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An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry

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Le besoin d'être mal armé

—Samuel Beckett

IN *A DEFENCE OF POETRY*, Percy Shelley argues that humans are like Aeolian harps (wind harps).¹ It's an extraordinary claim, influenced by materialist philosophers of sensation and identity such as John Hartley. Sentience, on this view, is vibrating in tune with (or out of tune with) some other entity: sentience is attunement. From this platform, Shelley is able to imagine thinking as a derivative of a physical process: a vibration “about” a vibration, or an interference pattern between vibrations. Shelley sneaks in a still more radical claim: “perhaps all sentient beings” are like wind harps.² Under the influence of the early Coleridge, Shelley is willing to transcend anthropocentrism and develop a philosophy that includes the nonhuman.

Yet we can go even further than Shelley. If a sentient being is like a wind harp, and if, moreover, sensation and thinking are ontologically similar to one another, then we can invert the image. Wind harps *are like sentient beings*. We are approaching territory into which the new philosophy speculative realism has burst, in particular, the insights of object-oriented ontology (OOO) concerning regions of nonhuman “sentience.” Speculative realist Steven Shaviro has recently written of the significance of “things” for Shelley.³ It seems appropriate then that Shelley, often accused of idealism, should be the topic of this essay on how literary scholarship can think about OOO.

If that wasn't weird enough, Shelley's Aeolian harps provide a way to think causality itself. Causality is aesthetic—by *aesthetic* this essay shall simply mean *having to do with appearance*. Rather than the candy sprinkles on the dull cake of reality, art becomes a workshop of experimentation in and on actually existing causes and effects. That causality is aesthetic is a major OOO breakthrough.⁴ Graham Harman, the founder of OOO, establishes in his groundbreaking works *Tool-Being* and *Guerilla Metaphysics* that objects are ontologically prior to their relations, relations that include their appearance for other objects. When OOO says *object* it means any entity whatsoever: symphonies, grass, poems, wind, nebulae,

wind harps, plays, humans, spools of thread, porpoises. OOO is thus highly congruent with Shelley's insight in the *Defence of Poetry*. Since objects are prior to any relation, and since causality (including time and space) just is a series of relations between things, causality must be ontologically "in front" of objects. This space "in front" is traditionally reserved for the aesthetic. Harman develops a theory of vicarious causation based on this fact.

When one object influences another one, it does so by *translating* that object.⁵ The Greek for translation is *metaphor*. It's refreshing for literary scholarship to see how the very fuel of causality might reside in something as recognizable as metaphor. In the following sections, I shall demonstrate that the aesthetic dimension is not an optional extra. To study a poem is not to study meaning alone, even if we expand "meaning" beyond established parameters. To study a poem, rather, is to see how causality itself operates. A poem directly intervenes in reality in a causal way. As literary scholars we are familiar with ascertaining the significance of a text. An OOO approach to poetry shows how poems do something as physical as what happens when my car scrapes the sidewalk. I shall conclude that the best defense of poetry is an object-oriented one.

The Aesthetic Dimension is the Causal Dimension

An Aeolian harp was the must-have household gadget of a certain eighteenth-century income bracket.⁶ The harp is a hollow box strung with sympathetic strings. Placed on a windowsill, the harp vibrates to the pulsation of air currents.⁷ Martin Heidegger, Harman's immediate precursor, maintains that we never hear the wind in itself: we hear the wind in the chimney, the wind in the trees—and the wind in the harp.⁸ Likewise, we don't hear the sound of the harp in some abstract sense. We hear the wind's "translation" of the strings. We hear the hollow sound box's translation of the string's vibration into amplified pressure waves. Entering our inner ear, these waves are translated by a pressure cell—the one plant cell in the entire human body. This cell acts as a transducer, converting mechanical vibrations into electrochemical signals. And so on.

Now in describing how the wind harp is perceived (*aisthēsis*), I am also describing its causal workings. The Aeolian harp is a beautifully elegant example of aesthetics as causality, which Harman calls *vicarious causation*. Why? Because we never hear the wind in itself. Neither do the trees grasp the essence of the wind. We OOO philosophers can sound as if we are saying that nonsentient objects are conscious.⁹ This is not exactly what is being said. Rather, what OOO claims is that consciousness isn't all that

different from what a tree does when it “translates” the wind. Nor does the wind capture the essence of the branches and leaves. Why? Because there *is* wind. Because there *are* branches and leaves and trees, “withdrawn” prior to their relations—not temporally prior, but ontologically prior. OOO is a form of weird realism, in which objects have an essence that is profoundly withdrawn.¹⁰ Even when objects appear to touch one another physically, they are withdrawn from one another ontologically. This means that when an object is “translating” another one—when it is influencing it in a causal way—it is doing to that object something analogous to what I as a human do when I act on things.

I *anthropomorphize*. It’s not that I anthropomorphize in some situations but not in others. It’s that, because of the fact of phenomenological *sincerity*, I can’t help anthropomorphizing everything I handle. *Sincerity* here means what José Ortega y Gasset means by *ingenuousness*, or, in the words of the great phenomenologist Buckaroo Banzai, “Wherever you go, there you are.”¹¹ It is impossible for me to peel myself away from the totality of my phenomenological being. Just as I fail to avoid anthropomorphizing everything, so all entities whatsoever constantly translate other objects into their own terms. My back maps out a small backpomorphic slice of this tree that I’m leaning on. The strings of the wind harp stringpomorphize the wind. The wind windpomorphizes the temperature differentials between the mountains and the flat land. The mountains are shellpomorphic piles of chalk. A nail is an anthropomorphic piece of iron. An iron deposit is a bacteriapomorphic rendering of bacteria metabolism. For OOO as for Aristotle, *form* (*morphē*, hence anthropomorphism) is how things appear.¹² With full respect to Mr. Spock, there is no such thing as “matter without form.”¹³ Moreover, if everything is itselfpomorphizing everything else, anthropomorphism is not as big a deal as some ecological criticism thinks. Indeed, the accusation of anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism is often staged from within anthropocentrism itself: humans are bad because, alone in all the universe, they shape things to their ends. Not at all, responds OOO: everything else is doing the same thing.

