

MEMORY, HISTORY, AND PLURIPOTENCY: A REALIST VIEW OF LITERARY STUDIES

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ABSTRACT: Speculative realism has, over the course of its rapid and controversial emergence in the past decade, been frequently criticized from the perspective of historical materialism, for its putative reliance on abstraction and eschewal of a sufficiently rigorous ideological alignment. This paper takes such critiques as a starting point for an examination of the contributions recent thought in the area of speculative realism has to offer the study of the humanities – specifically, the study of literature and literary history. In particular, contemporary realist thought has the potential to enable scholars of literature to move beyond the anthropocentric and specialized notions of history as an exclusively cultural entity, which have dominated the discipline since the twentieth century. Paying especially close attention to the work of Graham Harman and Manuel DeLanda, it is my argument that emergent realist philosophy offers literary scholars a set of powerful conceptual tools which can be put toward the work of accounting for the hitherto neglected ontological status of the literary text – illuminating the status of the text as a particular variety of real and physical object that participates in a system of real and physical history and memory.

KEYWORDS: Speculative realism; literary history; ontology; memory

Bruno Latour reserves some of his harshest treatment in *We Have Never Been Modern* for humanistic scholarship – for its meek acquiescence to modernity’s schism between human subjects and nonhuman things, for its endorsement of the bifurcation between nature and culture, and for its obsession with the marginalia of linguistic representation. Latour writes:

Are you not fed up with language games, and with the eternal skepticism of the deconstruction of meaning? Discourse is not a world unto itself but a population

of actants that mix with things as well as with societies, uphold the former and latter alike, and hold on to them both.¹

As Latour elaborates, the most the humanities can hope to accomplish with its favored ‘language games’ is the defense and maintenance of the ‘fuzzy’ areas on the margins of the world of culture – a rearguard action in defense of minor, marginal, and oppressed representations from the encroachment of totalizing modernity. This defense of marginality, Latour writes, ‘presupposes the existence of a totalitarian center.’² As Graham Harman relates in *Prince of Networks*, Latour often describes this concession as “‘an intellectual Munich”, referring to Neville Chamberlain’s surrender of the Czech frontier without a struggle.’³ This can be seen in the sort of cottage industry that has sprung up, in recent years, at the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and other such publications, in the regular production of articles on the various crises befalling the American university system and, in particular, the arts and humanities. This crisis in the arts and humanities has become something of a commonplace, a domesticated state of affairs, an institutional feature of American discourse on the academy. To borrow Latour’s metaphor, it seems that our own Munich happened some time ago. Or it is perhaps an ongoing event, a process of rearguard actions, taken in response to demands for accountability, for answers to the most frequent interrogations directed at the humanities.

In the interest of further examining the event that is the apparent crisis in the humanities, it will be helpful to narrow our perspective to a specific segment grouped under the broad and saggy big tent of the humanities – for the purposes of this project, we will consider the interpretative work of literary studies. Literature is particularly well suited as an exemplum here, and, I like to think, for reasons that extend beyond my own arbitrary intellectual interests. The commonsensical view of contemporary literary scholarship and criticism, painted in broad strokes, is one of a discipline devoted to the study of excessively abstract, theorized, solipsistic, and (in an apparent contradiction) narrow slices of cultural life. Such a commonplace can be ascertained with no more than a quick search for the terms ‘English’ or ‘literature’ on the website of the *Chronicle* or one of its equivalents. A cursory scan of the articles retrieved reveals that the majority of articles on the topic are concerned with either expressing, or with responding to one of two general categories of critique. This critique is expressed, generally speaking, in the form of variations on two questions: utility (*what is literature good for? what does literature have to do with the real world?*), and ideology (*what is the political agenda of literary studies?*).

¹ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter, Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1993, p. 90.

² Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, p. 91.

³ Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*, Melbourne, re.press, 2009, p. 61.

