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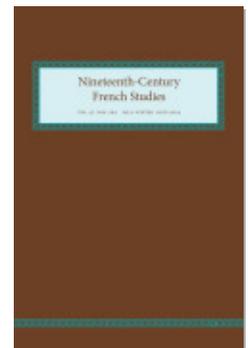
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Reader, Response, Theory: The Nineteenth-Century Fantastic as a Counter-Enlightenment Mode

CORRY CROPPER AND GRAHAM HARMAN

Building on an article published in this journal in 2015, we attempt to answer questions about object-oriented ontology (OOO) and the Fantastic. We argue that the nineteenth-century Fantastic is a self-consciously counter-Enlightenment literary mode occurring when a text adopts an object-oriented ontology and juxtaposes this ontology against the subject-centered ontology of Kantian philosophy.

Corry Cropper (CC): The late Tzvetan Todorov famously characterized the Fantastic as a genre defined by hesitation between the *merveilleux* and the *étrange*. Stanislaw Lem and others were quick to criticize Todorov's somewhat arbitrary selection of texts and the neatly bracketed time period that enabled him to find literary examples to prove his rule. Based on Todorov's definition, it could easily be argued that the Fantastic was the dominant literary genre in the Middle Ages or that science fiction, with its frequent hesitations about what is real, could be thought of as Fantastic. What is unique to the authors Todorov examines instead is that they were aware that their world was dominated by rational Humanism and phenomenology and that the supernatural had been dismissed as mere superstition. We want to argue that the nineteenth-century Fantastic is a self-consciously counter-Enlightenment literary mode occurring when a text adopts an object-oriented ontology and juxtaposes this ontology against the subject-centered ontology of Kantian philosophy.

In 2015 I published an article in this journal about object-oriented ontology (OOO) and the Fantastic. After its publication I received a number of questions and suggestions—both by email and at our association's annual colloquium. In this essay I attempt to answer some of those questions and flesh out the way OOO has altered the way I understand and define the Fantastic. I have invited Graham Harman, whose work on metaphysics and objects led to the development of OOO, to co-author this paper with me by responding to some of the questions and adding reactions to my comments. Beginning with a reading of Heidegger

(*Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*), Graham has authored nearly twenty books exploring phenomenology and its failings while analyzing topics ranging from Lovecraft to Dante to the Dutch East India Company.

Before answering the questions, let me first offer a brief summary of the 2015 article on OOO and the Fantastic. OOO philosophers reject Kant's anthropocentric worldview and argue that all actors or objects or things or units (the preferred term varies) are of equal value. To put it crudely, Descartes said, "I think therefore I am"; Kant said, "I think therefore things exist as I perceive them"; contemporary behavioral scientists say, "I am therefore I think"; and OOO philosophers say, "Objects exist." In other words, things exist, I am, I think, I exist, I have perception and conceive of time and space; and my computer exists, the pretzels I am about to eat exist, the scrub oak in my backyard exists, and each of these objects, like me, produces a sense of time and space that may or may not correspond to my own. OOO philosophers reject correlationism, the "Kantian claim that 'phenomena depend on the mind to exist'" (Braver, cited in Shaviro 5). Their movement is sometimes referred to as "speculative realism": we may never know what it's like to be a lampshade or a spork, so we must *speculate* "what it's like to be a thing" (Bogost), or how objects may exist and even interact without a human subject around to perceive them. Finally, OOO espouses a flat ontology where humans, armoires, forests, and factories are all on an equal ontological footing.

Graham Harman (GH): This is a solid and accurate overview of what OOO is about. I would simply add a few points of detail that, I hope, will enrich the picture somewhat. First, I would say that OOO is only a flat ontology in terms of its starting point, not its conclusions. A perfect example of a flat ontology would be the work of the living French thinker Bruno Latour, who is opposed to the basic principle of *modern* ontology, which holds that there are only two basic kinds of things: (1) humans, and (2) everything else. Although humans are of obvious interest to humans, we are really a fairly minor (if unusually interesting) sort of entity in a cosmos inhabited by trillions of other entities. What sense does it make to let human beings occupy a full *half* of philosophy? There is an argument for this, but not an especially good one, as I will discuss briefly a couple of paragraphs from now. For now, let's look at Latour's own attempt to outflank modernity, developed forcefully in his 1991 classic *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes* (translated into English in 1993). Latour asks us to consider reality prior to any supposedly obvious distinction between humans and non-humans. What all entities have in common, Latour holds, is that all are *actors*. Everything is real insofar as it has an effect on something else: humans, animals, rocks, the ozone hole, bulldozers, chemicals, fictional characters, and so forth. It is a very democratic principle for ontology. But Latour takes another step, one that I regard as a bridge too far. Namely, he not only

