply, Sateen Dura-Luxe destroys the artistic career of Rabo Karabekian, an illustrator-turned-Abstract Expressionist who serves as the novel's narrator. Karabekian describes Sateen Dura-Luxe as "an acrylic wall-paint whose colors, according to the advertisements of the day, would '...outlive the smile on the Mona Lisa.'"⁹ Duped by these advertisements, Karabekian chose the paint as the medium for what he expected to be his masterpiece: a sixty-four foot long, eight foot high canvas painted solid blue and titled "Windsor Blue Number Seventeen." Once he completed the painting, he sold it to GEFFCo, a corporation whose executives wished to hang the painting in the entryway of their headquarters on Park Avenue. On the wave of this painting's marvelous success, Karabekian notes that he finally gained acceptance into the "artificial extended family,"¹⁰ as he calls them, of the Abstract Expressionists, and indeed, he quickly becomes their wealthiest and most influential member. In fact, "Windsor Blue Number Seventeen" became so influential in such a short amount of time that art appreciation teachers immediately added images of it to their course texts, so that years later, Karabekian still encounters people who studied his work.

But then it all fell apart. As Karabekian explains, "Thanks to an unforeseen chemical reaction between the sizing of my canvases and the acrylic wall paint... [my paintings] destroyed themselves."¹¹ Not only did "Windsor Blue Number Seventeen" shed its paint in small bits of "what looked like moldy Rice Crispies" onto the floor of the GEFFCo lobby, but all of his paintings suffered the same fate,

⁹ Vonnegut, *Bluebeard*, 21.

¹⁰ Ibid, 195.

¹¹ Ibid, 20.

shedding their paint and turning from masterpieces to garbage overnight. It was such a sudden shift and one whose nature was so public that Karabekian, now an old man reflecting on the events after several decades have passed, supposes that “your local paint dealer, if he has been in the business for any length of time, will laugh in your face if you ask for Sateen Dura-Luxe.”¹² Because of the unexpected and invisible reaction between paint and canvas, Karabekian became the laughingstock of the art world, retreating to his mansion in the Hamptons to live as a hermit and allowing only his closest friends to visit, all because of the recalcitrance of a single brand of paint.

Sateen Dura-Luxe is matter at its most vital and rebellious, but it is not really a special case—after all, in any painting, the paint and canvas must do some of the work to produce the final product. Morton writes something along these lines in *Realist Magic*:

Paintings have always been made of more things than humans[;] when you put the painting on the wall, it also relates to the wall. A fly lands on it. Dust settles on it. Slowly the pigment changes despite your artistic intentions. We could think of all these nonhuman interventions as themselves a kind of art or design. Then we realize that nonhumans are also doing art all the time, it’s just that we call it causality. But

¹² Ibid, 21-22.

when calcium crystals coat a Paleolithic cave painting, they are also designing, also painting.¹³

Like the Sateen Dura-Luxe, which certainly *designs* when it destroys “Windsor Blue Number Seventeen,” Morton argues that *all* paint designs, all paint rebels against the painter’s intentions if those intentions are to limit it to a given, controllable value, even if those changes are never as present and apparent as is the case in *Bluebeard*. Because the Heideggerian hammer that is the Sateen Dura-Luxe withdraws in such a public arena, in front of millions of viewers, it serves as a prime example of the liveliness and recalcitrance of paint as an agent in the artistic process.

Yet what Morton says about paint is not new; in fact, it sounds uncannily similar to the way Karabekian and his Abstract Expressionist friends discuss their own art. This artistic “artificial family” acknowledges that inhuman things have agency in the creative process and are, as Morton claims, “doing art all the time.” For example, Terry Kitchen (another of Vonnegut’s fictional painters) struggled to build any artistic momentum until one day he discovered a spray-painting rig at a mechanical shop and began using it to make color field paintings. When he first saw the device, Kitchen became strangely transfixed by it and demanded that Karabekian buy it for him—he was broke at the time, and Karabekian’s recent successes allowed him to fund many of his artist-friends’ works. At this moment, because of the spray rig’s intrusion into his life, Kitchen’s career changed course completely, and he found a new passion for art and began to have success rivaling Karabekian’s. In *Bluebeard*, Karabekian reflects on his friend’s work, explaining that

¹³ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 24.

“in the paintings which have greatness birth and death are always there,” and that “Birth and death were even in that old piece of beaverboard Terry Kitchen sprayed at seeming random so long ago. I don’t know how he got them in there, and neither did he.”¹⁴ Because he encounters the spray rig and allows it to enter his creative process, Kitchen’s work becomes complex, full of unintended meanings that he could not otherwise have instilled in them.

In keeping with this specific reflection, Karabekian’s description of Abstract Expressionist art in general aligns nearly perfectly with the ways that object-oriented theorists speak of withdrawn objects, which exist in and for themselves, apart from human access. Throughout the novel, Karabekian insists that Abstract Expressionist paintings are “about absolutely nothing but themselves,”¹⁵ and that this about-nothing-ness was the only characteristic uniting the school’s diverse set of artists, “whose paintings were nothing alike except for one thing,”¹⁶ that one thing being their absence of symbolic meaning. Likewise, Harman writes that “objects are irreducible to their relations with other things, and always hold something in reserve from these relations,”¹⁷ and Morton describes the “unspeakable unicity”¹⁸ of objects by stating that “Every aesthetic trace, every footprint of an object, sparkles with absence.”¹⁹ Already, in these statements, we can see a vital-materialist take on aesthetics taking shape in the novel.

¹⁴ Vonnegut, *Bluebeard*, 91.

¹⁵ Ibid, 8.

¹⁶ Ibid, 254.

¹⁷ Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 187.

¹⁸ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 16.

¹⁹ Ibid, 18.

But perhaps the most direct statement of paint's vitality comes from a moment when the novel reaches outward from its pages and touches the real history of Abstract Expressionism. Several times in the novel, Karabekian references real-world painters—nights spent drinking with Jackson Pollock, brief interactions with Mark Rothko, and so on—but on only one occasion does he allow one of these real artists to speak. As Karabekian reflects on his first visit to the Museum of Modern art, he writes:

I am reminded now of what the painter Jim Brooks said to me about how he operated, about how all the Abstract Expressionists operated: "I lay on the first stroke of color. After that, the canvas has to do at least half the work." The canvas, if things were going well, would, after that first stroke, begin suggesting or even demanding that he do this or that.²⁰

This quote comes from a personal conversation between Vonnegut and James Brooks; Vonnegut includes a longer excerpt from this conversation in *Fates Worse than Death: an Autobiographical Collage*. There, he explains Brooks' unorthodox notion away, writing that "The canvas, which is to say the unconscious, considers that first stroke, and then it tells the painter's hand how to respond to it—with a shape of a certain color and texture at that point there."²¹ But immediately afterward, he adds a strange detail of his own: "And then if all is going well, the canvas ponders the addition and comes up with further recommendations." In his

²⁰ Vonnegut, *Bluebeard*, 181.

²¹ Vonnegut, *Fates Worse than Death*, 43.

first statement, Vonnegut implies that it is not the canvas doing the actual work, but rather the human unconscious, an assertion that sounds very similar to the correlationist conceit that the world only meaningfully exists for humans and in human perception. However, in his addendum that “the canvas ponders the addition,” Vonnegut problematizes this interpretation, blurring the line between the unconscious and the external world and implying that the canvas may indeed be an agent in the artistic process. In fact, he may be redefining the unconscious *as* the external world, implying that when we, as artists, think that our unconscious is prompting us to act, this is really the call of the inhuman objects with which we are surrounded. And regardless of Vonnegut’s ultimate opinion, James Brooks certainly seems to believe that his canvas works with him to create art, or at least his quote does not seem to indicate any doubt about the vitality of objects.

Later in the same essay in *Fates Worse than Death*—which Vonnegut wrote about Jackson Pollack at the request of *Esquire* for an issue commemorating the 50 Americans “who had made the biggest difference in the country’s destiny since 1932”—Vonnegut describes Pollock’s art in similar terms to the ones Brooks uses, explaining that Pollock “made himself a champion and connoisseur of the appealing accidents which more formal artists worked hard to exclude from their performances.”²² To Abstract Expressionists like Brooks and Pollock, canvas, brushes, and gravity are just as much a part of any work of art as the artist herself; they would all seemingly agree with Morton’s claim that “nonhumans are doing art

²² Ibid, 42.

all the time”²³ and Bennett’s assertion that the things we often consider inanimate are “not restricted to a passive ‘intractability’ but also [have] the ability to make things happen, to produce effects.”²⁴ In *Bluebeard*, then, Vonnegut does not overstep his bounds in his representation of the Abstract Expressionists, who seem to have prefigured an object-oriented view of the artistic process, including inhuman things as equals in their creative work. Despite what critics may claim about the novel’s idiosyncrasy and lack of philosophic merit, Vonnegut’s aesthetic position in the novel has direct ties to a very real and influential school of thought.

But in addition to all of these artistic objects I have discussed so far, *Bluebeard* also welcomes one other important object into the creative process: namely, the reader of artistic texts. Karabekian holds a prefigured object-oriented view in this case, but his view is not the only one we experience in the novel, as other characters come and go whose interpretations of abstract art clash violently with the artist’s own. These characters act as foils to Karabekian’s non-relational aesthetics, particularly Circe Berman, the woman who seems to be something of a cross between Karabekian’s lover and an unwelcome houseguest, and Dan Gregory, the artist’s former mentor. In short, Berman and Gregory believe that aesthetics is based solely on meaning—that is, on the notion that objects exist only for humans, that a painting is nothing more than its creator’s symbolic intentions.

On the one hand is Circe Berman; from the moment we meet her, she is already asking questions about meaning, as when Karabekian sees her on his

²³ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 24.