My concern here is, primarily, with the stance adopted in literary scholarship with regards to the first of these questions. In order to properly address and overcome such utilitarian critiques of the study of literature, we must first reevaluate long-beloved concepts of the ontological status of the literary text. The currently predominant understanding of the ontological status of literature, on those infrequent occasions when this status is considered at all, is one that is fundamentally anti-realist. This attitude is in keeping with wider trends in the sort of post-modern thought that underwrites the theoretical work of the humanities in general – an attitude of dismissal, verging on disgust. Manuel DeLanda, a self-described realist philosopher, aptly describes the prevalent attitude: “for decades admitting that one was a realist was equivalent to acknowledging [that] one was a child molester.”⁴ With regards to continental philosophy, this attitude has begun to weaken in recent years – in the face of persisting, frequent opposition and criticism – with the emergence of a number of varied and vocal espousers of realism, among them DeLanda, as well as Graham Harman, to whom DeLanda addressed the above-quoted description of continental attitudes toward realism. These newly emergent realist philosophies offer literary scholars a set of powerful conceptual tools, which can be put toward the work of accounting for the ontological status of the literary text as a particular variety of real and physical object that participates in a system of real and physical history and memory.

There is a resonance between the types of questions that are most frequently directed at scholars of literature, and the types of questions that inevitably come up over the course of debates over the varieties of speculative thought that have emerged over the course of the past two decades – speculative realism (SR), object-oriented philosophy (OOP), and object-oriented ontology (OOO), and their familial relations. In much the same manner as literary studies, the varied strains of speculative thought are frequently interrogated – attacked, even – on the basis of questions pertaining to their applicability/utility (in general, a perennial favorite for critics of the arts and humanities across the entirety of the spectrum), and on the basis of questions of ideology and politics. The explication of this parallel is not intended as a simple exercise in the description of resemblance (as mentioned above, the deployment of such critiques is hardly limited to English and philosophy departments; and, as we will see in subsequent discussion below, the use of such a strategy in any inquiry into questions of *being* has a way of leading to arguments based upon nothing more than simple resemblance). In examining the sort of questions and arguments that are

⁴ Graham Harman, ‘DeLanda’s ontology: assemblage and realism,’ *Continental Philosophy Review*, vol. 41, 2008, pp. 367-383, p. 368.

directed at English and speculative philosophy (and, to a lesser extent, the humanities in general), we can investigate and account for the limitations of the sort of ‘language games’ that are deployed in the critique favored by the currently predominant approaches to the text in Western English departments – that is, the various iterations of poststructuralism, historicism, and their fellow travelers.

The publication, early in 2013, in *Critical Inquiry* of Alex Galloway’s article, ‘The Poverty of Philosophy: Realism and Post-Fordism,’ set off a mid-sized online kerfuffle, and provides us with a suitable example of the second of the two lines of inquiry mentioned above – challenges to SR in the form of questions of politics and ideology. Near the conclusion of his article, Galloway articulates this question as follows:

Do movements like object-oriented philosophy and speculative realism have a politics and, if so, what is it? And, even more important, Malabou’s opening challenge, slightly rephrased: What should we do so that thinking does not purely and simply coincide with the spirit of capitalism?⁵

Galloway largely bases his critique of speculative realism on two – somewhat contradictory – premises. First, he equates the ontology of object-oriented philosophy with, strangely, Java and other object-oriented computer programming languages that ‘are themselves the heart and soul of the information economy, which if it is not synonymous with today’s mode of production is certainly intimately intertwined with it.’⁶ Following a somewhat out-of-place explication of Badiou’s work on mathematics, Galloway concludes that that a ‘congruity exists between how Badiou talks about ontology and how capitalism structures its world of business objects’ – how Galloway hopes to account for Badiou’s vocal Maoism here is, of course, unclear.⁷ Galloway extends this discussion of Badiou to the work Meillassoux and Harman, implying that the realist ontologies of SR and OOO (defined in the broadest terms) are somehow predisposed to complicity in capitalist hegemony.

Second, Galloway attacks SR on the basis of its lack of a sufficiently rigorous ideology. Realism, he writes, is an ‘unaligned politics’ and, thus ‘dangerous.’⁸ Galloway contrasts this with his own chosen blend of historical materialism, structured according to the principle that, everything ‘should be rooted in material life and history, not in abstraction, logical necessity, universality, essence, pure form, spirit, or idea.’⁹ The ‘true poverty of the new realism,’ he writes, lies in ‘its inability to recognize

⁵ Alexander Galloway, ‘The Poverty of Philosophy: Realism and Post-Fordism,’ *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2013, pp. 347-366, p. 364.

