

IS THE FUTURE OF SPECULATIVE REALISM IN THE STUDY OF LITERATURE?

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The movement of speculative realism, which originated from what Graham Harman calls “an intriguing philosophical workshop” (*Speculative Realism: An Introduction*, ch. Introduction) has, in the 15 years of its existence, seeped into all spheres of academia, most notably the humanities and the arts even though, as Harman further points out, “the original SR group did not last very long, and there are sharp philosophical (...) disagreements between some of its members today” (ibid.). However, as is commonly the case with ideas such as these which offer inexhaustible source of inspiration to numerous academics, the creators don’t always have the control over their creations, which is why speculative realism remains a widely discussed philosophical movement despite not forming a cohesive whole due to the diverse philosophical viewpoints it is made of.

It is a well-documented fact that the “only shared intellectual hero among the original members of group was the horror and science fiction writer H. P. Lovecraft” (Harman, “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer” 184), which could be why literary theorists have been so receptive to the movement of speculative realism even though Harman himself describes it as “loose philosophical movement opposed to trends that have dominated continental philosophy from its inception” (ibid.). This paper aims to give brief accounts on the ways in which literature can be observed through the philosophical lenses of the four main founders of speculative realism, in order to determine the possibility of these philosophies remaining a part of the literary discourse.

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Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology, in which he has reviewed and updated the concept of object types and object interaction, has had a strong influence on diverse disciplines. In his article "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism" Harman says that both OOO as well as speculative realism as a movement have "rapidly gained influence in fields outside academic philosophy, with special resonance so far in the fine arts, architectural theory, and medieval studies" (183). His concept of objects is easily applied and moulded to all these academic spheres because the relations between real and sensual objects and their respective qualities can be interpreted in a variety of ways.

When it comes to discussing literature in terms of OOO, one of the crucial terms is the allure, which Harman in his essay "On Vicarious Causation" defines as "a separation between a sensual object and its quality" (215). However, this is not the only conflict that occurs between Harman's real and sensual objects and their qualities, which are "repeated in the depths of the world as well" (Harman, "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer" 187). Turning to Heidegger's broken hammer, Harman explains that just like the real object, it too alludes to "the inscrutable reality of hammer-being lying behind the accessible theoretical, practical, or perceptual qualities of the hammer" (ibid.). Precisely like the broken hammer which can only hint at the features of the hammer as a real object without directly presenting it, literature does the same thing, which is why Harman contends that "this is the key phenomenon, of all the arts, literature included" (ibid.) because as far as Object-Oriented Ontology is concerned "allure alludes to entities as they are, quite apart from any relations with or effects upon other entities in the world" (ibid.).

Harman furthermore explains the term he chose to mark this occurrence as one pinpointing "the bewitching emotional effect that often accompanies this event for humans, and also suggests the related term 'allusion,' since allure merely alludes to the object without making its inner life directly present" ("On Vicarious Causation" 215.). Allure is the only way in which two real objects are capable of indirectly touching, and this relation is best shown through literature. Additionally, he writes that even though two real objects are only capable of interacting through allure, "as we have identified allure with an aesthetic effect, this means that aesthetics becomes first philosophy" (ibid. 221).

In essence, what Graham Harman wants literary theorists to do while observing a work through the lens of OOO is to decontextualize it, to shorten it in diverse ways, and then to lengthen it, to reimagine it as being told from an alternative point of view, to remove it from its set context and to try to comprehend at which point it ceases to be familiar.

Precisely because literary works are a distorted image of our reality, he shows that it is possible to apply the same theories on both, to help us understand the reality that surrounds us. His belief is that the OOO offers a ‘countermethod’ for literary theorists through which “instead of solving a text upward into its readings or downward into its cultural elements, we should focus specifically on how it resists such dissolution” (“The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer” 200) He explains his views in his 2012. article “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object- Oriented Literary Criticism”:

By showing how the literary object *cannot* be fully identified with its surroundings or even its manifest properties, criticism will show us the same tension between objects and their sensual traits displayed in the tool analysis of Heidegger. It will reveal the nature of the well-wrought broken hammer, and it will reveal further that not all broken hammers are equally well-wrought. (202)

He sees literature as something non-permanent, as a thing that can be altered in various ways, deconstructed and reconstructed time and time again, all with the aim of understanding the traits that separate a certain literary work from the rest, and to what degree can the preassigned contexts be removed for it to remain a familiar object we recognize as such.