Like any other entity the wind harp is irreducible to its parts for OOO. Why? Because otherwise smaller things would be more real than medium-sized things, an *ontotheological* claim that some things are more real than others.¹⁴ A more up-to-date reductionism (what Harman calls “undermining”) would think the harp as a mere instantiation of larger processes or flows, in the manner of Whitehead, Deleuze and Guattari, and proponents of new materialism such as Manuel De Landa.¹⁵ This reductionism also maintains that some things are more real than others: flowing liquids become templates for everything else. Undermining fails

to explain the givenness of the ontic phenomenon. For me, a human who grew up in the UK, I marvel at the way Tate and Lyle's Golden Syrup lugubriously slimes its way out of its plastic bottle on a Saturday morning when I eat pancakes. But to a hypothetical four-dimensional sentient being, such an event would be an unremarkable static object, while to a neutrino the slow globs of syrup are of no consequence whatsoever. There is no reason to elevate the lava lamp fluidity of syrup into the archetypical thing.

When we hear the word "object," we reach for our blowtorch: we think "static," "boring," "reified." OOO is not arguing that stasis is prior to fluidity, but rather that objects are prior to their relations. Objects exist prior to the one "for whom" they are fluid or static. This is not congruent with social, philosophical, and ideological tendencies to imagine reality as tiny point particles in a void or as flows and processes. But the claim that objects are ontologically prior to their relations follows logically from the fact that no one "translation" of an object is that object. To hypostatize fluidity above the static is to apply a single translation to all objects. OOO is not saying that behind every flow there is a static object. OOO is saying that behind every flow, behind every stasis, there is an object that cannot be reduced to anything whatsoever.

Irreducibility, Unicity, Anarchy

OOO uses the term *object* in a deliciously provocative way. Like *queer*, the term *object* attracts prejudices: objects are lumps, they are static, they are uncool. Rather than inventing new and improved versions of substance and accident, OOO goes for the ontological jugular and thinks of everything as a weird entity withdrawn from access, yet somehow manifest. According to OOO, what is called *process* is an aesthetic feature that emerges from the object as such. Reductionism downward into component parts or processes, then, is not on the OOO cards. Conversely, neither may we "reduce upwards," turning the wind harp into an effect of some entity such as God or my mind. Objects are not blocks of whatever waiting to be given true meaning by some (usually human) other. Why? This "overmining" (Harman's term for the opposite of undermining) also implies that some supervenient entity is more real than other things.¹⁶ But we have already decided that the essence of an object withdraws, even from its parts. Nothing can get a purchase on it. *Not even a god*. If you really want to be an atheist you might want to take OOO out for a spin.

Thus there may be an infinite regress of "objects wrapped in objects wrapped in objects wrapped in objects" (Harman).¹⁷ And there may be

an *infinite progress* of objects in which we are also wrapped, like Stephen Dedalus's address in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

Stephen Dedalus
 Class of Elements
 Clongowes Wood College
 Sallins
 County Kildare
 Ireland
 Europe
 The World
 The Universe¹⁸

Stephen's list seems to move upward in levels of importance. However, for object-oriented ontology there can be no "top object" that gives meaning and reality to the others. And there can be no "bottom object," a fundamental particle from which everything else is derived. Likewise, there is no ether or medium or "middle object" in which other objects float. Such a medium has possessed many names: *periechon* ("surround"), world, environment, Newtonian space, nature, ether, ambience, circumambient fluid.¹⁹ Even the holy grail of standard model quantum theory, the Higgs field (ultimate prize of the Large Hadron Collider experiments currently underway at CERN), might be an attempt to create an ontotheological "middle object" that gives meaning to other subatomic particles.²⁰ In contrast, OOO offers a reality without privileged categories: an anarchic plenitude of objects crowds around us and in us, like the leering characters in some expressionist painting.

The irreducibility (upward or downward) of objects entails that objects are unique but not necessarily singular. A crowd is an object; so is a loner. OOO is not a form of individualism. There is a strong difference between being an individual and uniqueness. Being an individual means being one of a series of things that are designated as such. Think of the classic American lawn, a one-size-fits-all symbol of individualism. A unique lawn, by contrast, decorated with psychedelic crucifixes, would cause the owner to be arrested in some states.

The Rift

Even the object itself is not an adequate expression of itself. *The object withdraws—even from itself*. There is a profound *rift* (*chōrismos*) between *essence* and *appearance*, sharply different from the off-the-shelf Aristotelian opposition of *substance* and *accidence*. For OOO, *substance* is another

“translation” of an object by another: say a pair of scales that measures the weight of a cupcake but not its flavor or sex appeal. Received wisdom decides that substances are like plain cupcakes, and that accidents add superficial flavor, like candy sprinkles. Wherever we look for essence, we won’t find it—*because it exists*. “Exist” just means “withdraw from access.” Anything that doesn’t do that is some kind of ontically given contraband from the world of (human) relations. An apple is not only its appearance for a human: round, juicy, sweet, tart . . . It has those appearances because it exists beyond human access. Thus the apple is not only its appearances-for some (other) entity. Since the apple consists of parts that are not strictly the apple, it withdraws even from itself. An apple is a nonapple, like the Magritte painting of the pipe that is not a pipe.