⁶ Galloway, ‘The Poverty of Philosophy,’ p. 351.

⁷ Galloway, ‘The Poverty of Philosophy,’ p. 352.

⁸ Galloway, ‘The Poverty of Philosophy,’ p. 365.

⁹ Galloway, ‘The Poverty of Philosophy,’ p. 366.

that the highest order of the absolute, the totality itself, is found in the material history of mankind.¹⁰ The argument here goes, it seems: unlike Marxist philosophy and historical materialism, which are rooted safely in the ground of material history, SR relies on abstraction and speculation, which makes it particularly vulnerable to manipulation by capitalists for the perpetration of any number of mean and nasty capitalist activities.

Unsurprisingly –given the prolific use of the Internet, and blogs in particular, by those scholars associated with SR as a resource for publication and debate – the publication of Galloway’s article in *Critical Inquiry* was met with a rapid flurry of refutations, equal parts scathing and humorous, on the blogs of the authors most commonly associated with the SR ‘movement.’ Levi Bryant, easily the most prolific of the bloggers associated with SR and OOO, responded to Galloway in a number of lengthy essays on his *Larval Subjects* blog. In the post

Pluripotency: Some Remarks on Galloway,¹¹ Bryant takes issue with Galloway’s apparent assumption of the existence of ‘an *essence*, no matter how historical, to how things or objects are *deployed* within social assemblages.’¹¹ If this line of reasoning is to be followed through to its conclusion, the use of object-oriented programming to support capitalistic modes of production must necessarily be its only possible use, and object-oriented programming must thus be irredeemably ‘capitalist through and through.’ Bryant writes:

If everything is defined by the historical setting in which it emerged, if things—above all people—are not pluripotent such that they harbor potentials in excess beyond the way they’re related and deployed in the present, then there’s no hope for ever changing anything. Everything will be tainted *through and through* by the power dynamics in which it emerged. Everything will be but an *expression* of those networks of power.¹²

The problems with such a model of emergence are clear enough – a totalizing definition of things, exclusively in terms of their historical situation, does away with any potential for agentic action beyond what is determined by the hegemonic institutions out of which they emerge. Such an emergence involves very little in the way of actual emerging or, for that matter, really any action at all. This is the most serious flaw in any zero-sum paradigm, wherein the being of an object can be accounted for in terms of its historical determination or in terms of its withdrawal, but

¹⁰ Galloway, ‘The Poverty of Philosophy,’ p. 366.

¹¹ Levi Bryant, ‘Pluripotency: Some Remarks on Galloway,’ *Larval Subjects*, 2012, < <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2012/12/12/pluripotency-some-remarks-on-galloway/> > [accessed 20 April 2013].

¹² Bryant, ‘Pluripotency: Some Remarks on Galloway.’

never accounted for in terms of *both* historical character and withdrawn character. Furthermore, there is the additional tendency in humanist critique to impose even further constraints on inquiry into being by adhering to a definition of history that is limited to the realm of specifically, and exclusively, *human* culture. This view begins to unravel, as we shall see, when we consider history not as a specifically cultural and humanist institution, but instead as the activity of accumulating, organizing, storing, presenting and transmitting information about events.

To reiterate: we are here seeking to move beyond the anthropocentric and anti-realist ontologies that underwrite contemporary approaches to literary studies. In the place of this anti-realist concept of literature, we have posited the alternate ontological conception of the text as a particular type of real and physical object that is an active participant as part of a wider system of real, physical memory and history. At this point it seems that, before proceeding any further with the description of this model of literature, it will be necessary to provide some clarification of our descriptive terminology – specifically, we must now ask, what is meant by this description of the ontological status of the literary text as being both *real* and *physical*? These two terms, as employed throughout what follows, can be most easily conceived of as they pertain to the two primary oversights, described above, of the sort of anti-realist argument that critiques speculative realism on the basis of its neglecting the determinative social and cultural forces of human material history. These oversights are, to wit: (1), such an approach engages in a sort of ontological zero-sum game by overlooking the fact that being is both historical *and* withdrawn, not one or the other; (2), such an approach adheres to a notion of history as being exclusively cultural, and somehow hermetically sealed from the absolute givenness of the natural realm. This brings us to the term *real*, which pertains here to the notion of withdrawal – this can be described as akin to a sort of autonomy, in that a real object is one whose existence is not dependent on its manifestation to the human mind. This notion will be of particular importance as we examine the ontology of Graham Harman in subsequent pages.