Quentin Meillassoux’s theory significantly differs from other philosophies at the base of speculative realism. Leon Niemoczynski has, in his book *Speculative Realism: An Epitome*, pointed out that while “Meillassoux does follow the speculative gesture initiated by Hegel to proceed into the Open “after” or perhaps “beyond” Kantian finitude and its absorption of the real into the concrete limits of human experience” (68), he “denies any Hegelian necessitation of the correlate between thought and being itself” (ibid.) which separates him from the rest of the speculative realists.

What Meillassoux aspires to do through his philosophy is to break out of what he refers to as ‘the correlation circle’, “the argument according to which one cannot think the in-itself without entering into a vicious circle, thereby immediately contradicting oneself” (5), as well as ‘the correlationist two-step’ which “consists (...) in the primacy of the relation over the related terms; a belief in the constitutive power of reciprocal relation” (ibid.) in order to reach the absolute. He finds the solution in complete radicalization of the correlationism from within, as he explains in his book *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*:

We must try to understand why *it is not the correlation but the facticity of the correlation that constitutes the absolute*. We must show why thought, far from experiencing its intrinsic *limits* through facticity, experiences rather its *knowledge* of the absolute through facticity. We must grasp in facticity not the inaccessibility of the absolute, but the unveiling of the in-itself and the eternal property of what is, as opposed to the mark of the perennial deficiency in the thought of what is. (52)

For Meillassoux facticity is part of the “structural invariants that supposedly govern the world. (...) But although these forms are fixed, they constitute a fact, rather than an absolute, since I cannot ground their necessity – their facticity reveals itself with the realization that they can only be described, not founded. (39)”. It is the principle of factuality, which is for Meillassoux “the speculative sense of facticity” (79), that makes his philosophy speculative materialism as opposed to speculative realism, because, according to M. Kovalets, through it Meillassoux “criticizes the ontological truth: to be means to be a fact, but not a correlator” (146). If we wish to fully understand the absolute, we must isolate it from the human experiences, because it is only in this manner are we able to uncover the true nature of being. For Meillassoux, the absolute is “nothing more than an extreme form of chaos, a *hyper-chaos*, for which nothing is or would seem to be, impossible, not even the unthinkable” (64), and which we are able to perceive by means of facticity, “through which thought is able to exit from itself (...) [and] make (...) way towards the absolute” (63).

Meillassoux states that “we can only hope to develop an absolute knowledge – a knowledge of chaos (...) on condition that we produce necessary propositions about it besides that of its omnipotence” (66). However, to do so, we should determine chaos with norms that derive from chaos itself, and in this way, chaos would simultaneously remain both chaos and nothing at all. Meillassoux’s vision of chaos is a “discourse that aims to establish the constraints to which the entity must submit in order to exercise its capacity-not-to-be and its capacity-to-be-other” (ibid.). According to Leon Niemoczynski, “Meillassoux believes that he has found a way to the absolute because if one can think of the absolute destruction of subjectivity then one can think something which is utterly *independent* of it” (87).

For Meillassoux, Kantian anthropocentric position which puts humans as the central point in relation to which all other objects are defined and determined, is extremely limiting. He believes that the thinkers of the new era should “grasp how thought is able to access *an absolute*” (28) which is able to exist entirely unrelated to our own thoughts and

existence, while displacing humanity from the centre of their focus. Leon Niemoczynski has identified the goal of Meillassoux's *After Finitude* as the following:

Re-activate a philosophy of the absolute by re-asserting the absolutizing capacity of thought. This shall be made possible by thinking a being which is absolutely independent of thought, that is, a being unaffected by our mode of apprehending that being in subjectivity. This occurs when we consider the contingency of our own being in the correlation between being and thought (whatever post or prior to the correlation), and discover the contingency itself is the only absolutely necessary form of being. That is, what turns out to be the absolute is not the correlation between thought and being, but the very fact of the correlation's necessarily contingent existence. (68)

Ignas Šatkauskas views 'the great outdoors', which Meillassoux in his book *After Finitude* defines as "that outside which was not relative to us, and which was given as indifferent to its own givenness to be what it is, existing itself regardless of whether we are thinking of it or not" (7), as "the natural world apart from its givenness to sentient subjects" (102). He understands Meillassoux as re-establishing the great outdoors "as indifferent and alien to experience" (113). Even though Meillassoux believes the only discipline able to discourse about the great outdoors is mathematics, if one were to observe the great outdoors from a different perspective, it becomes clear that literature is as well, in its own way, capable of discussing it. Through his philosophical views, literary theorists are able to entirely remove not just the notion of the author and the reader, but the overall influence of the world, and perceive any literary work as the great outdoors – a new world apart from all human experience, one which is in no way influenced by our subjectivity. This can be equated with Meillassoux's deliberations on death, where he claims that "if one is able to know that there will be a world continuing after one dies, they are able to in effect conceive of reality devoid of their own subjectivity, uncorrelated, by attaining that state of death even through thought." (88) This is what literary work is to both its creators, consumers and critics because they truly get a glimpse into a new world which does not contain them, but which their thoughts are capable of perceiving.