Appearances aren’t just cheerleaders of some faceless football team of essences. Rather, the rift between essence and appearance fuels causality. Consider the seemingly simple phenomenon of motion. We tend to imagine objects as “moving in” some medium. Thinking in these terms supposes a “middle object” that gives meaning (or mass or reality) to the other objects: an option that we have already ruled out. OOO objects don’t float around “in” time like billiard balls on a green baize table. Objects *produce time and space*, just like they do in Einsteinian relativity theory, as I shall endeavor to explain.²¹

Objects are Liars

If objects are inherently self-consistent, then we may need some kind of process philosophy (Bergson, Whitehead, Deleuze) to think change and motion. This is an ontotheological trap. We have arbitrarily decided, as noted earlier, that some things (processes) are more real than other things. We could, on the other hand, allow that objects are *themselves* (withdrawal) and *not themselves* (appearance) at the very same time. This means not only that objects are one thing to themselves and another to others, but that objects are also one thing to themselves *and another thing to themselves*, all at once. Objects are contradictions. OOO requires a logic capable of tolerating self-contradictory things. Since Aristotle, Western philosophy has cleaved doggedly to the law of noncontradiction (LNC). According to LNC, nothing can be both itself and not itself, $p \wedge \neg p$. With varying degrees of shrillness, defenders of LNC hold that a sentence such as “This sentence is false” is not a real sentence. Such a sentence is a *dialetheia*, double truthed: both true and false at the same time.²² The sentence is true, which means that it is false; or the sentence is false, which means that it is true. Adherents of LNC try to confine dialetheias to cramped ghettos of philosophy, but the more

brittle they become, the more virulent contradictions they spawn, in a classic case of autoimmunity.²³ And dialetheias are everywhere. They form the bedrock of Gödel's incompleteness theorem, for instance: a logical system is coherent iff (if and only if) it contains at least one sentence of the form "This statement cannot be proved." Thus dialetheias are in Cantor and Turing (to the chagrin of Whitehead and Russell), which means that they are in the fundamental structures that govern the ways we think computing and artificial intelligence.

Literary scholars have a leg up here: we constantly deal with sentences like "This sentence is false." We distinguish, for instance, between a narrator who says "I" and a character in a story who refers to himself as "I," even when those people are "the same." We have benefited from Lacan's Heideggerian claim that "there is no metalanguage."²⁴ The concept of metalanguages was developed precisely to contain the scandal of dialetheias.²⁵ But the more rigorous the metalanguage is, the more brittle it is, resulting in even worse dialetheias! Why? Precisely because of the phenomenological *sincerity* mentioned earlier. In other words, it is impossible to attain escape velocity from one's being. Like Alice trying to leave the Garden of Talking Flowers, we find ourselves right back at ourselves. Whatever its faults, theory class has had the benefit of inoculating us with a kind of allergy medicine, enabling us to tolerate the idea that OOO objects are contradictions ($p \wedge \neg p$).

In an age in which "they" say "everything is interconnected," and in which process trumps stasis, it's very difficult to imagine the following hypothetical situation. At a historical moment at which our coexistence with other beings (as I have argued elsewhere) could not be more urgent to think, it seems churlish, irresponsible, or perhaps even evil to think the following thought. I have, however, come to accept that OOO is deeply congruent with ecological philosophy. Imagine, then, an object existing all on its own. A scandalous thought, perhaps, maybe even an inconceivable one. The object is not just a blank lump waiting to be personalized by some higher object (overmining). The object is not a blob of something bigger or an assemblage of tinier things (undermining). The object is itself: specific, unique. Let's say it's a grain of space dust, since it's not too hard to imagine one such grain floating in a void. The grain already has qualities, such as front, back, and so on. Yet these qualities are only ever aesthetic appearances, no matter whether there is any "observer" around to see. The object is riven from the inside between its essence and its appearance. The grain isn't a lump of substance that has a certain accidental shape and color, an idea that we have ruled out. It must be the case, then, that *in itself* the grain (essence) is also a nongrain (appearance): $p \wedge \neg p$.

Now the disturbing thing about the rift between appearance and essence is that it's undecidable. We can't specify "where" or "when" the rift "is." The rift forces us to confront an illusion-like reality: "What constitutes pretense is that, in the end, you can't tell whether it's pretense or not" (Lacan).²⁶ Appearances (relations between objects) are deceptive: they are aesthetic. It's no wonder that philosophy has often seen the aesthetic dimension as a domain of evil. The shifting, swirling abyss is not surging behind objects, as it does in some Schellingian accounts of primordial stuff.²⁷ For OOO, the abyss is right before our very eyes. When I reach for an apple in a red plastic bowl in my kitchen, I am reaching into an abyss; even to look at the apple, to speak about it or write a poem about it, is to plunge into the abyss.