The term *physical* is somewhat more slippery in its precise connotation. *Physical* relates to the second flaw in the historical materialist critique of SR – its adherence to a view of history as exclusively cultural that imposes an implicit separation between the domains of the cultural and the natural. To assert that an object is physical is useful for breaking down this pervasive and oft-unnoticed nature/culture divide, in that it implies that an object pertains to the sort of natural systems that are characterized and produced via the forces of the processes of physics. Just as physical law shapes and produces the tendencies that govern the formation and organization of a ‘natural’ system, like a coral reef, it equally shapes and produces the tendencies that govern a ‘cultural’ system, such as a literary text or hermeneutic paradigm. The physical

pertains to *information*, in the sense that Levi Bryant describes it, in *The Democracy of Objects*, in terms of information being a ‘genuine event that befalls a substance or happens to a substance.’¹³ This definition is particularly useful for our purposes here, in that it allows for the classification of all manner of diverse systems to be classified as informational systems, even those which would otherwise be placed on opposite sides of the nature/culture divide. In this regard, the term *physical* can be said to pertain to the historical character of an object, in the sense of history as a term that describes the organization and presentation of information about (past) events.

Having developed – or at least speculated on – the descriptive terminology that might be employed in a realist account of the literary text, we can turn to questions of articulation which remain, at this point, largely unanswered. Most pressingly, just what would a realist account of literature look like? The short answer to this question is: bricoleur – perhaps aggravatingly so. The ability to engage, or perhaps indulge, in theoretical inconsistency is one of the most appealing perks of contemporary realist ontology. As Manuel DeLanda points out in his explication of Deleuze’s philosophy in *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, granting autonomy to reality outside of its manifestation to human consciousness means it is not necessary for realist philosophers to ‘agree about the contents of this mind-independent reality.’¹⁴ This is in stark contrast to the rigid concern with content that underwrites the ontological framework of the non-realist philosopher or critic. As Graham Harman writes, in a 2008 review of DeLanda’s book, *A New Philosophy of Society*:

DeLanda both claims to be a realist, and is one. The structures of the world described in his book require no presence of a human subject on the scene: neither a naked Cartesian cogito, nor a flashier post-human condensed from language and power games, nor even a Badiouian subject of truth-events.¹⁵

In keeping with this description, a realist account of the work of literature would be one that concerns itself not with the reading of the content or context of a text in the traditional humanistic sense, but instead with the structural conditions through and by which a text emerges, and the ways in which a text participates in an informational system of history and memory. A realist account of literature entails an activity more akin to mapping than to digging – the work of cartography, instead of archeology.

In what follows, we will now to turn to an (perhaps overly ambitious) attempt to carry out, at the very least, the performance of such a cartographic activity – to map the outline of a speculative realist theory of literature. In keeping with the bricoleur

¹³ Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, Ann Arbor, Open Humanities Press, 2011, p. 155.

¹⁴ Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, New York, Continuum, 2001, p. 2.

¹⁵ Harman, ‘DeLanda’s ontology: assemblage and realism,’ pp. 370-371.

sprit of realism, this articulation draws upon the distinct and, at times, contradictory ideas of two realist philosophers, Graham Harman and Manuel DeLanda. In Harman's object-oriented philosophy, we are presented with descriptive concepts with which we may account for the autonomy that defines an object and the contours of its reality. From DeLanda, and his assemblage theory, we can take with us the concepts necessary to account for the physical being of the literary text, and the manner in which this helps us to account for literature's capacity, as information, to affect, create difference, and perturb reality.