²⁴ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 5.

private beach and reluctantly says “Hello,” to which she responds, “What does ‘Hello’ mean?”²⁵ After Karabekian, again reluctantly, invites her into his home, which functions for him as an immense private gallery of Abstract Expressionist painting, she begins questioning his aesthetic choices, telling him that all the paintings are worthless: “I need information the way I need vitamins and minerals,” she tells him, and “Judging from your pictures, you hate facts like poison.”²⁶ As if this weren’t enough, when Karabekian tells her that the titles of his paintings (e.g. “Windsor Blue Number Seventeen”) “are *meant* to be uncommunicative,” she exclaims, “What’s the point of being alive... if you’re not going to *communicate*?”²⁷ According to Berman, the only reason art should exist is to communicate symbolic meaning to its human viewer. The objects themselves—that is, the painting and all the other inhuman things that have come together to create it—play no role in her aesthetic theory. Whereas Pollock, Kitchen, Brooks, and the other Abstract Expressionists, real and fictional, allow paintings to exist for themselves, refusing to inject artificial symbolism into them and thereby to ruin the absence of meaning which is so integral to their art, Berman refuses to acknowledge anything that has no meaning.

On the other hand, Dan Gregory’s aesthetic theory is more developed than Berman’s, in that he not only wants art to communicate *something*, but for it to communicate reality as it exists outside the painting, and to do so in such an exact way that moral judgments can be made about the merit of the things being

²⁵ Vonnegut, *Bluebeard*, 14.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 25.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 38-39.

represented. In his emphasis on representation, Gregory seems, at first, to be similar to William Carlos Williams, since both begin by presenting not ideas, but things, in their art. However, this similarity quickly vanishes when Gregory brings morality into the discussion. In Karabekian's first meeting with Gregory, back when he was first beginning to take up art, he recalls that his mentor told him to "Draw everything the way it really is"; Gregory then pointed to a model ship on his mantelpiece and demanded, "when you put [that ship] into the wonderful picture you are going to paint of this studio, you and I are going to go over your rendering of it with a magnifying glass. Any line in the rigging I care to point to: I expect you to tell me its name and what its function is."²⁸

Here we can see the superficial similarity to Williams; Gregory does, after all, place his focus on real objects as they exist beyond the painting, insisting that they be depicted as they actually exist. But beneath this object-oriented façade, everything Gregory touches turns to symbolism, vanishing from the realm of reality to the realm of meaning and sensual translation. Karabekian recalls Gregory telling him that "there would be a spiritual lesson for me in my study of the simple rifle and the bewilderingly complex human body."²⁹ This lesson, according to Gregory, is that artists "are the justices of the Supreme Court of Good and Evil,"³⁰ and that they are the only ones who can make the final decision about whether any individual object is morally right or repugnant. Furthermore, Gregory commands Karabekian never to set foot inside the Museum of Modern Art—he, like Berman, abhors such

²⁸ Ibid, 148.

²⁹ Ibid, 149.

³⁰ Ibid, 150.

meaningless drivel—yet when he catches his protégé leaving the museum one day, he becomes furious, not because Karabekian has seen the art itself, but because he has violated a symbolic command. Gregory shouts, “It was a way of proving you were on my side and not theirs. I’m not afraid to have you look at the junk in there. You were part of *my* gang, and proud of it.”³¹ For Gregory, everything is symbolic, even and especially the so-called *real* objects he represents in his illustrations.

Both Gregory’s and Berman’s stances toward modern abstract art insist on knowing, beforehand, what art is supposed to be, on approaching a painting with a set of rules and values to impose onto the work. Neither character can appreciate these works of art *not* because they are not well-trained enough, but rather because they are *too* well trained, conditioned to view paintings only in terms of their meanings and not as aesthetic objects existing in and for themselves. They personify Bennett’s warning in *Vibrant Matter* that “If we think we already know what’s out there, we will surely miss much of it.”³² Because they are so wrapped up in their own aesthetic theories, they miss the fascinating vitality of the inhuman things that play such an important role in the creative process. In other words, abstract art withholds itself from their appreciation, since it does not communicate any symbolic human meaning. And since they refuse to acknowledge any other forms of meaning, they cannot see, as the Abstract Expressionists can, the recalcitrant vibrancy of objects.

³¹ Ibid, 176.

³² Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xv.

And we can see all of this through Vonnegut's tale of the rebellious Sateen Dura-Luxe, one particular recalcitrant thing. The novel presents a complex and object-oriented aesthetic theory in which inhuman objects are included as actors in the creative process. But rather than simply presenting his theory as such, Vonnegut does so through the interesting and compelling tale of Karabekian, a man who, now nearing the end of his life, has finally come to terms with the recalcitrance of the paint that ruined his career. In this story, the paint's withholding sheds light on the role of objects in the larger aesthetic discussion, providing a solid counterpoint to Berman's and Gregory's anthropocentric symbolism. The novel becomes an intricate commentary on the real world outside of the text by capturing the moments in which both Sateen Dura-Luxe in particular, and abstract art in general, withhold aspects of themselves from the characters. And as a result, we come out of the experience of reading *Bluebeard* with more than just Vonnegut's idiosyncratic opinions, but also with a better understanding of both the history of and the theory behind Abstract Expressionism. Perhaps we even gain a better understanding of the inhuman artists at work in our own everyday lives.

2.2 – SIGNALS [UN]INTELLIGENCE

It is an interesting coincidence that reviewers responded to Joel and Ethan Coen's 2008 film *Burn After Reading* in much the same way they did to *Bluebeard*, criticizing the Coens for relying too heavily on their typical tropes and writing the film off as proof the brothers had become complacent in their work. Richard Corliss concludes his *Time Magazine* review, "I have the sinking feeling I've made *Burn After*

Reading sound funnier than it is,” explaining that “Film critics aren’t supposed to confess bafflement at the end of a review, but that’s what I feel here. Either the Coens failed, or I didn’t figure out what they’re attempting... *Burn After Reading* is a movie about stupidity that left me feeling stupid.”³³ Manohla Dargis is not so kind in the *New York Times*, where she argues that the Coens’ “predictably self-amused comedy” lacks heart and wonders why the brothers “keep making films about a subject for which they often evince so little regard, namely other people.”³⁴ Even Roger Ebert, who gave the film a fairly positive three-star review, writes that “This is not a great Coen brothers’ film” and that “the end felt like it arrived a little arbitrarily.”³⁵ Just as *Bluebeard* was panned for relying too heavily on Vonnegut’s idiosyncrasies, so the Coens have been criticized for the “gimmicky” nature of *Burn After Reading*, which one critic even called “an entirely frivolous soufflé.”³⁶

But just as *Bluebeard*’s reviewers seem to have missed the novel’s complex aesthetic theory, so do critics of *Burn After Reading* miss out on the film’s object-oriented undercurrent, seeing only the human elements of the story and ignoring everything else. Once again, *Burn After Reading* presents viewers with an intricate network in which one unlikely object—specifically, an unlabeled compact disc in a green plastic jewel case—takes center stage and rebels against the intentions of all the characters who wish to manipulate it or use it to their own ends. When the disc falls out of the gym bag of an unsuspecting secretary, it sets into motion a series of

³³ Corliss, “Baffled by *Burn After Reading*.”

³⁴ Dargis, “Coens Ask the C.I.A. for a License to Laugh.”

³⁵ Ebert, “*Burn After Reading* Movie Review (2008).”

³⁶ Sandhu, “Brad Pitt and George Clooney Star in *Burn After Reading*.”

events that is beyond the understanding not only of the characters themselves, but even of the CIA, whose omniscient and menacing presence looms over every moment in the film. And just as the Sateen Dura-Luxe illuminates the recalcitrance of art in general, this CD encoded with government intelligence sheds light on the larger category of signals intelligence that it exemplifies. In both cases, Latour's suggestion comes true, as the resistance of a particular object renders visible the larger network of actors in which it is enmeshed.



Above: Burn After Reading still; Brad Pitt as Chad Feldheimer holding the Cox Memoir's plastic jewel case

At this point, I should give a brief plot summary in order to explain how this particular object—which I will refer to as the Cox Memoir, though it is really something much more than such a reductive description allows—comes to exist. When Osborne Cox (played by John Malkovich), a mid-level CIA analyst, is demoted for alcoholism and inefficiency, he quits his job and vows to get revenge by writing an “explosive” memoir. When he tells his wife Katie (Tilda Swinton) that he has quit, she decides she has finally had enough of their floundering marriage and files

for divorce. Before she can tell Osborne about her decision, Katie's attorney recommends that she obtain a copy of her husband's financial records, so she sneaks into his basement office and downloads them onto a blank CD. But in her haste, she also downloads several other documents from the hard drive including Cox's memoir, or at least the notes he has recorded so far, notes which are merely his drunken ramblings as he tries to piece together scenes from his past.

From this point on, the Cox Memoir withholds itself from the characters' access, refusing every attempt to categorize or label it. In its first and most literal withdrawal, the disc falls out of the gym bag of Katie's divorce attorney's secretary while she is working out at a neighborhood fitness center called Hardbodies. There, a janitor collects it and turns it over to Linda Litzke (Frances McDorman) and Chad Feldheimer (Brad Pitt), two of the gym's bumbling employees. Linda desperately wants a set of cosmetic surgeries in order to spice up her dating life, so when they put the CD into Chad's office computer and discover that it contains references to signals intelligence and CIA section heads, they assume it is top-secret government intelligence and decide to track down the disc's owner and demand a reward in exchange for retuning the disc. To Chad and Linda, the Cox Memoir is merely a means to an end, a way to make some easy money, and in their frantic haste to turn a profit on their discovery, they ignore the actual contents of the memoir, instead projecting onto it their own purposes; they view the memoir as a Latourian "black box" worth only its input and output.