claims that all objects are equally real (though not equally strong) if they have any sort of effect on any other entity, but adds further that actors consist *entirely* in their actions. There is no room for any unactualized surplus in his actors; nothing like a traditional “substance” hiding behind an actor’s action is permitted. Stated differently, Latour offers us a purely *relational* ontology.

The easiest way to see why this fails is to recall why Aristotle introduced the notions of “substance” and “potentiality” in his *Metaphysics* in the first place. Aristotle’s contemporaries in the Megarian school held that nothing is any more than what it actually is right now. For example, a house builder is not a house builder unless he/she is actually building a house right now. It would follow from this that a master house builder who is fast asleep or taking a lunch break is no more a house builder than someone, like me, who has no idea how to build a house, since neither of us is building one at the moment. Clearly, a distinction needs to be drawn between the master builder and me. This master has a *potential* to start building a house at will in a way that I do not. Yes, I too can begin to study the art of house building and in principle can eventually become a master builder myself. But this is a different sort of potential than that of the one who is already a master. This is the root of Aristotle’s concept of potentiality, which I think has other problems, though I do think it sufficiently answers the Megarians’ claim that a thing is only what it actually is right now. Yet Latour would have no choice but to side with the Megarians. Since there is no surplus in his actors beyond their current actuality, he is unable to account for the difference between the master builder on a lunch break and someone like me who does not know the first thing about building a house: or even from a rabbit or inanimate object that can never learn how to build one, for that matter. All are equally non-house builders in the current moment.

As for the concept of substance, Aristotle famously argues that substance is that which can have different qualities at different times. Socrates sometimes laughs and sometimes cries, but is always Socrates, meaning that he is somehow indifferent with respect to his current actions, all of which can be viewed as accidental or transient. This allows Aristotle to talk about the changes undergone by substances over time. By contrast, Latour has no way to do this: for him, laughing Socrates and crying Socrates must be two different entities. To summarize, however admirable Latour’s commitment to flatness may be, he acquires it at the high cost of identifying every entity with its current actions rather than with something deeper than those actions that can engage in different actions at different times. OOO counters this by drawing an absolute distinction between objects and their relations, which is the counterpart to OOO’s inverse insistence on the absolute distinction between an object and its component pieces. We cannot reduce water downward to its tiniest constituents, but to an equal degree we cannot reduce water upward to its current uses or even to all its

possible uses. Water does not exist because it is used, but can be used only because it exists. In this respect, OOO does not remain flat in its ontology. Though Latour is right to level the traditional modern distinction between humans on one side and everything else on the other, it is wrong to level all things down by looking exclusively at their actions. Oftentimes real objects change their actions, and sometimes they fail to act at all.

OOO can also be viewed as performing the *opposite* reversal of Kant's philosophy from the one found in such German Idealist philosophers as Hegel and Fichte. Famously, Kant tried to put an end to dogmatic rationalism by saying that we cannot know anything about the thing-in-itself (or *noumenon*), but only about things perceived according to the conditions of the human mind: space, time, and the twelve categories of understanding. German Idealism reacts to this by saying that the thing-in-itself is a self-contradictory notion. If I think something is lying outside thought, this is itself a thought, and therefore we never escape the boundaries of thought. From this standpoint, Kant was a great philosophical genius who messed up only when he introduced the nonsensical notion of the noumenon. OOO reverses this line of attack. From our standpoint, Kant was a great genius *precisely* due to his notion of the thing-in-itself. Where he went wrong was in his assumption that only human thought is haunted by the noumenon, as if inanimate objects were able to collide with each other directly and without surplus. But this is false. When one billiard ball strikes another, or when fire burns cotton, these objects caricature or distort each other just as much as the human mind caricatures or distorts them. Instead of German Idealism, there could have been a "German Realism" that took this alternate path of development. In a sense, OOO is simply a belated birth of German Realism, two centuries after the fact.