The nihilist of the group, Ray Brassier, focuses on radical scientific view of the world to form his own philosophy which Graham Harman in his *Speculative Realism: An Introduction* refers to as 'Prometheanism'. Roy Goddard underlines the exceptionality of Brassier's nihilism, writing that "where other thinkers have looked squarely at the thought

that human existence is meaningless and then have sought to overcome this possibility, Brassier embraces nihilism as ‘a speculative opportunity’” (56), which enables us to place him as one of the founders of speculative realism. Leon Niemoczynski states that the development of Brassier’s philosophy marks him as being “emblematic of the realist yet speculative philosophers who directly challenge the subject-at-center metaphysics of Kant and subjectalist metaphysics of contemporary Continental thought” (119).

For Brassier, the key to philosophical questions he deals with is in cognitive sciences through which the duality between thought and words can be eliminated entirely. In the Preface of his book *Nihil Unbound*, Brassier explains that for him nihilism is “the unavoidable corollary of the realist conviction that there is a mind-independent reality, which, despite the presumptions of humans, is indifferent to our existence and oblivious to the ‘values’ and ‘meanings’ which we would drape over it in order to make it more hospitable” (xi). Nihilism is not a negative view on existence but just the opposite. Brassier believes that through nihilism it is possible for our thoughts to move away from the problems of our existence and observe the reality independent from the mind, and the only window which allows us to do so, as far as Brassier is concerned, is science.

His central thought, ‘everything is dead’, gives the nihilist philosopher freedom in which he can offer a different view on reality. In the last chapter of his *Nihil Unbound* he explains the intricate connection of extinction and philosophy:

If everything is dead already, this is not only because extinction disables those possibilities which were taken to be constitutive of life and existence, but also because the will to know is driven by the traumatic reality of extinction, and strives to become equal to the trauma of the in-itself whose trace it bears. In becoming equal to it, philosophy achieves a binding of extinction, through which the will to know is finally rendered commensurate with the in-itself. This binding coincides with the objectification of thinking understood as the *adequation without correspondence* between the objective reality of extinction and the subjective knowledge of the trauma to which it gives rise. It is this adequation that constitutes the truth of extinction. But to acknowledge this truth, the subject of philosophy must also recognize that he or she is already dead, and that philosophy is neither a medium of affirmation nor a source of justification, but rather the organon of extinction. (238 - 239)

Leon Niemoczynski believes that what Brassier has set out to do with his book

Nihil Unbound is to point to “thought’s inevitable extinction in order to sever the dependence of being upon thought” (114). Additionally, Peter Gratton has, in his book *Speculative Realism: Problems and Prospects*, identified the core thought which Brassier follows in his philosophy: “At the heart of Brassier’s project is to recognize the findings of science as the passkey to the in-itself, while also deliberating on the meaning of this thought” (138). However, through the evolution of his philosophy, Brassier shows dissatisfaction with his initial claims in his later works, presently turning “from the speculative nihilism of the *Nihil Unbound* to a still- developing transcendental realism by way of further elucidating the relationship between naturalism and rationality within the framework of a Sellarsian scientific-realist metaphysics” (Niemoczynski 115). Now Brassier sees the absolute as “incessant indifferent reality blindly accommodating the irrational into the rational through the various creative processes of conceptual practice” (ibid. 121).

Brassier’s philosophy offers us a distorting lens with which we could observe the world and the literary works as two unrelated entities. In the typical nihilistic view of the world that everything is already dead, he enables us to perceive the absolute as a reality which accepts its irrational literary representation. If we become aware the amount of distortion literature brings about, we could understand our world better. In annulling the life through extinction, we become free from the cultural bonds in observing all literary works.

Leon Niemoczynski equates Brassier’s Speculative Nihilism and Iain Hamilton Grant’s transcendental materialism in turning towards nature as the “main domain of inquiry within their own respective speculative projects” (111). He describes Grant’s metaphysics as one of “naturephilosophy: a consideration of the Absolute thought of as nature ‘originally and necessarily’ in its ‘grounds’ and as it ‘grounds everything that our species has ever thought about nature’” (121) which is presented in his 2008 book *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling* in which he places Schelling as a central philosophical figure because of his “rapidly varied approaches to a singular project; that of redefining the content and relationship of materialism and idealism in league with burgeoning science and German philosophy in order to construct a rigorous philosophy of nature, a philosophy which attempts, in various modes, to demolish what has preceded in order to clear path for accessing the absolute”. Woodard 1-2).