Gerard Manley Hopkins writes:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
 As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
 Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
 Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
 Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
 Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
 Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
 Crying, *What I do is me: for that I came.*²⁸

Even here, in the midst of a reaffirmation of the Aristotelian haecceity of Duns Scotus (the last time the term *ontology* could be spoken without a slight blush), there is a difference between "I" and "me": "*What I do is me: for that I came.*"²⁹ An object "goes itself"—like "going green" or "going berserk"—but how can you become what you already are? What is a thing saying, what is the *me*? In this difference between a reflexive and a nonreflexive personal pronoun, we detect archaeological evidence of the rift between a thing and its appearance. What Hopkins gives us is no brightly colored diorama of animated plastic, but a weird theater in which things stage their unique version of the Cretan Liar sentence: "This sentence is false." To speak otherwise is to have decided in advance what things are, which contradicts the way the poem forces us to experience things. "Tumbled over rim in roundy wells / Stones" (2–3) are felt and heard before we hear what they have to say for themselves against the walls of the well and in the deep water within. The second line is an invisibly hyphenated adjective, *tumbled-over-rim-in-roundy-wells*. The adjective takes almost as long to read as it might take for an average stone to hit the water. The adjective draws out the stone, just as the dragonflies "draw flame." The stone becomes its tumbling, its falling into the well, the moment at which it is thrown over the rim. Then splash—it's a stone

alright, but we already sensed it as a nonstone. Appearances are liars, but in lying they tell the truth. The bottomless play of appearances is paradoxically grounded: the endless dream of causality is subtended by objects that subvert the metaphysics of presence.

Objects Emit Space and Time

Recall the the two main ways of avoiding OOO:

- 1) Undermining. Things are reducible to smaller entities such as particles. Or things are only instantiations of deeper processes.
- 2) Overmining. Objects are blank chunks with their appearances glued to their surfaces, or added by some “perceiver.” Thus objects are not real until they interact with other objects.

Alternatively, there is a rift between appearance and essence *within the object itself*. We should accept some kind of paraconsistent, possibly dialethic logic that allows things to be what they seem, and not what they seem, simultaneously. Otherwise we regress to default substances plastered with accidents. On this basis we can discern a third way of avoiding OOO, the inverse of (2):

- (3) There are no substances, and it’s all “appearance for” or aesthetics all the way down.

OOO preserves the rift between appearance and essence, as a way of retaining, paradoxically, the very aestheticness of the aesthetic dimension. If reality were aesthetic all the way down, then we would *know* it was “just” an illusion and its power to beguile us would disappear.³⁰ We would have an inverted ontotheology of pure affects without substances. Lacan again: “What constitutes pretense is that, in the end, you don’t know whether it’s pretense or not.” Until thinking is ready to accept that objects can be intrinsically unstable, we are stuck with options (1)–(3).

Once we accept this inherent instability, this rift, we don’t need to think of objects being pushed around by processes or particles or others’ perceptions of them. They can do just fine on their own. (Without this instability, paradoxes associated with motion arise, such as Zeno’s paradox.) A single object in a state of quantum coherence is intrinsically unstable. The object need not be at a quantum scale: an experiment of this kind was done with a forklike object thirty microns long, which is tiny from a human point of view, but breathtakingly vast from the standpoint of an electron. When isolated from other objects, the fork is

far from “static.” Rather it “breathes,” occupying two positions, vibrating and not vibrating simultaneously.³¹

What is called *space* and what is called *time* just are aesthetic properties of objects.³² OOO provides a way to think the ontological reasons for the validity of Einsteinian spacetime, which ripples from objects depending on their mass. Objects can’t be pinned down to one noncontradictory place and one noncontradictory time. Why? Because space and time are aspects of the difference(s) between an object and itself. Objects “time.” A theory of motion is now no problem. Objects can move without a prime mover and without some supervenient dynamism, simply because their essence is playing leapfrog with their appearance.³³ What is called spacetime is the difference between an object’s essence and its appearance. You fly in a plane: your clock runs a little bit faster than if you are stationary on Earth, because you are in a weaker part of Earth’s spacetime vortex.³⁴ You see starlight. You are seeing the appearance of the star relative to your place on Earth, the star’s appearance several million years ago “in” the past.³⁵ But the same thing also applies to this paperweight twelve inches from my face. Moreover, I see the past of the paperweight in a broader sense, when I see it “now.” What I see is resin shaped into a sphere, a dandelion picked and placed in the resin, some grease from my fingers when I last handled the paperweight. The aesthetic form of an object just is temporal. This means that objects—all objects, from perfume bottles to Popes to plutonium pellets—do what Heidegger says only Dasein does: they “are” time, they “time.”

Literary analysts have an advantage here. It’s common to experience time dilating and contracting when we read a story or a poem. We can identify formal narrative techniques and other devices such as ekphrasis that make this happen. We know that form generates time. It’s just that we have tacitly accepted the habit of thinking that time and space (and causality more generally) subtend objects, in particular flimsy artifacts such as poems. So we think that how a poem “times” is a superficial coating. OOO reverses this picture. Time, space, and causality float “in front of” objects: they just are ways in which an object appears. And the paperweight “times” just as Dasein “times.” Nonhumans are fundamentally no different from humans, then, let alone German humans. One of the merits of Harman’s reading of Heidegger is that it performs the most thorough imaginable de-Nazification of Heidegger, not by kicking Heidegger in the pants, yelling “Nazi!” and running away, but by accepting and exploring his profound insights. Like Derrida, who also engaged Heidegger deeply, OOO takes Heidegger’s revolutionary thinking with the required seriousness.