CC: In my 2015 article, rather presumptuously titled "Réintroduction à la littérature fantastique," I suggested that we have perhaps looked at the Fantastic too narrowly, focusing on genre and formal issues while essentially dismissing the central claim of the texts that objects—from coffee pots to paperweights—act and move independently. The language of OOO allowed me to look at the broader theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of the Fantastic and argue that it pushes back against the human-subject-centered Enlightenment and against the Kantian *a priori* of space, time, and causality.

Question #1: Are you really saying that objects have will? Isn't this just personification?

CC: I understand that will is typically conceived as a purely human trait, something that sets humans apart from boomerangs or waterfalls. But Fantastic texts clearly suggest that objects do, in fact, have a form of will. Take, for example,

Maupassant's narrative "Qui sait?" where the narrator's furniture leaves his house and sets off on its own. The narrator attempts to prevent his desk from taking flight:

Je m'élançai sur lui et je le saisis comme on saisit un voleur, mais il allait d'une course irrésistible, et malgré mes efforts, et malgré ma colère, je ne pus même ralentir sa marche. Comme je résistais en désespéré à cette force épouvantable, je m'abattis par terre en luttant contre lui. Alors, il me roula, me traîna sur le sable, et déjà les meubles, qui le suivaient, commençaient à marcher sur moi, piétinant mes jambes et les meurtrissant. (243)

The desk's will and force is stronger than the human narrator's and, as a worthy adversary in the flat ontology of the Fantastic, the desk—along with the other furniture—succeeds in exercising its agency and leaving the narrator's home.

While conceding that the agency of objects remains "controversial," in his 2016 book *Immaterialism*, Graham nevertheless contends that

Whether we praise objects for their agency or brashly deny that they have any, we overlook the question of what objects are when *not* acting. To treat objects solely as actors forgets that a thing acts because it exists rather than existing because it acts. Objects are sleeping giants holding their forces in reserve. (7)

Harman is here contesting the idea posited by Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory that objects are only interesting when they interact within a perceptible system. He argues, instead, that objects exist and even act or interact when humans are not around to observe. "A truly pro-object theory," he writes, "needs to be aware of relations between objects that have no direct involvement with people" (6). Harman continues: "Everything has an autonomous essence [. . . All] entities sometimes affect and are affected by others, but they are never exhaustively deployed in their mutual influence, since they are capable of doing other things or even nothing at all" (16–17).

GH: The criticism that Latour and OOO both "anthropomorphize" the inanimate world is itself a symptom of the anthropocentric bias of modern philosophy. We need not claim that inanimate objects are "conscious" in order to claim that they interact with each other in the same ontological way that humans interact with them. No doubt, there are higher human mental faculties that one will not find in rocks and algae. But we are speaking now about a much more basic level of reality. In other words, the fact that human intelligence might be different from everything else that exists (and at least some philosophers—Chalmers, Skrbina, and Strawson, for example—are increasingly questioning even this) does not entail that the difference between human thought and *everything else in the cosmos* deserves to be

the fundamental distinction of philosophy, which is precisely what it has become in the modern period.

CC: Lest this sound too theoretical or like nothing but philosophical gymnastics, consider this experiment described in a 2015 *New York Times* article titled, “Sorry, Einstein. Quantum Study Suggests ‘Spooky Action’ is Real.” Scientists conducted experiments that

proved one of the most fundamental claims of quantum theory—that objects separated by great distance can instantaneously affect each other’s behavior [. . .]. Since the 1970s, a series of precise experiments by physicists are increasingly erasing doubt [. . .] that two previously entangled particles, even if separated by the width of the universe, could instantly interact.