The language Chad and Linda use to describe and discuss the memoir makes clear the emptiness of their assumptions. In all of their conversations, Linda and

Chad never seem to know what to call the memoir, so they don't end up calling it much of anything; Chad refers to it mostly as "shit"—for instance, when Linda suggests that they put a note up in the locker room advertising the lost disc, he objects, asking incredulously, "Put a *note* up? Highly classified shit found? Signals intelligence shit? CIA shit? 'Hello! Did you lose your secret CIA shit?' I don't think so."³⁷ Meanwhile, in the same conversation, Linda and Ted (the gym manager) only refer to the memoir as "this" and "it," using empty pronouns divorced from their antecedents to make up for the fact that they don't quite know to what these pronouns refer anyway.

Because they interpret the memoir only in terms of how it might benefit themselves, Chad and Linda use it in a way that has dire consequences for the rest of the characters. Chad searches through the document and discovers what he believes is the name and telephone number of the disc's owner—namely, Osborne Cox, who is unaware of his wife's plan to divorce him and thus has no idea that his memoir has been lost and found. Chad and Linda call Cox late one night and offer to return the disc for a reward, which naturally infuriates Cox, who refuses to submit to what he perceives as blackmail. After this initial plan fails, Linda decides to take the disc to the Russian embassy for a reward, and again, since Russia has no need for the rambling journal notes of a mid-level ex-CIA analyst, and since they are forbidden from accepting United States government intelligence anyway. And the CIA notices all of this, since they have an agent in the Russian embassy, yet they are confused about why anyone would want to buy or sell Cox's memoir, since they are

³⁷ Coen and Coen, *Burn After Reading*.

well aware of his complete lack of productivity. And at the same time, Katie Cox and her attorney must wait to begin the divorce process since they don't have the financial records they need. All the while, the Cox Memoir keeps changing hands between confused characters who can't quite figure out what any of the other characters want or what this strange object is that serves as the focal point of these interactions. The plot of the movie is a twisted mess, but the Cox Memoir just keeps on defying characters' expectations at every turn.

As is the case when Karabekian carefully applies the Sateen Dura-Luxe to his canvas, each character in *Burn After Reading* has a specific purpose or design in mind for the memoir; it is always, to use Heidegger's terminology, *ready-to-hand*. To Katie Cox, it is financial records and the key to a long-needed divorce; to Linda, it is secret government intelligence and a quick way to fund cosmetic surgery; to the Russian Ambassador, it is worthless "drivel"; and to Osborne Cox himself, it is an "explosive" memoir, a way to get revenge on his former employer. None of the characters perceives the real object itself, but rather a sensual translation of it: the secrets-for-Linda or financials-for-Katie. And just as his paint rebels against Karabekian's intentions by turning into "moldy rice crispies" and wrecking his career, the Cox Memoir shows its recalcitrance by denying each character's attempt to categorize it and obstinately refusing to be used for their purposes.

Even we, as viewers, cannot ever really see the Cox Memoir for what it is. Only briefly can we ever view its contents, and even then only in fragments, so that much of what we know about it we know by association. From the few glimpses of its contents that we do have—both on computer screens: when Katie is

downloading it for the first time, and then again in Chad's office at Hardbodies—we only see vague outlines of text and numbers, so blurry in the background of the cinematic shot that nothing is identifiable. Even when the memoir's text is read out loud, it makes no sense: for instance, early in the film we hear Cox dictate into a voice recorder, "We were young and committed, and there was nothing we could not do. We thought of the agency less... less.... The principles of George Kennan—a personal hero of mine—like the fabled 'Murrow's Boys,' at a time of...."³⁸ Other than its references to minor players in 20th-century American politics, this fragment has no real content or any coherent meaning. Once again, later in the film, when Chad and Linda call Cox to try to convince him to reward them for finding his "shit," in order to prove that he does indeed have the memoir in his possession, Chad reads another passage: "The bureau chief in Belgrade we all called Slovak the Butcher. He had very little rapport [or *report*, as Chad pronounces it] with his staff, and his dispatches...."³⁹ While this passage does point *somewhere*, it does not give enough information for us to determine just where that somewhere is. Even at its most present moments, the memoir still withdraws, still "holds something in reserve behind its current relations," as Harman says.⁴⁰

But though we cannot ever access the real Cox Memoir apart from its relations, we can certainly see the effects of its recalcitrance by observing those relations. As Morton explains it, "If things are intrinsically withdrawn, irreducible to their perception or relations or uses, they can only affect each other in a strange

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 187.

region out in front of them, a region of traces and footprints: the aesthetic dimension.”⁴¹ When the Cox Memoir falls out of the secretary’s gym bag, it sets off a chain of events that ultimately leads to the deaths of two or three (the film is unclear on this point) characters, the arrests of several more, and a slew of strange coincidences along the way. And we see all of this only in relation to the characters’ mistaken interpretations of the memoir, not to the memoir itself, in a series of negative examples in which characters impose onto the memoir something that it is not—thus the film utilizes Adorno’s negative dialectics in a similar way to Wallace Stevens’ poetry. By observing the memoir’s “traces and footprints”—that is, through mistaken sensual translations—we can understand how it moves throughout the film and how it affects characters and binds their fates together into one strange mess best summed up by J.K. Simmons’ CIA boss in the film’s final scene: “Jesus, what a clusterfuck.”⁴²

But the traces left by the Cox Memoir point to something perhaps even more sinister than the film’s bloody conclusion. Before Cox quit his job at the CIA, he was a data analyst, as we learn in the first few lines of the movie when his supervisor explains that, though he is not firing Cox, he is “moving [him] out of SIGINT entirely.”⁴³ SIGINT stands for *signals intelligence*, and according to the National Security Agency’s website, it “is intelligence derived from electronic signals and systems used by foreign targets, such as communications systems, radars, and weapons systems. SIGINT provides a vital window for our nation into foreign

⁴¹ Morton, *Realist Magic*.

⁴² Coen and Coen, *Burn After Reading*.

⁴³ Ibid.

adversaries' capabilities, actions, and intentions."⁴⁴ Cox's former job, then, is very similar to the one held by Edward Snowden before he leaked sensitive NSA documents, though Snowden worked as a consultant rather than at the CIA itself. What seems at first to be a mere genre convention of the Coens' film—of course the main character in a spy thriller would work for the NSA decrypting signals intelligence—turns out to be rich in cultural context and controversy, and on top of that, it seems to have anticipated this controversy several years ahead of time.

Just as *Bluebeard* sheds light on the artistic depths of Abstract Expressionism by examining the recalcitrance of one particular brand of paint, so too does *Burn After Reading* illuminate the seedy underbelly of signals intelligence by depicting the hidden life of one particularly unintelligent piece of intelligence. Typically, signals intelligence is acquired through advanced technological processes and cannot be understood by anyone but the most highly-trained experts. So it fits with the typical Coen irony that the Cox Memoir falls into the hands of Chad and Linda, two decidedly-inexpert gym employees whose lack of intelligence matches up perfectly with that of the memoir. This irony is drawn out further by the fact that this particular piece of intelligence withdraws from view in a most untechnological way: by falling out of a secretary's gym bag onto a locker room floor.

The Cox Memoir, then, is signals *unintelligence*, since each character who possesses it seems to become less intelligent than they were beforehand; whenever the memoir changes hands, it seems that information has been lost rather than gained. When Linda presents the disc to the Russian ambassador, for instance, he is

⁴⁴ "Signals Intelligence."

completely baffled about why a middle-aged gym worker would be trying to sell him a worthless memoir under the guise of government secrets. He is intrigued at first, but ultimately wastes his time and gains nothing for it. Likewise, when the CIA informant in the Russian embassy reports back to his boss that the Russians have the memoir, the boss is even more confused than the Russian ambassador; he asks his analyst, “So, we don’t really know what anyone is after?” and then tells him to “Report back when... um... I don’t know—when it makes sense.”⁴⁵ Even though they are constantly spying on the characters, the CIA cannot make sense of the strange combination of events that the memoir sets into action. As the film ends, the boss is so confused that he exclaims, “I guess we learned not to do it again... although I’m fucked if I know what we did.”⁴⁶ The Cox Memoir has finally and completely withdrawn from view.

2.3 – MINDING THE GAP

Burn After Reading and *Bluebeard* are both texts about withdrawn objects, and both use the withdrawal of their respective objects to illuminate something beyond themselves, something about our relational human experience that puts it in stark contrast with a nonrelational, object-oriented existence. We are always, the texts imply, imposing meaning onto objects, attempting to categorize them, and they always withhold something of themselves from us. Both of these texts illustrate what Harman calls the “sensual gap”—that is, the difference between a real object

⁴⁵ Coen and Coen, *Burn After Reading*.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

and a sensual translation of it. Because they capture each of their depicted objects and hold them still for the reader to examine, we can see these objects even in their instants of withdrawal, noticing things about them we would not normally see in our everyday lives.

As a result of this close examination, we are better able to *mind the gap*—in other words, to withhold judgment for a moment, to allow ourselves to coexist with objects without attempting to categorize them according to their uses or superimposed meanings. The withdrawal of the Sateen Dura-Luxe in *Bluebeard* reminds us that works of art do not exist only in relation to us, but that they also exist in and for themselves, or as Karabekian puts it, paintings can be “about absolutely nothing but themselves,”⁴⁷ despite the fact that throughout the years connoisseurs attempt to impose arbitrary meanings onto them. And the recalcitrance of the Cox Memoir in *Burn After Reading* calls our attention to the fact that contents have consequences, that if we only view objects in terms of our perceptions of them, we will be sorely mistaken and utterly confused when they resist those interpretations. Or, again, as Bennett writes, “If we think we already know what’s out there, we will surely miss much of it.”⁴⁸

Minding the gap means refraining from translation, preventing oneself from interpreting objects through one’s own framework of meaning or purpose. If Jon Solomon is right that “translation... is never definitive and always bears some kind

⁴⁷ Vonnegut, *Bluebeard*, 8.