Examining historical emergence and the (as yet, largely unaccounted for) being and work of literary texts in terms of such an understanding of information requires that we, first of all, accept, literary texts in terms of their being objects. Taken at face value, this is not an altogether unfamiliar stance for scholars of literature – however, in considering texts as being objects, we will find that it is likewise necessary to consider human subjects as being objects. Indeed, there is no subject in this regard, at least not in the sense of a subject that is anything other than a particular type of object – in the object-oriented view, there is no such thing as a privileged subject possessed of a comparatively greater or more objective quanta of being. Graham Harman describes this position in *The Quadruple Object*, the introduction of which opens with the assertion that our understanding of objects 'must include those entities that are neither physical nor real.'¹⁶ These objects are not all equally real but 'they are equally *objects*.'¹⁷ This equal ontological status of being is elided by the predominant variety of humanistic, non-realist critical thinking. Harman writes: 'the labor of the intellect is usually taken to be *critical* rather than naïve. Instead of accepting this inflated menagerie of entities, critical thinking debunks objects and denies their autonomy.'¹⁸

Harman elaborates that critical thought denies objects their autonomy by way of two main processes. The first of these, which he designates *undermining*, denies objects their autonomy through the assertion that objects are not fundamental. Undermining reduces the object downward, making the claims that 'objects are too specific to deserve the name of ultimate reality,' and are instead all 'built of some basic physical or historical element whose permutations give rise to these objects as a sort of derivative product.'¹⁹ This concept is the basis of one of the more conspicuous differences between the ontologies of Harman and DeLanda, who Harman describes

¹⁶ Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, Washington, Zero Books, 2011, p. 5.

¹⁷ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, p. 5.

¹⁸ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, p. 7.

¹⁹ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, p. 10.

engaging in undermining by way of a sort of Deleuzian-inflected ‘half-hearted monism.’²⁰

Harman refers to the second strategy for denying objects autonomy with the term *overmining*. Whereas undermining reduces objects downward, overmining approaches objects from the opposite direction, and views them as important ‘only insofar as they are manifested to the mind, or are part of some concrete event that affects other objects as well.’²¹ (11). Harman writes that, despite the difference between the two strategies, in terms of the direction from which they regard the object, ‘both positions share the notion that a thing’s existence consists solely in its relation with other things. An object is exhausted by its presence for another, with no intrinsic reality held cryptically in reserve.’²² Harman goes on to argue that the reductive strategies of overmining and undermining, favored by predominant paradigms of critical thought, both fail to account for the fact that the being of objects can ‘be defined only by their autonomous reality.’²³ These objects ‘must be autonomous in two separate directions: emerging as something over and above their piece, while also partly withholding themselves from relations with other entities.’²⁴ This notion of the irreducibility and diversity of objects as the fundamental entity of being is the most valuable contribution of Harman’s object-oriented philosophy to any speculation on the development of a realist account of the literary text.

At this point, it will be helpful for us to pause a moment and refocus the scale of our inquiry to the level of the individual text. Even after – or, perhaps, especially after – the domestication of critical theory by the humanities, the individual text remains the level at which literary scholars are apparently most comfortable, perhaps because it is also the level at which the hermeneutics of close reading operate most effectively. To further illustrate our discussion of Harman’s thought thus far, it will be helpful to turn, briefly, to this specific textual level. How, exactly does an individual text correspond to this definition, much less a set of texts? To illustrate this argument, let’s turn to the example of the text of Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* – a familiar enough text, and one with an exceptionally tumultuous history of interpretation and reception.

What sort of play is *The Merchant of Venice*? The original title informs us that that the play is a comedic history – but the play is hardly comedic anymore or, at the very least, is very infrequently a cause for laughter. Equally slippery is the question: who and what is *The Merchant of Venice* about? Whose play it? These days it’s certainly not

²⁰ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, p. 9.

²¹ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, p. 11.

²² Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, p. 12.

²³ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, p. 19.

²⁴ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, p. 19.

about the titular merchant – Antonio – or, at least not mainly about him. More often, it's a play about Shylock, certainly, but *The Merchant of Venice* is also a play about anti-Semitism, apartheid, market capitalism, and any number of themes pertaining to otherness; it's a play set in Venice, but also a play set in New York, and in Auschwitz. Furthermore, sometimes *The Merchant of Venice* is not a play at all, at least not a stage play; it is a film, and it opens with the history of the ghetto, conveyed through austere blocs of white text, superimposed with scenes of pogroms; the film is available on DVD and VHS, and streaming on YouTube with Spanish subtitles.