What Heidegger thought was that a tool is withdrawn (*Entzug*, withdrawal) but a broken tool appears. There I am, hammering away, when all of a sudden I hit my thumb or the hammer breaks: then I notice the hammer. But it isn't quite a hammer any more. Harman argues forcefully that this startling insight opens up a gigantic coral reef below the Heidegger U-Boat: the coral reef of OOO, resplendent with trillions of entities all twinkling in their different ways, some of which are humans, some of which are not, but all of which have what humans have, and so do what humans do.³⁶ Not because a soup spoon is alive, but because I'm not really alive, not in the sense that matters. Not because a spoon is intelligent, but because I'm not really intelligent. I just look and quack intelligent in relation to some other entity, such as a psychologist or a daughter or an IQ test. What spoons do when they scoop up soup is not very different from what I do when I talk about spoons. Again, not because the spoon is alive or intelligent (panpsychism), but because intelligence and being alive are aesthetic appearances for some other phenomenon, including the object in question.

Poetry as Agent

We seem to be returning slowly to Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*. Shelley argues that time is not objective. Rather time is a revolutionary upsurge of poetic inspiration. We can now see just how realist this idea might be. Since objects produce time, time as a continuous and smooth sequence of evenly spaced now-points must be *a certain version of time* produced by a *certain set of objects*: digital clocks, Greenwich, Pope Gregory, the stock market, CNN . . . Against this uniformity, other events are irruptions of transformation, iridescent fireworks of change. There is a politics at work here, a politics that includes nonhumans. Such revolutionary moments are not empty Badiouian Events, holes in a symbolic order, but rather the birth of fresh things.³⁷ In such moments, we suddenly find ourselves in the midst of new beings. Consider events that we deem bad or painful: a car crash is happening, we realize we are dying, we find ourselves in the middle of an ugly divorce. We always apprehend such moments in a belated way. We can't see an action replay of the birth of objects. All of a sudden, there they are, like the murderer in a David Lynch movie: they are already in the shot. A beginning is always traumatic, because it is the irruption of a new object. A poem is not simply a representation, but rather a nonhuman agent.

Causal-aesthetic configuration space can't be limited in advance, and is atemporal and nonlocal: or, as a Shelleyan might put it, "timeless."

Let us consider how revolutionary “timelessness” now sounds. A trauma happens “outside time” because it disrupts the habitual currents of temporality. A trauma just is the appearance of a new object. A new temporality appears, because there is a new entity in the world, with its own way of “timing” and “spacing.” It was quite a while ago that a literary scholar used the term *timeless* with anything other than a sarcastic sneer. Aesthetic terms mothballed for decades can now make a radical comeback. Something that looks like a weird Neoplatonism—aesthetic phenomena beckoning onto a secret beyond—joins forces with a weird Aristotelianism—a nonmaterialist (that is, nonreductionist) realism of substances that are not just vague chunks of matter. This is a truly progressive palette for the humanities to play with.

Shelley describes the efficacy of poetry:

Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred. It is at the same time the root and blossom of all other systems of thought; it is that from which all spring, and that which adorns all; and that which, if blighted, denies the fruit and the seed, and withholds from the barren world the nourishment and the succession of the scions of the tree of life. It is the perfect and consummate surface and bloom of all things; it is as the odor and the color of the rose to the texture of the elements which compose it, as the form and splendor of unfaded beauty to the secrets of anatomy and corruption.³⁸

That last sentence shifts from metaphor to reality: “Poetry is the perfect and consummate surface and bloom of all things; it is as the odor and the color of the rose to the texture of the elements which compose it.” Shelley is talking about thinking, but he’s also talking about roses. Poetry is not the candy sprinkles on the cupcake of science, nor some ineffable source or power. It is sparkingly apparent yet strange at the same time. It is both “root and blossom,” essence and appearance, withdrawn yet vivid. Poetry is not mere ornamentation, nor is it some Romantic (or post-Romantic) engagement with (human) “meaning”—as either the public relations guy or the ignored poor relation of an instrumental realm of science and politics. Poetry is astonishingly important, for Shelleyan and OOO reasons—which are the same reasons. Not because poetry gives meaning to a meaningless mechanism, or because it’s the last and best resistance to the juggernaut of modernity, but because poetry tampers directly with causality. Far from being the cry of the heart in a heartless world, or a subversive parody of ideology, or even a “peal of stillness” that instantiates the *there* of Dasein, poetry simply is causality, pure and simple.³⁹

It's not surprising that Shelley would see this. Shelley is a consummate constructivist: his poetics is one that plays with relationships and relationality—causality, in OOO terms. Like a concept artist whose raw materials are the mind and expectations of the viewer, Shelley makes gigantic machines that defy easy navigation and totalization. They dissolve objectification, making things appear far more complex and interrelated than we suppose: a trick he learned from Wordsworth. From the perspective of OOO, relations are like Shelley poems: vast, complex, entangled, nonlocal, atemporal, sliding hither and thither, beset with irony and illusion. But *why* are relations like this? Why are they illusionlike, confronting us with aporias and shadow plays? Because objects are prior to relations. What the coruscating causal play of Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* forces us to realize is what OOO maintains: the aesthetic dimension, the dimension of relations, is the causal dimension. What then of the objects that are ontologically prior to this dimension? An appropriate literary critical response might be: while relations are Shelley poems, *objects are Keats poems*.

Men may be from Mars and women from Venus, but it is more accurate to say that relations are from Shelley, while objects are from Keats. In contrast to Shelley, Keats chose the road less traveled in the history of modern art. Instead of making constructivist machines for dissolving objectification, Keats creates objects that dissolve relations, like black holes (for Harman, a black hole is the quintessential object precisely because nothing escapes from it).⁴⁰ Keatsian objects are still unravished brides of quietness that stop the thinking process dead in its tracks. Hence the poet's obsession with objects, even with consumerist kitsch.