⁴⁸ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xv.

of metaphorical violence toward the original enunciation or text,"⁴⁹ then Bennett's claim is true that literary texts can teach us "to live more sustainably, with less violence toward a variety of bodies."⁵⁰ But why should texts stop here, at this gap between human interpretation and nonhuman objects? As I will show in the next chapter, texts can take us one step further. By presenting readers with vibrant and active inhuman things, texts allow readers to get a sense of what it is like to be an object, and consequently readers are reminded that they too are objects with no greater claim to absolute, unmediated reality than anything else.

⁴⁹ Solomon, "Translation, Violence, and the Heterolingual Intimacy," 6.

⁵⁰ Bennett, "Systems and Things," 232.

CHAPTER 3 – HOW TEXTS REVEAL WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE AN OBJECT

As I have shown in the previous chapters, literature and art can illuminate interactions between objects as well as moments when objects withhold something about themselves from those interactions. But perhaps even more important, to me, is the fact that reading a literary text opens up a space into which we can project ourselves, experiencing the text as if it were happening to us. And this, I argue, is where the real stakes of an object-oriented approach to literature reside: when literary texts present us with inhuman others, calling us to inhabit the subjective spaces of those others, we can begin to break down the artificial barriers we have built between humans and inhuman things.

In this chapter, I will present a few readings of texts that do just this, allowing us to see into the subjective experiences of inhuman things—in particular, animals—in order to better understand our entangled relationships in the world we inhabit together. I use animals instead of “inanimate” objects because it is easier to understand their subjective experience, since they encounter the world through senses, just as we humans do. Furthermore, while Harman extends perception to nonliving things, I am not sure I am willing to go as far in the direction of panpsychism as he is. Nevertheless, it is certainly the case that humans are not the

only entities who encounter and perceive the world as selves; in other words, the subject-object binary is not the problem in the humanistic philosophies that speculative realism so vehemently rejects, but rather the problem is that these philosophies only allow subjectivity to humans, relegating everything else to the realm of objects.

Husserlian phenomenology reminds us that we humans always encounter objects through our own subjective, sensory experiences; the only access we have to the world comes through perception. Because of this, we exist in our own minds only as subjects, and all other things—even other entities with subjective perception and sensory experience of their own—exist only as objects in our perception. Husserl's student Franz Brentano calls these objects-in-perception “intentional objects,” and Harman adjusts this name slightly, calling them “sensual objects” instead. Whatever their name, objects are always set opposed to subjects in this binary framework. But as Harman, Bogost, and other speculative realists assert, this subject-object dichotomy has led to hundreds of years of philosophical thought in which the only entities that were granted *real* subjectivity were humans. This is problematic, however, since in 1934, theoretical biologist Jacob von Uexküll extended phenomenological subjectivity to nonhumans, insisting that animals (and perhaps even plants) also access the world as perceiving subjects, with each subject's perception forming an environment that the subject experiences as objective reality. For both Husserl and Uexküll, there is a gap between reality as it exists outside of perception and reality as the subject experiences it. Yet Uexküll acknowledges that humans are not the only subjects. Decades before speculative

realism and the formal establishment of posthumanist theory, scientists and philosophers were already beginning to think in non-humanistic terms.

For example, in *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*, Uexküll explains that “every subject lives in a world in which there are only subjective realities”¹—he calls these subjective realities *umwelten*, the German term for *environments*. A subject’s *umwelt* differs from its surroundings in that its environment only consists of those things with which the subject can meaningfully interact, whereas its surroundings include everything nearby: the entire network of actants, to speak in Latourian terms. For example, Uexküll explains that the *umwelt* of a tick consists only of three things: plants, which it senses as ladder-like objects from which to ambush its prey; the scent of butyric acid, which signifies the presence of a nearby mammal; and blood, the tick’s only source of food. The tick’s surroundings clearly consist of much more than plant-ladders, mammal-scent, and blood-food, but in the tick’s subjective experience of the world, only these three things matter. It follows that what one subject perceives as reality is not necessarily what another subject would experience in the same setting, and yet each subject nonetheless experiences something real, some objective world the existence of which precedes any experience of it. In fact, Uexküll shows that even other living, dwelling subjects can be interpreted as objects in some *umwelten*. Take, for instance, the pea weevil: when this insect lays its eggs inside of young green peas, the larva must, upon hatching, eat its way to the surface before using the pea as a cocoon, or else the pea will harden as it matures, trapping the fully-formed weevil

¹ Uexküll et al., *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans, with: A Theory of Meaning*.

inside its tough green shell. But as Uexküll explains, “The building of the tunnel and the door, vitally necessary to the pea weevil, by its larva, is in many cases its doom, for there is a little ichneumon wasp which can hit the door and the channel with deadly accuracy with its fine ovipositor in order to deposit its eggs in the defenseless larva of the pea weevil.”² The larva, by its own inborn path of action, also exposes itself to a species of wasp that uses the larvae’s plump body to carry its eggs. In the *umwelt* of the pea weevil, the pea acts as food and shelter for its young, yet in that of the wasp, the larva itself performs these functions. Therefore, each *umwelt* is necessarily a translation or approximation of reality, since a subject can never fully grasp its surroundings, and since in different *umwelten* the same object can take on such varying existences. For any living subject, reality beyond relation is necessarily withdrawn.

And whereas Uexküll extends phenomenological perception and withdrawal to other living beings, Harman extends it one step further to *all* objects. As Harman explains,

Just as numerous gradual changes can occur in the human perception of a tree without the tree itself seeming to alter, inanimate objects must also confront a world quantized into chunks capable of accidental variation that can be sensed without being important. Though it may take a highly developed nervous system to gain an explicit sense of the difference, and though it may take Edmund Husserl to turn it

² Ibid, 161.

into a well-defined philosophy, this does not entail that the difference is not present in the most primitive recesses of the world.³

Whenever an object enters into relation with another object, each translates the other into a sensual object. Even things with no sensory organs still must translate reality, since objects intrinsically withdraw from access of even other objects—as I explain in my previous chapter.

When it opens up spaces for the reader to project herself into the *umwelt* of an inhuman other, literature can prompt us to recognize that even we, as human subjects—like the pea weevil larva, which finds itself painfully transformed by the perception of the ichneumon wasp—are objects in relation with other objects on the same ontological playing field. And when I realize this, it becomes extremely difficult for me to justify any assertion that I, as a human, have the right to rule over inhuman things, since there is no fundamental difference *in kind* between the way I experience the world and the way other things experience it. Not only can literature allow me to get a sense of what it is like to be a particular inhuman object, but it can also remind me that I am always already an object myself. In the right circumstances, with the right combination of objects, texts can serve as ethical sandboxes in which we can come to identify with, as I will call them in this chapter, *object others* as we meet them on the page.

Emmanuel Levinas provides the foundation for this new ethical framework when he explains that when one encounters a (human) other face to face, one is

³ Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 212.

compelled to acknowledge that the other is not only another being in the world, but that she is also another self: a thinking, perceiving subject to whom the original perceiver is also an alien other. As Levinas puts it, “The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation, which no ‘interiority’ permits avoiding.”⁴ When I encounter an other, I am shaken out of my subjective experience, in which I normally view other people only as objects, and come to the momentary realization that I am dealing with not an object but a subject, a real, living being with her own subjective experience. In other words, I can experience in this moment a bit of what it is like to see things through the other’s subjective worldview—I can inhabit, to use Uexküllian terminology, the other’s *umwelt*.

Whereas Levinas only extends this power of evoking obligation to the human face, Uexküll and Harman extend perception—and therefore identification through imagined embodiment—to animals and nonliving objects. Thus even *objects* are subjects with *umwelten*, though they do not literally *perceive* their environments in the sensory ways we typically associate with perception. As Harman writes, “If all relations are on the same footing, and all relations are equally inept at exhausting the depths of their terms, then an intermediate form of contact between things must be possible. This contact can only take a *sensual* form, since it can only encounter translated or distorted other objects.”⁵ In other words, objects “perceive”⁶ one another when they enter into relations, not in the sense that each object sees or hears the other, but rather in that all interaction must take place in the sensual

⁴ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 201.

⁵ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 120.

⁶ *Ibid*, 112.

realm. When one object interacts with another, it does not come into contact with the other's withdrawn interior reality, but only with its surface qualities. This notion of the inaccessible interiority of the object other aligns neatly with the framework Levinas uses to describe the way in which human subjects encounter human others.

Yet this act of imagined embodiment is not appropriative; it is not equivalent to, as Gayatri Spivak puts it, making "the subaltern speak."⁷ When subject and other meet, the face of the other expresses the other's subjective interiority, but just as Harman explains that objects do not exhaust one another through interaction, so too the face-to-face encounter does not exhaust or use up a subject's interiority. As Levinas clarifies: "Expression does not consist in *giving* us the other's interiority. The other who expresses himself precisely does not *give* himself, and accordingly retains his freedom to lie."⁸ Though the subject does come to recognize the other as an interior being through the face-to-face encounter, the subject does not actually experience or possess the other's subjectivity.

So even though I can never know exactly what it is like to inhabit another subject's *umwelt*, by interacting with that subject closely and observing our similarities and differences, I can at least come to recognize the limits of my own subjectivity. Levinas goes on to explain that "What we call the face is precisely this exceptional presentation of self by self, incommensurable with the presentation or

⁷ Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" From: Nelson and Grossberg, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, 271.

⁸ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 202.

realities simply given.”⁹ The human face, in this scenario, is not significant because it has eyes, a nose, a mouth, and so on; rather, what matters is that a subject has come into close contact with the other, contact close enough to recognize the other’s subjectivity and to notice similarities and differences between the other and oneself. It follows that whenever I recognize an object’s withdrawn interiority, interacting closely with it, the object reflects back to me not my mirror image of myself as a subject, but a mirror image of my own object-nature—after all, to the thing that encounters me, even *I* am just another object other, and as such, I cannot claim access to some greater realm of objective reason or perception. Rather, I must come to realize that I am bound to my own *umwelt*, to my own sensory experience of my surroundings, which is no less an approximation of reality than the *umwelt* of a praying mantis, a venus flytrap, a human other, a rock, a wooden nickel, or a melting glacier.