To claim that the text of *The Merchant of Venice* is shaped by cultural and historical, and even nonhuman forces is hardly a provocative gesture. Indeed, it's a gesture completely in line with the sort of historical materialist critique espoused by Alex Galloway; and, in its illumination of the complex interrelationships between human culture and history and non-human entities like media technology and ideology, it is indeed a valuable tool – within the limited scope of its range of action. As indicated in the above discussion of Galloway's critique of realism, such historical materialist hermeneutics frequently adhere to a zero-sum conception of literature – accounting for it exclusively in terms of historical determination, while neglecting the possible being of a text that is simultaneously historically determined *and* withdrawn. The two-faced ontological status of the object that is literature (a status that is characteristic of all being) is discernible in the case of *The Merchant of Venice* illustrated above. There is nothing remarkable in the fact that a process of cultural-historical determination produces shifting interpretations, narratives, and receptions of a literary text. What *is* important here is the fact that, despite the chaotic shifting of historical and interpretative profiles of *The Merchant of Venice*, the text is still recognizably *The Merchant of Venice*. There is something in this play, and in the literary text, that holds together, and maintains the coherence of the text as the text. There is a text-ness to the text, a coherence of being that is held back beyond the reach of the ever-shifting play of interpretations presented and represented on the surface – a stable and inaccessible play, behind the shifting and perceivable surface play.

It no longer seems an exercise in eccentricity to juxtapose this description of *The Merchant of Venice* with the, decidedly more succinct, description Graham Harman provides of an object as 'anything that has a unified reality that is autonomous from its wider context and also from its own pieces.'²⁵ It is not sufficient, however, to conclude from this example that the literary text is an object – at least, not merely an object. For the text here is not merely unified and autonomous, it is also withdrawn and

²⁵ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, p. 116.

inaccessible. In this, the text meets the ontological criteria for a *real* object, as described by Harman:

an object is real when it forms an autonomous unit able to withstand certain changes in its pieces. This does not require additional relations with other entities, since we have seen that the real object lies *deeper* than such relations and often enters them with no lasting effect to itself.²⁶

It seems that we are now pointing in the direction of something like an *essence* at the core of the object that is the text – a concept that seems in danger of affirming the historical materialist critique of speculative realism as an essentialist philosophy. And indeed, Harman does include essence in his ontology, as part of a fourfold model structure of being, which he extrapolates and develops from the infamously obscure fourfold model of Martin Heidegger. Beyond its central role in Harman's ontology, the examination of this fourfold model is important if we hope to address: first, the difference between the essence defined in Harman's thought, and the essence defined in traditional realist thought; and, second, the limitations of Harman's object-oriented ontology in accounting for agency and change, the addressing of which points us toward DeLanda.

In Harman's fourfold, two of the poles correspond to two types of objects – sensual objects, which are accessible to perception and experience, and shadowy real objects, which are entirely withdrawn from access. On the opposite end of this model, Harman places two poles corresponding to the two types of qualities, the features and traits exhibited by an object that 'makes it what it is for those who perceive it.'²⁷ As Harman describes it, the 'tensions' between these four poles result in the production of four dimensions of reality. For our purposes, we will concern ourselves for the moment with a single one of these four tensions: the tension between a real object and its real qualities. Since a real object is defined in terms of its inaccessibility and withdrawal, this tension between the real object and real qualities is necessarily enacted under conditions of the utmost withdrawal, in the deepest and most medieval dungeons of tool-being. Harman designates the dimension produced by way of this tension as *essence*. Crucially, Harman clarifies, in contrast to the conventional model of essence that 'treated real qualities as mobile universals able to be exemplified anywhere, qualities according to the present book are shaped by the object to which they belong.'²⁸ This description of essence is useful for us, first of all, in the insight it provides into charges of politically oppressive 'essentialism' leveled at the ontologies of SR, OOO, and OOP by Galloway and others of historicist/materialist inclination –

²⁶ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, p. 123.