Aesthetic Form and Time

Shelley's vision of aesthetic causality in *A Defence of Poetry* is realist yet profoundly weird. First it has nothing to do with materialism, which is commonly taken to be a staple of realism. Remember what was said in the introduction about Shelley's image of sentience as a wind harp. This image is not strictly materialist. For OOO what is called "matter" is simply matter for . . . , *an aesthetic phenomenon*. What Aristotle, the ancestor of OOO, calls the material causes of a thing are the beings that compose it: "What it's made of." An Aeolian harp is made of wood, but the wood in turn comes from a tree.⁴¹

The artist who this idol wrought
To echo all harmonious thought

Felled a tree, while on the steep
 The woods were in their winter sleep,
 Rock'd in that repose divine
 On the wind-swept Apennine;
 ...
 For it had learnt all harmonies
 Of the plains and of the skies,
 Of the forests and the mountains,
 And the many-voiced fountains;
 The clearest echoes of the hills,
 The softest notes of falling rills,
 The melodies of birds and bees,
 The murmuring of summer seas,
 And pattering rain, and breathing dew,
 And airs of evening. . . .⁴²

A guitar just is what happened to some wood, which just is what happened to a tree: as we trace the story of the guitar, we never find some material substrate that is not already some object. Like Heidegger's Van Gogh shoes, the guitar resonates with other entities.⁴³ But as the evocative figures suggest, floating somewhere between metaphor and metonymy, these entities do not illustrate a human world. Rather they evoke the nonhuman: forests wet with rain and dew, the hills from which the trees grow, rain. What seems like fancy turns out to be realism of a kind, but this is not your grandma's realism. The guitar is a nonguitar, pregnant with the "murmuring of summer seas."

OOO is realism without materialism. "Matter" is a clumsy shorthand for the unique thing that was carved, wrought, melted, entangled, to produce the object at hand. On this view, materialism is strangely "correlationist": correlationism being the dominant post-Kantian view that reality itself only meaningfully inheres in a correlation between a mind and a thing or a world.⁴⁴ Matter requires some "observer" (whether they are sentient or not, human or not, is irrelevant) "for whom" matter is posited. Moreover, matter implies the existence of at least one other entity from which the matter in question differs. Think about Derrida's infamous line "il n'y a pas de hors-texte."⁴⁵ Happily, Gayatri Spivak gives us two translations. The second, parenthetical translation is the one I prefer: "there is no outside-text." In other words, not everything is reducible to pure language, as is the case with structuralism, which indeed reduces things to their relations. What Derrida is saying, by contrast, is that a text is an operationally closed system (in the terms of Roy Bhaskar) that is founded on some kind of externality that it both includes and excludes, that it can't talk about, but that it can't help referencing

in the negative. A word, for example, depends upon an inscribable surface, ink, and a history and culture of writing . . . The existence of a text is its coexistence with at least one (1+n) withdrawn entity. This is far from the whole OOO truth, but from an OOO standpoint, it is the radar echo from the tip of an object-oriented iceberg. OOO is truly post-Derridean, rather than a regression from Derrida back into an affirmative or positivistic process relationism (Whitehead, De Landa). Most materialisms are indeed forms of relationism, since they imagine things to be patterns of smaller things, or snapshots of larger things. This view is so entrenched that it is very difficult to think past it. We are too accustomed, argues OOO, to seeing things as patterns and not as objects.

Instead of materialism, OOO draws on the ugly duckling of Aristotle's four causes, formal causation. Formal causation has been down on its luck in the consensus that emerged in modernity, which, in contrast to scholasticism, placed the emphasis on material and efficient causation, not formal causation. One main reason is that formal causation is often interpreted in a teleological way, and much science acts as a powerful repellent against teleology. Consider the harm teleological notions of form have done: nonwhite races are "for" dominating; cows are "for" eating; and so on. Marx wrote Darwin a fan letter simply because he recognized how *The Origin of Species* seriously undercut a teleological view of life forms.⁴⁶ The deeper OOO reason to be suspicious of teleology is that it turns objects into blobs that are given meaning by some "for which," some purpose. On this view, until objects are purposed in this way, they just float around vaguely: to be is to have a purpose for some other entity.

Contemporary discoveries in quantum physics may rehabilitate formal causation.⁴⁷ The widespread quantum-mechanical phenomenon of nonlocality just is aesthetic causation, formal rather than efficient or material. A particle traveling through the doughnut hole in an electromagnetic field is still influenced by that field, although it doesn't physically "touch" it. Fruit flies smell by detecting the quantum signature of a molecule, not the volatile chemicals themselves: a nonlocal apprehension of an *aesthetic form*.⁴⁸ Birds detect electromagnetic fields by means of nonlocal effects on a quantum-scale magnet in their eyes, not by positioning themselves in a physical field.⁴⁹ Might it be possible to revise formal causation while unplugging it from teleology? Since form just is the substance of a literary text, this is more than a relevant concern for literary scholarship.

A poem is a certain form: just this lineation, just that rhyme scheme, just this stanza form, just those images. Poems are records of causal-aesthetic decisions. To read a poem is to be an archaeologist. For OOO, the physical form of an object is a form-as and a formed-by. A glass is

shaped by the way the breath and hands of a glass blower, a tube and a blob of molten glass, interacted. Its shape is the trace of what happened to it. Freud argues that the ego is just the record of “abandoned object cathexes.”⁵⁰ What if we inverted this phrase, and assert that the form of objects is their ego? If ego is objectlike, then the inverse applies. The identity of this glass is the way it was shaped as a glass. Form is *memory*, as in a memory stick: your face, your hard drive, your chipped coffee mug, records what happened to it. What is called the past is really other objects that coexist with the object in question. When we hold a glass, we are holding the past. As we saw earlier, there is a profound *rift* between the *appearance* of the glass and the *essence* of the glass, which is not the same as the difference between an undifferentiated blob and a defined shape with stem, bowl, weight, sparkle, and so on. For lack of a better way of putting it, it’s *the difference between the glass and the glass*. (“What is the difference between a duck? One of its legs is both the same.”) The glass is a glass and an uncannily not-glass: $p \wedge \neg p$.