When it presents us with close encounters between subjects and others, literature gives us glimpses into the interiority of inhuman things, or what Thomas Nagel would call their *what it is likeness*. But even these glimpses, as with any act of perception, occur from within our own subjective experiences. As Nagel explains, “In so far as I can imagine [behaving like a bat], it tells me only what it would be like for *me* to behave as a bat behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what it is like for a *bat* to be a bat. Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task.”¹⁰ But

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” 439.

this is not to say that we should not try to imagine the bat's experience. Bogost agrees with Nagel that it is impossible for humans to ever fully know what it is like to be anything nonhuman, since "When we ask *what it means to be like something*, we pose a question that exceeds our own grasp of the being in the world."¹¹ But Bogost goes on to explain that, through speculation, we can at least begin the work of acknowledging others' subjectivities. Perhaps all we can come to understand as humans is what it is like to be a *human* object.

By reading literary texts that present to us the interior subjectivity of inhuman objects in ways that expose their roots and allow us to better understand their inner lives, perhaps we can at least speculate on what it is like to be an inhuman object other. And by so speculating, by attempting to empathize with these others, we might be able to live up to Bennett's assertion that "the stakes of the turn to things in contemporary theory is how it might help us to live more sustainably, with less violence toward a variety of bodies [since it can] help us feel more of the liveliness hidden in such things and reveal more of the threads of connection binding our fate to theirs."¹² By cataloguing, describing, and representing inhuman objects, literature can render those "threads of connection" more tangible and binding, which in turn will prevent us from so easily escaping them when it is more convenient not to consider the others around us. As a result, these texts will enable us to think more ecologically about our surroundings, expanding our *umwelten* to include more than our own limited, subjective slices of

¹¹ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 30.

¹² Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 232.

the world. So now, I will turn to a few texts that can help to demonstrate the weird and wonderful object others with which we share the world.

3.1 – COEXISTENCE THROUGH SIMULATION

Perhaps the most straightforward way that texts can allow readers to access the subjective worlds of inhuman objects is by simulating these worlds in order to allow the reader to virtually inhabit the other's *umwelt*. Videogames make the perfect medium for such virtual inhabitation. Traditionally, videogames have been disregarded by literary criticism as a pop-culture phenomenon with little intellectual merit. Recently, however, scholars and theorists have been more inclined to take up videogames as objects of study, and consequently have published numerous scholarly books on the topic in the past decade, including the 2007 anthology *Videogames and Art*. This collection contains the essay "Videogames as Literary Devices," in which Jim Andrews argues that videogames function on the same level as literature in that both entail "a process whereby events are generated by some mechanism and the events are interpreted [as] meaningful within the world of the piece of art."¹³ In other words, literature and videogames both involve simulated worlds that manifest in the reader's mind. When a new piece of information—some new character or series of events—appears in the text's simulated world, the reader interprets it as meaningful in context, relating it to what she already knows about the world. Through repeated iterations of this interpretive process, the reader builds the world of the text in her mind. Due to their interactive,

¹³ Andrews, Jim. "Videogames as Literary Devices," 54-55.

visual, and kinetic nature, videogames make this simulated inhabitation even more immersing, giving the player agency to alter the course of events within the world.

Because of their immersive nature, videogames serve my object-oriented purposes well, since it is through this immersion that players can experience simulated versions of the *umwelten* of the characters they inhabit. Take, for instance, Valve Corporation's *Portal*, one of fourteen games selected by the Museum of Modern Art to join its Department of Architecture and Design collection on permanent display. In *Portal*, the player inhabits Chell, a woman held captive and used as a human test subject by Aperture Science, a fictional technology research corporation. The object of the game is to escape from a series of testing chambers by opening portals on walls and travelling through them, thereby avoiding obstacles and reaching a previously-inaccessible exit door. The game's first-person perspective makes it so that the player rarely gets a glimpse of the character she inhabits. Because of this, the player begins to feel that she is really a part of the *Portal* world, feeling in a real and tangible way that world's simulated physical properties; as Paola Antonelli, Senior Curator of the MoMA game collection, writes on the MoMA blog: "Game controllers are extensions and enablers of behavior, providing in some cases... an uncanny level of tactility."¹⁴ This is certainly the case for *Portal*; since we see the world through her eyes, Chell becomes the literal *shell* of the player's own embodied presence in the gameworld. As a result, the player begins to feel very real connections to her virtual embodiment, cringing when she

¹⁴ Antonelli, "Video Games: 14 in the Collection for Starters."

falls, moving slightly in tune with the movements of her character, and perhaps at times even cognitively mirroring these movements.

Below: Portal screenshot; a laser travels through orange portal on wall and then upward through blue portal on floor



In order to successfully navigate the *Portal* world, the player must experience what it is like to be Chell: how she moves and how she interacts with objects in her environment. In other words, she must learn through experience the “natural” laws that govern Chell’s surroundings and the limits of her ability to perceive that environment. When gameplay begins, the player’s knowledge is limited to the fact that Chell is being used as a test subject for Aperture’s new “Handheld Portal Device,” a strange contraption that allows the user to open portals on walls, floors, ceilings, and other solid surfaces. Once two portals have been opened in the same room, Chell can move freely between them as if through a doorway. But unless she looks up instructions online, the player must learn by trial and error the physical laws of the gameworld. Specifically, she must press buttons to determine their effects; interact with objects around her to determine what is useful and what is merely a part of the game’s fixed surroundings; and shoot portals at various

surfaces to determine, for instance, whether a portal will open on metal grating, or whether it requires a more solid surface like concrete or sheet metal. She must find out whether momentum is conserved when she enters a portal, determining, perhaps by accident, that if she falls through a portal on the floor, the momentum she gained during her fall will carry through to propel her forward if the corresponding portal is on a vertical wall. Each of these revelations is necessary in order to succeed in the game, which requires clever placement of portals, resourceful utilization of physical forces, and unconventional use of the inanimate objects lying around each room in order to reach the exit.

In the process of inhabiting Chell's *umwelt*, the player comes to identify with her on a number of levels, noticing not only the differences between Chell's environment and her own, but also the similarities. In the process, the player becomes motivated to escape the Aperture lab not only because escaping is the object of the game, but also because she empathizes with Chell, who is doomed otherwise to a dreadful, solitary, and painful life as a scientific test subject. Throughout the game, Chell is pursued and sadistically tormented by an artificial intelligence system called Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System (or GLaDOS, for short). In order to motivate Chell to complete the seemingly-endless series of tests, GLaDOS often reminds Chell of her traumatic past, promising that once she completes just *one* more room of testing, she will be allowed to attend counseling sessions to cope with the grief caused by the recent deaths of her parents. GLaDOS provides an element of black humor to an otherwise-apocalyptic game, turning its tone from dour to wryly ironic. But as with all black humor, even the funniest quips

carry emotional resonance; as gameplay progresses, GLaDOS' commentary becomes increasingly biting, and in the process, the player begins to feel as if this commentary is directed at *her*, making the task of escaping Aperture and overthrowing GLaDOS' tyrannical rule all the more immediate. By embodying Chell, the player comes to empathize with her, as the subjective environments of player and character begin to overlap and eventually merge. Finally, as *Portal* draws to its cathartic close, the player and Chell come together to defeat GLaDOS at last. Thus *Portal* demonstrates a Levinasian ethics in which the human subject encounters and comes to identify with the human other.

But other videogames make similar maneuvers with *inhuman* characters, allowing the player to inhabit the environment of animals in surprisingly realistic ways. Take, for instance, Might and Delight's PC game *Shelter*, in which the player controls a badger sow leading a litter of five cubs home to safety in a new burrow. In *Shelter*, the same sort of identification process occurs as in *Portal*, with the only differences being that *Shelter* uses a third-person point of view and that, of course, the playable character is not human. But in contrast with games like *Donkey Kong* and *Banjo-Kazooie*, in which the player controls a humanoid animal on a fantastic quest through a world of cartoonish baddies with unusual abilities, the developers of *Shelter* take great pains to present a realistic representation of the environment of the badger brood. There is nothing anthropomorphic about the badgers or their surroundings. And yet, as the player engages with the game, she comes to inhabit that realistic badger *umwelt*, creating an empathetic connection with the badger sow just as she did with Chell.



Above: Shelter screenshot; badger sow with five cubs in front of a wooded field

As the player leads her brood of badgers through a beautifully-animated landscape, she must perform a pair of tasks that are central to badger life: feeding her young and sheltering them from danger. Just as the player had to learn the laws and limitations of Chell's environment, she must do the same for the badgers, learning where to find food, what sorts of grasses are long enough to provide shelter from hungry birds of prey, and so on. Through the process of exploration, the game reveals a stark contrast between the badger's *umwelt* and that of the human player. Keza MacDonald notes this contrast in her *IGN* review, explaining that "The things I do not know about being a badger, it turns out, are manifold."¹⁵ Because of the game's realism, the player actually does learn a lot about being a badger as she is forced to strike a careful balance between the competing needs for shelter and for food. In several stages of the game a large hawk flies overhead, as denoted by the

¹⁵ MacDonald, "Shelter Is Like Journey, But With Badgers."

bird-shaped shadow that sweeps across the ground. When this shadow appears, the player must lead her brood quickly into a patch of tall grass or a hollow log, since the bird will swoop down and eat any cub that remains in the open for too long. In other stages, the mother must lead her cubs through the forest as a wildfire rages behind them and across a hazardous river flooded by a recent storm. Yet all the while, she must find food for her cubs, which become sluggish and eventually stop moving entirely if they become too hungry; if a cub lags behind when crossing a field beneath the hawk, the consequences could be deadly.