At the centre of his philosophy, as he defined it at Goldsmiths, is the desire to create an all-encompassing definition of the nature of philosophy and the nature of thought. He sees the world as being composed of several dimensions which are “articulated by the

operation capable of abstracting its objects from the context on which they are dependent” (Niemoczynski 168), which makes it possible for us to extract and study the layers independent from one another. Furthermore, Grant’s idea of nature as “not a basis to which everything must be *reduced* but a basis from which everything is *produced*” (Harman, *Speculative Realism: An Introduction* 85) provides a crucial distinction between Grant and other naturalists. In his 2013. article “How Nature Comes to be Thought: Schelling’s Paradox and the Problem of Location” Grant writes that nature lies in reason “not insofar as it is self-contained, but precisely because it is self-extaining” (40). He sees nature as “a force somehow retarded or blocked in its flow, thereby giving rise to what we think of as individual objects (apparently including our individual selves)” (Harman, *Speculative Realism: An Introduction* 99). By putting nature in the centre of his philosophy, Grant automatically displaces humans from the position they held for centuries, demanding the end of the anthropocentrism, “whether normatively or ontologically, and to end of any neat divides between what counts as human and what counts as ‘nature’” (Gratton 110) Gratton points out that the speculative realists’ understanding of correlationism coincides with the end of the Anthropocene, the era “in which the real things in and around us are effectively a hostage of “human” artifice, witnessed by the ecological catastrophes first set in motion at the dawn of the industrial revolution” (109)

Focusing mainly on the German ideas of idealism, Grant recognizes that it “cannot be viewed as merely an affront to realism but that idealism itself can be seen as exploring the reality of the idea, or the natural history of the mind through an unconditioning of the metaphysics of nature”. (Woodard 2) The Idea Grant is referring to is explained by Gratton as “the form of the movement of this natural history itself, one that is indirectly intelligible, analogous to the manner that you indirectly feel the power of the sun, though you should not look at it directly” (115).

All speculative realists speak about the absolute and find the ways to it through different paths which open up in their philosophies. For Grant the absolute should not be thought in terms of objects like in object-oriented ontology, but “in terms of activities that produce all such objects” (Gratton 110). The absolute is everchanging nature, it is all activities that are a part of the self-sufficient world that nature is. Liam Niemoczynski explains his view of the absolute as nature in the following way:

Nature is all but there is, there is nothing that is non-natural or so supernatural that cannot be said to belong to it. Hence there is nothing outside of nature, nor before it, nor even after it. Nature is "absolute activity exhibited ad infinitum". For from where other than within nature's activity could such claim *about* nature be made? This is indeed what makes nature the Absolute (...). Nature is unconditioned precisely because it is always the starting point: there is absolutely nowhere begin *other* than nature and hence nothing which could be its meaningful opposite. In this way nature is, following Schelling, a *precondition* for thinking. And if nature understood as Absolute is a precondition for thinking thought itself must be part and parcel of the natural, its "medium". (122)

Were we to look at any literary work through the lens of Grant's philosophy which Harman in his book *Speculative Realism: An Introduction* calls 'Vitalist Idealism', it would become apparent, more than with any other speculative realist philosophy, that the role nature has in our perception has altered entirely, and now it takes the centre as the single most important influence. The focus which Grant puts into the discussions of history and the becoming of objects is just as vital when it comes to the study of literature as his view of nature.

It is increasingly obvious that speculative realism has marked a revolutionary shift in the philosophical perception of the world. Peter Gratton has described the change the four philosophers have made in the following way: "What speculative realism will have accomplished is a shift from the era of interpretation and minute textual analyses to a "post-metaphysical" plundering of the real while also shifting Continental philosophy back to traditional metaphysical questions about the nature of being, philosophy's relation to scientific understanding, and so on." (201) The change which Harman, Meillassoux, Grant and Brassier have brought about with their unusual worldviews mirrors the great change in thought and the fight against the Anthropocentric view which has commenced around the same time humanity has realized the true extent of the effects we have had on nature. New movements are always a reaction towards their present as well as what came before them, and speculative realism is just that.

Despite presenting an unusual and unconventional, readings of the texts written by their philosophical predecessors, the four founders of speculative realism have created a new perspective of the world which is certainly valuable to other academic disciplines as well, among which literature stands out the most. Literary theorists have in these philosophical theories been provided with new lenses through which they can observe literary works in this

fast-evolving world in which nature once again takes centre when it comes to cultural studies.

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