What then of the present? What is existing, or continuing, or persisting? It just means being in-difference from oneself. Existing thus is futural. It is not yet. Consider a poem. Its meaning is its future. At some point we will read it and decide on its meaning. Then we reread it and another meaning might emerge. The only reason we return to a poem is that it might release a different meaning this time. Since the aesthetic dimension is the causal dimension, what does this basic fact about what we do as literary scholars tell us about time itself? It tells us that the “present” is not a bubble between past and future, or a blinking cursor, or a point. The present is a construct imposed on an uncanny intermeshing of appearance and essence. Presence is hollowed out from the inside by “past” and “future.” We are approaching an OOO interpretation of the end of Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry*, in which Shelley regards poets as “the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration, the mirrors of the gigantic shadows that futurity casts upon the present.”⁵¹

Because causality is aesthetic, it’s legitimate to use poetry to think causality. Only consider what Harold Bloom says about a poem: “The meaning of a poem can only be a poem, but *another poem—a poem not itself*.”⁵² Likewise, the meaning of an object is another object. We can slightly modify this to argue that the “other object” could uncannily be the very same object, since objects are dialetheic. This is not a limpid, naïve givenness: not WYSIWYG meaning (in an age before Microsoft Windows, this meant “what you see is what you get”). This is a shifting, deceptive, illusory meaning. *The past just is appearance*. Contrary to the commonly held belief that appearance is “now,” the formal cause of a thing just is its pastness. That must mean that *the future is the essence of a thing*.

How startling: *appearance is the past, essence is the future*. We commonly associate the *essence* of a thing with the past: what was this thing before I looked at it, before it interacted with that other thing? Science is now beginning to confront the limitations of this default ontology. The quantum-theoretical definition of “measure” is “deflect with another quantum.” At this level, the link between perceiving and causing is undeniable, though many consider this to be an invitation to idealism or New Age fantasy. Many of the problems of Aristotelian-scholastic substance theories and post-Kantian correlationism (the standard model of quantum theory just is correlationist) stem from thinking essence as the past. Thus is born the light-in-the-refrigerator anxiety of the correlationist and the idealist. When you close the door, how can you tell if the light’s off?

The meaning of a poem is (in) the future. This future is not a now-point that is *n* now-points away from the current one: it is withdrawn, it is withdrawal. This future is what Derrida calls *l’avenir*, the to-come, or what I call the *future future*.⁵³ In a strict sense, poetry does come from the future, just as Shelley argues. A weird Platonism is in effect, beaming the shadows of objects down from the future future into sensual-aesthetic-causal coexistence. The future future is not some transcendental beyond: this would be a top object par excellence. Nor is the future future a “time in which” the object “resides.” The future future is the pure possibility of the object as such.

Withdrawal is futurity, not as a predictable time that is ontically given. Nor is futurity a poststructuralist “*excess*,” since this implies a thing for which the object is excessive (this could be a telescope or a teabag as much as it could be a human or a fish). Excess is an appearance, belonging to the realm of an object’s pastness. Nor is futurity a void, a gap or empty nothingness. Perhaps the term *openness* expresses it best. Withdrawal is openness, a shadow of futurity “cast into the present” (Shelley).⁵⁴ Now we can discern more clearly the *chōrismos* between essence and appearance. It is a rift between openness and pretense. An object persists and moves for as long as it can maintain its inner lie. If it is forced to speak nothing but the truth, destruction ensues: the rift collapses. On this view, the death of tyrants and the overthrow of oppression is the exposure of tyranny to its truth. Marx writes that the revolution to come must “draw its poetry . . . from the future.” I wonder whether he had Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry* in mind.⁵⁵ The very workings of causality as such are the shadow play of the future’s poetry, vibrating the strings and surfaces and hollows of wind harps, egg cups, cathedrals, underwater gas pipelines, poems, neutron stars, PDFs, and grains of salt.

On the event horizon of the black hole into which I have fallen, you see a slowly fading photograph of my horrified face.⁵⁶ A black hole is

the densest possible object in the universe, an object from which no information escapes. In their appearance aspect, all objects are like the photograph on a black hole's event horizon. Fancifully, *appearance just is the event horizon of an object*, the point ontologically "in front of which" causality becomes meaningful. Yet even black holes eventually evaporate. They exist because they do not coincide with their appearance. Eventually essence collapses into appearance, which is how an object ends. When I die, I become your memories of me, the crumpled pieces of paper in my waste paper basket.⁵⁷

Samuel Beckett replies to someone that the reason why he writes in French is that "There is a need to be ill-equipped," a phrase that also means "There is a need to be Mallarmé."⁵⁸ Mallarmé broke the hammer of poetry by stretching the space on which it was written like a rubber sheet, treating the paper as part of the poetry. The space stopped being a blank container for words, and started to be for humans what it already was: an entity in its own right. Paper can tear. Ink can spill. Lines of poetry can burst asunder. Trees can be pulped to form paper and wind harps. 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. To write poetry is to perform a nonviolent political act, to coexist with other beings. This coexistence happens not in some eternal now, or in a now-point, however expansive or constrained. The "nowness" of a poem, its "spaciousness," is the disquieting asymmetry between appearance and essence, past and future. With remorseless gentleness, a poem forces us to acknowledge that we coexist with uncanny beings in a groundless yet vivid reality without a beyond. This is what it means to compose an object-oriented defense of poetry.