And just as the *Portal* player identifies the similarities between herself and Chell, letting the differences fall away, the same happens in *Shelter* when she juggles the needs of her cubs. This identification can become so strong that, if a cub is lost, the player feels a sense of tragic failure, as if, for a moment, she had actually lost a child. As Simon Parkin writes in his *Eurogamer* review, “Your aim is straightforward and ancient: lead your offspring to shelter, keep them safe, keep them fed. And when you fail in that aim—when you fail as a parent in your most important duty—the grief is close to unbearable.”¹⁶ By inhabiting the environment of the badger, the player sees not just the differences between badger life and human life, but also the similarities, recognizing that the needs for shelter and nourishment across species lines.

This interspecies identification makes *Shelter* an inherently ecological game—much more ecologically-conscious than *Portal*, with its setting isolated to an apocalyptic sci-fi laboratory. This consciousness shows up most clearly in the

¹⁶ Parkin, “Shelter Review.”

game's ending: whereas *Portal* ends with a moment of closure, *Shelter* resists such tidy conclusions. When Chell falls into a pit of lava, she restarts the level at a recent checkpoint without a burn mark on her body, but when a badger cub is eaten or burned alive or swept away by the river, it cannot return. Parkin puts it nicely in his review:

Loss of life in video games carries different weight in different contexts. In *Super Mario*, for example, with its endlessly reviving plumber, it's light and fickle. There, losing a life is little more than a momentary setback. But in *Shelter*, your lives aren't abstract numbers scrawled at the top of the screen or nestled in some menu.... Rarely has a game articulated loss in such clear and urgent terms.¹⁷

By allowing the player to inhabit the subjective world of the mother badger, *Shelter* puts the player face to face with an animal other. And unlike *Portal's* Chell, who has little connection to reality except as a projection of the player's own emotions, the badger reminds the player of the real badgers that exist in the world around her, creatures who must also balance the needs for shelter and food, who must also lead their young to safety from predators and through hazardous terrain. The game sheds light on the subjectivity not only of the badgers within the game, but of those outside it as well. And in doing so, it serves as a powerful example of Bennett's claim that texts can "help us feel more of the liveliness" of things by tracing the

¹⁷ Ibid.

“threads of connection binding our fate to theirs.”¹⁸ The ending of *Shelter* is an ecological and emotional wake-up call to any player too caught up in her own human subjectivity: just before the mother escorts her remaining cubs into their new burrow, a hawk swoops down, and instead of allowing the bird to take a cub, the mother badger offers herself to it instead, allowing the cubs a few extra seconds to reach shelter. And in the player’s mind, as sadness sets in, so does awareness of the fact that badgers are feeling, perceiving subjects too, different from humans only in kind, not in degree.

But videogames can go even further, removing subjectivity altogether in order to allow the player to inhabit a nonrelational world as it exists for itself, a speculative realist’s dream in which there is no perceiving subject whatsoever. Since 2006, thatgamecompany has been making unconventional, visually-stimulating, and critically-acclaimed games for PlayStation systems; the Museum of Modern Art included their first title, *fIOW*, alongside *Portal* in its game collection. But their second game, *Flower*, most interests me here. In it, the player ostensibly controls the wind, moving freely through the sky in any direction she pleases. There is no visible character to inhabit, just a spot in space from which the player views the world. And whenever that spot comes into contact with a flower, that flower opens and releases a single petal, which from that point onward is blown along inside the player’s field of vision. As the player contacts more flowers, more petals join the procession, creating a comet-like trail of color that floats about on the screen, loosely following the player’s movements. And the player watches it all from

¹⁸ Bennett, “Systems and Things,” 232.

her disembodied place in the sky, not inhabiting a character's *umwelt*, as in *Portal* and *Shelter*, but becoming a disembodied observer in a world totally free from human and animal perception.



Above: Flower screenshot; a trail of petals against a pastoral landscape with rock outcroppings

Even more than *Shelter*, *Flower* presents the player with the real world, with a bare ecology stripped of anthropocentric meaning and purpose, a world existing for itself and on its own merits. The game begins in a tiny, drab apartment, with the player looking through a dusty window at an abandoned city. On the windowsill sits a wilted flower nestled in a terracotta pot no larger than a teacup. When the player highlights the flower and zooms in on it, the screen goes dark and she is transported into a sort of dream—some reviewers, like *IGN*'s Ryan Clements, call them “the dreams of flowers”¹⁹—set in a pastoral landscape with rusty farm equipment strewn sparsely about. As the player flies through fields adding petals to her

¹⁹ Clements, “Flower Review.”

collection, she discovers that by flying in circles around certain objects, she can bring them back to visual life; windmills begin turning, lampposts light up, and haystacks sprout flowers. Once she has enlivened enough objects in a stage, a new passageway opens and the player can continue on to the next drab field in need of color. As the stages progress, the landscape begins to show more and more signs of industrialization, tractors and lampposts replaced by high rises and power line transmission towers, all of which have fallen into disrepair. These scenes are reminiscent of the sweeping, wide-angle shots of abandoned cities in post-apocalyptic films, urban spaces turned uncanny by the absence of human presence and the resurgence of the very plant and animal life forms the urban area was designed to keep out. And by flying her cometlike mass of petals alongside these industrial structures, the player can cause transmission towers to collapse and bring color to the drab, gray, Soviet-style sky scrapers whose inhabitants are nowhere to be found. *Flower* encourages creativity and curiosity; though there is indeed a main pathway by which the player moves from stage to stage, each of these stages is a wide-open space with plenty of room for exploration and many hidden spots for the player to discover. And in the absence of human and animal subjects, the player can view this gameworld as it exists without the pressure of some overarching objective or time limit telling her where to go and what to do.

The *Flower* world is a simulation of the speculative realist “real world” outside of subjectivity and perception, and what makes the game special is that it allows the player to get a glimpse into that subjective world, watching as the elemental force of the wind helps to bring withdrawn reality out into the open. Of

course, this glimpse is fictional, only a simulation, but as speculation it powerfully demonstrates what the world would be like if humans were gone, if our cities were left to rust and collapse in the wind, retaken by the plants and turned vibrant colors by clouds of drifting flower petals. Whereas many post-apocalyptic films always set the inhuman world as opposed to humanity, using flashbacks to earlier times when humans still roamed the streets, in *Flower* there are no such contrasting scenes, no humans whatsoever, though our “traces and footprints” remain.

While the game is inherently ecological and political, *Wired* columnist Clive Thompson notes that *Flower* does not “demonize human civilization.”²⁰ The dark and gloomy urban sprawl of gnarled power lines and crumbling concrete towers does indeed paint a stark picture of industrialized society. But once that industrial rubbish is restored to color and vibrancy, the game’s “dream” ends with a sweeping review of where the player has been, tracing a path back to that same drab apartment where the game began. Out the window *this time*, however, the city that before was drab and decaying now appears full of life, both human and inhuman. Thompson describes it wonderfully:

In the final scene, you return to the city where you began. Cars still zoom around town, and plenty of overpasses remain—but this time, trees and flowers are abloom in the midst of the concrete. In *Flower*, the “saved” world is the one where humanity has figured out how to balance its industrial life with

²⁰ Thompson, “Games Without Frontiers.”

the natural world. We get to keep our automobiles and our greenery—our PlayStation 3s and our roses.²¹

By allowing the player to inhabit a world free of humans and to bring that world back to color and life, *Flower* invites the player into an open ecological mindset that considers more than humans and the implications of human actions. And in doing so, rather than preaching the deep-ecologist's *anti*-human message, it merely presents a calm, beautiful call to awareness of the inhuman things with which we must coexist. And the result of all of this is that the game sheds light on what are, in our anthropocentric, anthropomorphic, anthropo-everything *umwelten*, perhaps the most withdrawn objects of all: ourselves.

Videogames can open up worlds in which human players can inhabit the *umwelten* of others. Like literature, these games feature simulated worlds each with its own system of meaning in which events and signs are interpreted as meaningful in relation to other aspects of the text's world. Because they enable the player to inhabit an *umwelt* and interact with it on a real, tactile level, videogames are a rich medium for ecological thought since they allow the player to inhabit not only other human subjective spaces, but, as we see in *Shelter*, animal subjectivities; and in *Flower*, even spaces free from subjectivity altogether. When they put us in the shoes, so to speak, of these inhuman object others, videogames call us, as human players, to ecological consciousness, inviting us, as Bennett suggests they will, to "live more sustainably and with less violence" toward the other things in the world we actually inhabit.

²¹ Ibid.

3.2 – FOR ALL AND WITHOUT DISTINCTION

As Jim Andrews reminds us, videogames are a form of literature in their world-building capacity and their ability to place players into the subjective worldviews of characters who are inherently and radically other. But games, and more broadly literature, can push us even further than toward mere *encounters* with the other, an advancement that is necessary in situations when mere encounter is not enough. In encounters based on similarity and empathy, such as the ones demonstrated by the games in the previous section, it can become easy to allow oneself to be trapped in a one-sided identification in which the other *is* affirmed as a subject, but only at the expense of all the *other* others not present in the moment and space of encounter. By taking in a stray cat, for instance, what havoc am I wreaking on the mice that inhabit my walls? I see the cat and empathize with it, but since I cannot see the mice, I ignore the new terror I am introducing into their environment. Literature can highlight situations like this in which face-to-face encounters break down and the sorts of postmodern, Levinasian ethics of the encounter do not produce the promising results we expected of them. Instead, it can allow us to dwell in the dissonance and, hopefully, to learn from it as a result. Since so many ethical acts occur without ever meeting the other face to face, rethinking even these otherwise-promising encounter-based ethical models is critical if we want to work toward a larger, more inherently inter-netted ethical system. And literature can facilitate such a rethinking.