²⁷ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, p. 101.

²⁸ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, p.101.

we can now see the manner in which such a charge is premised upon what Harman designates as the ‘traditional model of essence,’ as a mobile universal standard, a sort of colonizing and policing dimension that enacts homogenization wherever it manifests itself.

In the interest of further explicating the object of the literary text in terms of its being both historically emergent and withdrawn, we will have to depart from Harman’s object-oriented philosophy and the Latourian lineage of speculation, and turn our attention to the more overtly Deleuzian-flavored variety of realism (we must take care here to remain conscious of the fact that in doing this we are, in a sense, ascribing to notions of history based upon the notion of a linear *telos* – a notion that we will soon find ourselves compelled to contradict as we further investigate the particular object that is the literary text). In turning toward the more overtly Deleuzian line of speculation, examined in what follows by way of the work of Manuel DeLanda, we can address what has now become clear as one of the problems with the application of Harman’s ontology to the literary text – namely, the manner in which the withdrawn essence of the object precludes any contact, any encounter whatsoever. For, the act of reading and interpretation is – at, it seems, its most fundamental level – an act of meeting, an act of encounter. Harman’s universe of concealed and withdrawn objects is valuable here, in its explication of the way in which a literary text holds together as a discrete and real object, but offers us little insight into the activities and processes of reading, interpretation, and circulation involved in the work of literature – for this, his essences remain too withdrawn, too held-back in their held-togetherness.

Perhaps the most basic and colloquial definition of the work of the study of literature pertains to the notion of meaning – what does a particular text/paradigm/etc mean in a particular context? In this, the Deleuzian notion of essence, as explicated by Brian Massumi in *A User’s Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, offers us a useful point of divergence from that described by Harman. As Massumi relates, ‘Deleuze and Guattari occasionally call meaning “essence.”’²⁹ This occasional synonymy is more than merely semantic, as we shall see – and, as with Harman, essence/meaning is not to be understood in the traditional mobile-colonial sense that is critiqued from the perspective of historical materialism. In the work of Deleuze and Guattari, essence assumes the form of an ‘encounter’ or ‘event’ that is ‘neither stable nor transcendental,’ but is instead ‘immanent to the dynamic process it expresses.’³⁰ The usefulness, for our purposes, of such an understanding of meaning – the product,

²⁹ Brian Massumi, *A User’s Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1992, p. 17.

³⁰ Massumi, *A User’s Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p. 17.

so to speak, of the work of literary interpretation – becomes more clear with Massumi’s summation, in subsequent pages: a ‘meaning is an encounter between force fields. More specifically, it is the “essence” (diagram, abstract machine) of that encounter. Its own essence (the meaning of meaning) is the incorporeal transformation, which comes in many varieties.’³¹ The essence/meaning of the literary text, in this conception, functions as an interface between two distinct forms: first, the form of content, or, the order and organization of qualities and signs to be read; and, second, the form of expression, or, the order and organization of functions and the activity of being-something of the text. Essence assumes the character of the meeting place between these two forms – the event of the encounter between the form of content and the form of expression.

It is this nomadic conception of essence and meaning – as an event, an encounter – that underwrites Manuel DeLanda’s own notion of essence, which is one of outright opposition to any essentialism whatsoever. The influence of the Deleuzian conception of meaning/essence upon DeLanda’s discussion of his notion of memory is apparent, albeit in a significantly transformed and modified form, in (among other places) DeLanda’s most recent book, *Philosophy and Simulation: The Emergence of Synthetic Reason*. For the purposes of what follows, it will be necessary to, once again, clarify some of the terminology employed hereafter – specifically, the terms *memory* and *history*. At the outset of this project, we established for ourselves the – perhaps, overly ambitious – task of discussing the work of literature in the context of the literary text’s ontological status as a real and physical object that participates in a system of history and memory. The terms are employed here and, it seems, in DeLanda’s text, as follows: *memory* corresponds to the informational storage capacity of an entity at the level of the individual object; while *history* corresponds to the capacity for the storage, organization, and transmission of information of a system of individual, discrete objects.