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NOTES

1 Percy Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002), 511. All quotations from Shelley are from this edition.

2 Shelley, *Defence*, 511.

3 Steven Shaviro, "The Universe of Things," *Theory and Event* 14, no. 3, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v014/14.3.shaviro.html, accessed December 16, 2011.

4 It is the topic of my *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, forthcoming).

5 Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 91–93, 98–99, 101–24, 141–44, 218–20; "On Vicarious Causation," *Collapse 2* (2007), 171–205.

- 6 Charles Rzepka, "‘Perform Thy Task Untouch’d, Alone’: Aeolian Harps as Home Entertainment." (Paper given at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association, Philadelphia, 2006).
- 7 See <http://www.tompolk.com/music/aeol8bit.wav>, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aeolian_harp, accessed December 15, 2011.
- 8 Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 15–87, esp. 26.
- 9 This is not the case. See Graham Harman, "Zero-Person and the Psyche," in *Mind that Abides: Panpsychism in the New Millennium*, ed. David Skrbina (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2009), 253–82.
- 10 Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Peru, IL: Open Court, 2002), 217–96.
- 11 José Ortega y Gasset, *Phenomenology and Art*, trans. Philip W. Silver (New York: Norton, 1975), 63–70; Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 39, 40, 135–43, 247; W. D. Richter, Dir., *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai across the Eighth Dimension* (20th Century Fox, 1984).
- 12 Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 34–36.
- 13 "Return to Tomorrow," *Star Trek*, first broadcast February 9, 1968.
- 14 Harman, *Tool-Being*, 5, 28, 173.
- 15 Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Alresford: Zero Books, 2011), 7–19.
- 16 Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 7–19.
- 17 Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 85.
- 18 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Huebsch, 1922), 11–12.
- 19 Leo Spitzer, "Milieu and Ambiance," in *Essays in Historical Semantics* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1948; repr. 1968), 179–316.
- 20 Timothy Morton, "Standard Model of QT in Trouble," <http://ecologywithoutnature.blogspot.com/2011/08/standard-model-of-qt-in-trouble.html>.
- 21 Albert Einstein, *Relativity: The Special and the General Theory* (London: Penguin, 2006).
- 22 Graham Priest, *In Contradiction* (Oxford University Press, 2006), passim. Graham Priest and Francesco Berto, "Dialetheism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2010 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta.
- 23 Priest, *In Contradiction*, 9–27; Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 44–45.
- 24 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977), 311.
- 25 Priest, *In Contradiction*, 9–27.
- 26 Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, Livre III: Les psychoses* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1981), 48. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 206.
- 27 Iain Hamilton Grant, *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 3, 8, 11, 27, 43–44, 48–49, 108–109, 180–81.
- 28 Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), 129.
- 29 For haecceity, see Duns Scotus, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Allan Wolter (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 4, 32–33, 51, 151.
- 30 See Steven Shaviro, *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).
- 31 Aaron O’Connell et al., "Quantum Ground State and Single Phonon Control of a Mechanical Ground Resonator," *Nature* 464 (March 17, 2010): 697–703. The "breathing" image is taken from O’Connell’s TED talk, "Making Sense of a Visible Quantum Object," March 2011, http://www.ted.com/talks/aaron_o_connell_making_sense_of_a_visible_quantum_object.html.

- 32 Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Alresford: Zero Books, 2011), 99–102. Petr Horava of Berkeley argues that Einsteinian spacetime is an emergent property of objects larger than 10^{17} cm. Petr Horava, “Quantum Gravity at a Lifshitz Point,” arXiv:0901.3775v2 [hep-th].
- 33 Priest, *In Contradiction*, 172–81.
- 34 The spacetime vortex created by Earth has now been empirically verified: Science@NASA, “NASA Announces Results of Epic Space-Time Experiment,” http://science.nasa.gov/science-news/science-at-nasa/2011/04may_epic/, accessed December 7, 2011.
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- 36 Harman’s *Tool-Being* was the first published example of OOO.
- 37 Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2007).
- 38 Shelley, *Defence*, 531.
- 39 The phrase “peal of stillness” comes from Martin Heidegger’s “Language,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 187–210, esp. 207–10.
- 40 Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 20, 95, 184–85.
- 41 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996), 66.
- 42 Shelley, “With a Guitar. To Jane,” *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, 43–48, 65–74.
- 43 Heidegger, “Origin,” 33–34.
- 44 The locus classicus is Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 5.
- 45 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1987), 158.
- 46 Daniel Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1996), 62. See Gillian Beer, “Introduction,” in Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, ed. Gillian Beer (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), xxvii–xviii.
- 47 I bypass a necessary discussion of the controversial assertions of Rupert Sheldrake in *Morphic Resonance: The Nature of Formative Causation* (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 2009).
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- 51 Shelley, *Defence*, 535.
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- 53 Jacques Derrida, “Hospitality,” trans. Barry Stocker with Forbes Matlock, *Angelaki* 5.3 (December, 2000): 3–18.
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- 55 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 302.
- 56 Andrew Hamilton, “Falling into the Singularity of a Black Hole,” <http://casa.colorado.edu/~ajsh/singularity.html>.
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- 58 Samuel Beckett, Letter to Hans Naumann, February 17, 1954, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, ed. George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, and Lois More Overbeck, vol. 2, 1941–1956 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011), 462.