Take, for instance, Cormac McCarthy's 1994 novel *The Crossing*, in which sixteen-year-old Billy Parham comes to identify with a wolf he captures on his

family's ranch in the mountains of New Mexico. When Billy finds a dead calf with wolf prints nearby, he begins to track the wolf, taking long, solitary horse rides through the mountains and speculating on what the wolf is doing and thinking in order to better trace her movements. In his solitude, Billy imagines himself inhabiting the wolf's subjective experience: the narrator tells us that Billy "closed his eyes and tried to see her. Her and others of her kind, wolves and ghosts of wolves running in the whiteness of that high world."²² And then, the next evening,

He lay awake a long time thinking about the wolf. He tried to see the world the wolf saw. He tried to think about it running in the mountains at night.... He wondered at the world it smelled or what it tasted. He wondered had the living blood with which it slaked its throat a different taste to the thick iron tincture of his own.²³

Even before he meets the wolf, Billy is trying to see through its eyes, attempting to understand its *umwelt*. And yet, as we will see, Billy's relationship with the wolf is fraught with anthropocentric notions: while he does attempt to understand the wolf's subjective experience, he only does so in order to assert his dominance over her, reinforcing his firmly-held notion of human exceptionalism. And as a result, what he intends to be an extension of his ethical framework to include the wolf ultimately fails when he becomes too narrow and rigid in his focus.

But before we move on to the failure of Billy's ethical act, let us consider the wolf. What ultimately leads Billy to identify with her is their face-to-face encounter,

²² McCarthy, *The Crossing*, 31.

²³ *Ibid*, 51-52.

a moment in which the wolf gazes back at Billy, reminding him of his own animality. Jacques Derrida discusses similar animal-human encounters in his lecture series *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, where he explains that

As with every bottomless gaze, as with the eyes of the other, the gaze called “animal” offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say, the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself, thereby calling himself by the name that he believes he gives to himself.²⁴

When Billy encounters the wolf, she returns his gaze and presents to him a reflection of himself, an Uexküllian reminder that both he and the wolf are perceiving animals, both subjects with their own *umwelten*, and each capable of responding to the other. The border between animal and human is blurred, each animal’s bubble of subjective experience burst by the intrusion of the other. Billy, who has just spent several days riding alone through the mountains, attempting to see the world through the wolf’s perspective, finally actualizes his speculated identification and as a result feels a deep sense of compassion toward the wolf.

At this point, Billy inhabits an ethical position similar to the one Cary Wolfe lays out in *What is Posthumanism?*, where he explains that the traditional model of ethics focuses on reciprocity, on the golden-rule to treat others as one would want to be treated. But in relations between humans and animals, Wolfe argues that traditional, reciprocal ethics breaks down. When we approach such relationships

²⁴ Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 12.

expecting the animal to return our ethical consideration, we will either be sorely disappointed—as when the hungry wolf eats us—or we will only end up protecting animals that can serve some function in our lives, treating them only as mechanical means to a human end. We would treat our horses and housecats well, since they provide transportation and companionship, but the worms in their stomachs we would mercilessly slaughter alongside the cattle whose flesh becomes our food. Reciprocal ethics is always a process of choosing which animals deserve ethical consideration and which do not. What we need, according to Wolfe, is to replace our outdated reciprocal ethics with “an ethics based not on ability, activity, agency, and empowerment, but on a *compassion* that is rooted in our [own] vulnerability and passivity,”²⁵ one in which we extend ethical consideration to the inhuman other without expecting a return on our investment. In short, Wolfe proposes that compassionate human-animal interactions cause the human to recognize her own otherness and “nonnormative contingency,”²⁶ to realize that, in the eyes of the wolf, *she* is the alien other.

This is just what Billy realizes when the pregnant wolf gazes back at him. McCarthy writes that Billy is “in no way prepared for what he beheld”²⁷ when he returns to find her in his trap. And it is significant, too, that in Billy’s first glimpse of the wolf, she “stood up to meet him,”²⁸ a responsive act difficult to write off as mere instinct. Billy initially takes out his rifle and prepares to shoot her, since earlier in

²⁵ Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, 141.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

²⁷ McCarthy, *The Crossing*, 53.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

the novel his father gave him specific instructions to kill the wolf immediately “If her leg were broke or if she were caught by the paw,”²⁹ as Billy recalls it—otherwise she will be able to twist herself free from the trap. But by standing to meet him, the wolf causes Billy to hesitate just long enough to see her gazing back at him, and as a result, he sees her for the perceiving subject that she is. After spending the day muzzling and leashing the wolf and then binding her wounds, Billy builds a fire, and we read that “When the flames came up her eyes burned out there like gatelamps to another world. A world burning on the shore of some unknowable void.”³⁰ Because she is so unknowable, the wolf reflects back to Billy his own alienness; he knows that his situation is precarious, that his survival is contingent, since if the wolf were to free herself from her makeshift muzzle, she would not hesitate to attack and kill him on the spot. There is no hope for reciprocity in such a situation. Yet Billy is able to meet her hungry gaze with compassion, affirming her existence as a living, perceiving subject, their respective unknowability *seeming* to become the characteristic they most directly share.

Yet what ultimately draws Billy to the wolf is her *familiarity*; he sees in her predatory nature a familiar, rugged-individualistic ideal. As we saw earlier, Billy spends days at a time alone in the mountains, imagining himself as a wolf. And though he never understands precisely what it is like to be a wolf—as Nagel notes is impossible—he certainly *thinks* he does: we read several passages in which Billy projects himself into the wolf’s perspective, like when he “closed his eyes and tried

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid, 73.

to see her... running in the whiteness of that world,"³¹ or in the passages I quoted earlier in which he imagines her sensory experience. For a solitary young boy prone to bouts of make-believe in which he tracks imagined prey on his family's land, a wolf seems to make the perfect companion animal. Indeed, Billy treats her as such, not as an equal, but as a captive companion, an animal sidekick, always keeping a tight grasp on her leash. And because he thinks he knows what it is like to be a wolf—not to mention that he often imagines that he *is* one—she is not really as unfamiliar to Billy as we are led to believe.

And when he notices that the wolf is pregnant, Billy feels an even stronger sense of identification with her, since her care for her unborn pups reflects his own love for his young brother Boyd. Consider that the novel begins with Billy riding across the desert holding Boyd in the saddle in front of him, acting as a parental figure for the boy:

He carried Boyd before him in the bow of the saddle and named to him features of the landscape and birds and animals.... In the new house they slept in the room off the kitchen and he would lie awake at night and listen to his brother's breathing in the dark and he would whisper half aloud to him as he slept his plans for them and the life they would have.³²

³¹ Ibid, 31.

³² Ibid, 3.

So when Billy sees that the wolf is pregnant, that she shies from him and growls protectively whenever he reaches to touch her belly, Billy empathizes. He is then able to see that she has not been killing his family's cattle for sport, but to nurture her unborn young. He sees in her a reflection of his own love for Boyd, a love that will become the novel's focus once Billy's misadventure with the wolf is over. So instead of shooting her, Billy's compassion for and identification with the wolf ultimately leads him instead to muzzle her, bind her wounds, and escort her back into the mountains of Mexico, retracing her path to where she first crossed the border. And while this unusual act of mercy begins on a promising note, ultimately Billy's one-dimensional compassion and identification fails when circumstances call for a more holistic consideration of the others around him. Furthermore, despite his compassion for the wolf, Billy never once allows her any agency, always asserting his own role as the human steward of her animal being.

We notice early on that Billy's attempt to identify with the wolf serves a specific and anthropocentric purpose: tracking and trapping her in order to remove her from his family's ranch, preventing her from killing any more of his family's cattle and thereby wrecking their livelihood. And in fact, his attempt to trap her only succeeds after he lays out what essentially amounts to a test of the limits of her subjectivity, a test meant to separate her, as animal, from humans. Billy sets a series of traps for her, burying them in the leaves or otherwise concealing them, but each time, she outsmarts him, digging up the traps and springing them so that she can safely reach the bait he has laid out for her. After several failed attempts, Billy becomes frustrated and even more determined to catch her; he devises a plan to

turn the tables, outsmarting *her* by burying a trap in the ashes beneath a fire pit where a group of rancheros cook their daily meals. There, she will be so distracted by the smell of food—a natural scent at a fire pit—that she will not notice that he has set a trap beneath the ashes. But in order not to trap the rancheros by accident, Billy writes a note in the sand before the fire explaining what he has done: “*Cuidado*, he wrote. *Hay una trampa de lobos enterrada en el fuego*.”³³ Just after he writes the note, we read that “He rode out across the pasture toward the road and in the cold blue twilight he turned and looked a last time toward the set. He leaned and spat. You read my sign, he said. If you can. Then he turned the horse toward home.”³⁴ Billy’s note serves dual purposes, both warning the rancheros and testing the limits of the wolf’s subjectivity. In stereotypical cowboy fashion, Billy spits into the dust toward his (then-imagined) adversary, offering up a challenge to the wolf: “read my sign.... If you can.” All the while, he knows that linguistic signs are anthropogenic, that they are utterly meaningless to the wolf—or at least so he hopes, though he is perhaps a bit uncertain given the wolf’s recent displays of uncanny ingenuity. The note becomes a way for Billy to ensure that he, as a human, remains superior to her in his linguistic capacity. Their relationship is always one of anthropocentrism, though since Billy disguises it in compassion, since he empathizes with her and cares for her, he does not realize that what he is doing serves his own purposes, that it might not be what is best for her.

³³ Ibid, 50.

³⁴ Ibid.

This sort of breakdown of compassion-based ethics is not isolated, however, to the case of Billy and the wolf. In fact, many scholars in animal studies and posthumanism have recently taken up the issue, disagreeing with Wolfe's proposal of a compassion-based ethics because, as we see with Billy, it results in an ethics that is too selective and narrow, one still rooted in anthropomorphism at best and human exceptionalism at worst. For instance, Bogost argues that "animal studies expands our domain of inquiry, but it stops short by focusing on a single domain of 'familiar' actants—dogs, pigs, birds, and so forth—entities routinized by their similarity in form and behavior to human beings."³⁵ When ethics is based solely on compassion, it tends to leave out beings which by their radical alienness do not lend themselves to interspecies



identification. A face-to-face encounter with, for instance, a lamprey [above], would not typically leave humans with a sense of close connection, but rather an immediate desire to look away and never see such a monstrous creature again.