The Deleuzian flavor to DeLanda’s ontology is especially apparent, as mentioned above, in his discussion of the content of the memories of mammals and birds, in the seventh chapter of *Philosophy and Simulation*, ‘Neural Nets and Mammalian Memory.’ At the chapter’s outset, DeLanda establishes a distinction, which will be valuable to our understanding of the different types of work performed over the course of the work of literature – the distinction between the concepts of *significance* and *signification*. DeLanda writes:

The content of autobiographical memories in animals must be thought of as endowed with significance not with signification, which is a linguistic notion. The

³¹ Massumi, *A User’s Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p. 33.

significance of a scene or event is related to its capacity to make a difference in an animal's life, to its capacity to affect and be affected by the animal's actions, while signification is a semantic notion referring to the meaning of words or sentences.³²

DeLanda's distinction between significance and signification is valuable here, in its description of the real and physical affective capacity of memory at the level of the individual animal or, for our purposes, the level of the individual object – a category which we have expanded to encompass every discrete entity, including the individual work of literature.

What is less clear here, with regards to DeLanda, is why the linguistic notion of signification cannot also be understood as one of significance. For, if we are to proceed further down the speculative realist rabbit hole – or at least that of the bricoleur Harman/DeLanda variety which we have been here examining – we must likewise accept language itself as a real and physical object, which cannot be reduced upward to its wider context (mediation of reality, exchange of ideas, what have you), or downward to its component parts (phonemes, neurological manifestation/processing, cultural make-up). Accepting such a premise points us in the direction of further potential resonance between the ontological models of our two primary interlocutors, Graham Harman and Manuel DeLanda. For, in light of such a notion, we can attempt a reconciliation with one of the more troubling aspects of Harman's ontology: the withdrawal of the object from access – a notion that is advantageous in its accounting for the work of literature in terms of its being a complete and discrete object but, equally, problematic in its preclusion of anything more than vicarious interaction and causality.

We can, however, perhaps modify this notion of withdrawal for our purposes if we approach it in the context of DeLanda's conception, laid out in *Philosophy and Simulation*, of memory and language in terms of their function as storage mechanisms. The resonance between the terms *withdrawal* and *storage* is more than merely semantic – both entail a holding-together predicated upon a holding-back, in the form of withdrawn and stored energetic potential, the storing away of the capacity for significance. DeLanda elaborates upon the concept further in the eighth chapter of *Philosophy and Simulation*, 'Multiagents and Primate Strategies,' in which the scale of focus is expanded from that of the individual agent (the level corresponding to memory), to that of systems of multiple agents interacting with each other (the level corresponding to history, in our formulation). DeLanda begins with the discussion of

³² Manuel DeLanda, *Philosophy and Simulation: The Emergence of Synthetic Reason*, London, Continuum, 2011, p. 94.

the emergence of language in Neolithic human communities, and the manner in which the ‘rapid transmission of linguistic information’ allowed early Stone Age communities ‘to act as a reputation-storage mechanism.’³³ However, crucially, such a ‘reputation-storage mechanism’ is not predicated exclusively upon linguistic development for, as DeLanda points out, archeological evidence suggests, ‘a complex social life preexisted the emergence of language.’³⁴

What is crucial here, in terms of its application to our understanding of the object that is the work of literature, is not so much the notion of a properly *linguistic* storage mechanism, but rather of a distributed network of memory and cognition, of which the linguistic dimension (hitherto, the focus of the vast majority of studies of literary history) is no more than one dimension among multiple dimensions/pathways of *significance*, beyond those limited to semantic questions of *signification*. Exploring this chaotic distributed system of cognition and significance offers a daunting task for the humanities that traditionally rely upon, unsurprisingly, the enshrined principles and paradigms of humanistic critique. These paradigms are valuable, undoubtedly, and will continue to be so – however, in the face of ever-expanding systems of energy and distributed cognition, an augmented conceptual toolkit is long overdue. The anti-critical, or perhaps non-critical, stance of object-oriented ontologies such as that of Harman, in conjunction with the turn to simulation and science, as exemplified by DeLanda and Latour, offers to the humanities just such a kit.

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³³ DeLanda, *Philosophy and Simulation*, p. 112.

³⁴ DeLanda, *Philosophy and Simulation*, p. 112.

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