We can only extend compassionate ethics to animals with which we share significant traits, and because of this, these ethical systems carry an inherent anthropomorphism, since they are a product of human subjects projecting themselves into the subjectivity of others. While these sorts of ethical systems can be helpful and productive in our efforts to coexist with other species, they should be

³⁵ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 8.

taken with a grain of salt. Bogost argues that “When we theorize ethical codes, they are always ethics *for us*,” and goes on to explain that

the assumption that the rights any thing should have are the same ones we believe we should have; that living things more like us are more important than those less like us; and that life itself is an existence of greater worth than inanimacy. These are understandable biases for us humans. We are mortal and fragile in specific ways and we worry about them.³⁶

Since we can never think about ethics outside of our own human subjective experience, we are bound, in every ethical system, to think in anthropomorphic ways. Through research and observation, we can certainly learn what sorts of things make animals healthy and what harms them; but as soon as we make the move to theorizing feelings, thoughts, and rights, we move into a realm of speculation, and such speculation is always filtered through a distinctly human lens. In other words, we begin to morph animal others into iterations of the human, since human feelings, thoughts, and rights are all the feelings, thoughts, and rights that we know. This is the paradox of posthuman ethics: all our ethical systems are inherently human, yet we *must* extend them to inhuman others.

Perhaps the solution is to dwell in this paradox, to remain uncertain and continue nonetheless to expand our consideration while acknowledging our anthropomorphic tendencies. Otherwise, we might fall into the same traps that Billy does, choosing as ethical objects only familiar animals and ignoring the less

³⁶ Ibid, 73.

desirable and more uncanny others. We might, as we have done for years, save the whales and screw the shrimp, as the old bumper-sticker adage reads.

Contemporary activists, however, have begun to realize and correct the flaws of selective ethics: in Britain, a group of scientists has organized to form the Ugly Animal Preservation Society, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving creatures normally excluded from typical “save the animals” campaigns, including, but not limited to, the blobfish, the star-nosed mole, and the purple pig-nosed frog,



all of which the UAPS (for short) claims are just as important to understanding and preserving global ecology as pandas, whales, kittens, and other more cuddly animals. But even campaigns like this are merely inversions of the standards by which we select ethical objects; I would

argue that the society chose the blobfish [above, left] as its mascot not because of its repulsive face, but rather because that face looks slightly familiar, like an estranged uncle with a nose three sizes too large. Creatures like lampreys and leeches, whose faces consist of large, slurping jaws filled with sharp teeth, with no visible eyes, nose, or other recognizable features, would likely turn casual web-surfers off from exploring the UAPS website, whereas the blobfish, despite its weirdness, sparks more curious clicks than upset stomachs. Even the UAPS puts forth an anthropomorphic brand of animal ethics. But so long as we can acknowledge such projects as anthropomorphic, they can still help us to expand the limits of our

normal modes of ethics to include things we would normally ignore or even willfully exclude.

Billy, however, does not acknowledge his anthropomorphism. And because he feels so much compassion for the wolf, his vision becomes too narrow, so that instead of expanding his ethical framework to include inhuman others, as he appeared at first to do, he instead focuses it solely on himself and the wolf (and to a lesser degree his horse, who seems throughout the novel to appear only when Billy needs to be transported somewhere), excluding everything else entirely. Once Billy and the wolf cross the border into Mexico, a group of corrupt police arrest Billy for entering the country without identification, and proceed to seize the wolf and sell her to a travelling circus where she will be the main attraction in a dogfighting ring. By the time Billy is released, recovers his horse and rifle, and arrives at the circus, she is bloody, exhausted, and near death, having just killed more than twenty hungry dogs a pair at a time. Because he has become so single-mindedly focused on protecting the wolf, Billy makes a very rash decision, rushing into the middle of the ring, rifle drawn, to untether the wolf. Here we read that Billy

took hold of the actual wolf by the collar and unsnapped the swivelhook and drew the bloody and slobbering head to his side and stood. That the wolf was loose save for his grip on her collar did not escape the notice of the men who had entered the ring. They looked at one another. Some began to back away. The wolf stood against the güero's thigh with her teeth

bared and her flanks sucking in and out and she made no move.

Es mía, the boy said.³⁷

Here we see that Billy has transitioned from compassionate identification with the wolf to a desperate declaration of possession: *she's mine*, he shouts to the Spanish-speaking crowd, a declaration that takes on a sad dramatic irony since it is clear by this point that the wolf will not survive much longer. The wonder and sympathy with which Billy began caring for the wolf has morphed into dominance and ownership; his ethics has failed both him and the wolf.

When his attempt to free the wolf fails, Billy makes an unexpected choice: rather than allow her to die at the teeth of the final pair of dogs—two hulking Airedales he saw in a shed outside the ring—Billy shoots the wolf. Since she is technically property of the circus proprietor, this act could result in serious trouble for Billy, who is already in a tenuous legal position after his earlier arrest and his mad rush into the ring just moments ago. Luckily, the proprietor recognizes that the wolf was nearly dead and that her pelt was already too damaged to be valuable, so he accepts Billy's offer to trade his rifle for her dead body. And as Billy rides off with the wolf's carcass draped across the saddle in front of him—the very place his brother Boyd had sat in the novel's opening scene—we see in his torment and grief the final failure of his attempted ethical expansion. His compassion has finally broken down and he even more fully embodies the bloodthirsty and animalistic predator he once pretended to be.

³⁷ McCarthy, *The Crossing*, 117.

McCarthy's description of the subsequent scene is stark and haunting, and demonstrates Billy's dissociative identification with the wolf: "He could feel the blood of the wolf against his thigh where it had soaked through the sheeting and through his breeches and he put his hand to his leg and tasted the blood which tasted no different from his own."³⁸ Earlier in the novel, Billy wondered whether "the blood with which [the wolf] slaked its throat a different taste to the thick iron tincture of his own," searching for any trait they have in common in order to better track and trap her. And now, he finally has an answer to his question, as he tastes her blood and finds in it a familiar flavor.

Billy begins the novel with a promising ethical foundation, looking for common traits between himself and the wolf in order to act compassionately and ethically toward her. As Cary Wolfe suggests will happen under such circumstances, Billy does indeed gain a sense of his "nonnormative contingency," acknowledging that both he and the wolf are subjects enmeshed in the same world and that the existence of each is contingent on that of the other. Yet, as we have seen, his compassion breaks down and leaves him with empty projection, his identification becoming so strong that he loses his grip on his own subjective identity. Because he only accepts familiar actors into his ethical framework, and especially because he limits this acceptance to a *single* familiar actor, he cannot adapt when his conception of the world is ruptured. As Bogost explains, when the human encounters an inhuman other with curiosity and compassion, "The act of wonder invites a detachment from ordinary logic, of which human logics are but one example," and

³⁸ Ibid, 125.

that “As Howard Parson puts it, wonder ‘suggests a breach in the membrane of awareness, a sudden opening in a man’s system of established and expected meanings.’”³⁹ But in Billy’s case, this breach feels more violent than Bogost’s positive terminology would imply. Billy is traumatized by his precarity and contingency, and ultimately he becomes just as much a captive animal other as the wolf, trapped in a narrow perspective that leaves no room for those actors who are truly alien to him. *The Crossing*, then, becomes an illustration of Bogost’s objection to animal studies and the compassionate ethics it espouses: the blueprint is good, the foundation necessary, but the house is far too small.

3.3 – EXTENDING ETHICS TO INHUMAN OTHERS

In these examples, I have laid out a few of the ways that literature and OOO can help us to think about ethics in new ways. By inhabiting the subjective worlds, or *umwelten*, of object others, we can come to feel the “threads of connection,” as Bennett puts it, connecting us all together, human and inhuman alike. For instance, by experiencing the speculative-realist dreamworld of *Flower*, one in which there are *no* subjects, but only perception, we can see that this world in which we are enmeshed does not revolve around us, and that if we are to preserve global ecology we cannot think in terms of ourselves and our own sustainability—*sustainable for whom*, we might ask. Or, more accurately, *for what*? Yet, ultimately, we read in *The Crossing* as an ethical position—one that seemed *so* promising at first, aligning with some of the most advanced systems proposed by some of the best thinkers in

³⁹ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 124.

posthumanism and animal studies—falls apart. But though things have turned out terribly for Billy, we as readers emerge from the novel saddened, but wiser for it.

What these texts do, especially when combined with object-oriented ontology, speculative realism, and posthumanism, is to better enable us to imagine our ethical futures, while at the same time learning from past failures. From *The Crossing*, we can glean that we *must* acknowledge, as Billy neglects to do, that we are selves in our own particular subjective worlds; that we are encountered daily by countless other selves who see us as uncanny aliens intruding into their own *umwelten*; and that both we and these object others exist on the same ontological plane, in the same real world that is no more real for us than it is for them. This is our ethical imperative: coexist. Not in the mystical, *all-things-are-one*, new-agey sense of the word, but in the literal one. Once we acknowledge that we share reality with videogame characters, badgers, flower petals, novelists, wolves, and the posthumanities, it becomes very difficult for us, as humans, to justify any domination, any assertions of power or exceptionalism, any ethical systems which do not acknowledge that, as Bogost reminds us, ethical systems themselves are always anthropomorphic, inherently *for-us*. Because in some instances, it is not enough merely to feel the threads of connection binding me to a host of object others, but it is also necessary to recognize that I am not at the center of this great spiderweb of, as Morton calls it, “interobjectivity,”⁴⁰ but rather just another object entangled in the web.

⁴⁰ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 81.

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