The new experiment [. . .] is the strongest evidence yet to support the most fundamental claims of the theory of quantum mechanics about the existence of an odd world formed by a fabric of subatomic particles, where matter does not take form until it is observed and time runs backward as well as forward. (Markoff)

Researchers used a photonic link to entangle the electron spins of defect centers in diamonds. These diamonds were then placed 1.3 kilometers apart (on opposite ends of a campus) and randomly manipulated. The change in one instantly affected the other, meaning that these objects influenced each other across time and space. Other experiments have since reproduced this 2015 finding by measuring starlight that had taken 600 years to travel to earth. In other words, Kant’s subject-centered philosophy of the subject and his *a priori* understanding of space and time are challenged by both the Fantastic, by OOO, and now by our contemporary understanding of quantum theory.

GH: In my view, quantum theory actually points in a philosophically *realist* direction rather than in the human-centered one defended by such contemporary philosophers as Karen Barad and Slavoj Žižek. Even when we accept the Heisenberg/Bohr idea of particles having neither exact position nor exact momentum until these are measured, this simply demonstrates that position and momentum are not fundamental to the existence of the particle, which can have a whole range of possible positions or momenta that can be evaluated statistically. We are speaking, then, of an object deeper than any of its possible physical positions or measured momenta. As for the example of “entanglement” you just described, Corry, it also suggests the possibility of non-locality, and thus of a “weird” realism like OOO in which any object might have two manifestations at a vast distance in space. In other words, the entangled diamonds become a joint single object despite their great distance from one another.

CC: So yes, in the Fantastic, objects possess will. And it is too easy to dismiss this by saying it is merely a projection of the narrator's madness, allegory, or personification. I contend there is more afoot. As does Gautier who repeatedly insists on the inherent reality of the Fantastic. Gautier praises Hoffmann not as an author of the supernatural, but as a radical realist: "Hoffmann passe pour un poète fantastique; cependant, jamais réputation ne fut moins mérité, car *c'est, au contraire, un réaliste violent*" ("Odéon"). In Gautier's eyes, Hoffmann's merit stems from his ability to depict things as they are, to see and describe the world as a clear-eyed realist. In Gautier's *Arria Marcella* (1852), Octavien finds himself enamored with the imprints of a breast and thigh left in Pompeian lava by a woman long since dead. When visiting the villa where she died, Octavien, "pris d'un amour rétrospectif," sheds a tear for his dead, absent love (*L'Œuvre fantastique* 206). Soon thereafter, "Un prodige inconcevable le reportait, lui, Français du XIX^e siècle, au temps de Titus, non en esprit, mais en réalité [. . .]" (212). The phrase "en réalité" makes it clear that this experience is intended to be read neither as a dream, as a vision, nor as the projection of a frenzied mind; "en réalité" underscores that the text resists conventional conceptions of time, and that it is meant to be read literally.

Question #2: Wouldn't your definition of the Fantastic mean that Notre Dame de Paris with its speaking stones is Fantastic or, for that matter, that Lamartine's "Le Lac" is Fantastic, too?

CC: In most Romantic poetry and novels, objects decidedly remain *porte-paroles* of the narrators' inner voices. In the Fantastic, objects willfully upstage the narrators, displacing them to a secondary role, making the human subject one more object in a shifting ontology. A key component of the philosophy of OOO is the notion of surprise. Graham puts it this way: "Whereas the old essentialism thought it could *know* the essence of things [. . . object oriented] essentialism cautions that the essence is not directly knowable and thus generates frequent surprises" (17). Borrowing and expanding on a phrase from Bruno Latour, Harman explains that Enlightenment Materialists and New Materialists alike see objects as "mathematizable primary qualities with a physical base," whereas in a flat, object-oriented ontology, objects are characterized by their "surprise and opacity" (19). Harman concludes that these "opaque surprises" inherent in objects and their potentiality "must be due to fully formed individuals at every scale" (20). The Fantastic adopts a counter-Enlightenment philosophy that predicts OOO through its dismissal of Enlightenment notions of human-centered rationality and its acknowledgement of the opacity and "surprise" of objects. In the Fantastic, unlike in texts by Hugo or Lamartine, the narrators are baffled when perspective, time, and a sense of space are recentered via the object—that is,

when the text is focalized by an object or when the object behaves in a way that transgresses the limits of an Enlightenment understanding of what an object is *supposed* to do. While Romantic narrators and poets defend the knowability of objects and use objects to give voice to their emotions, Fantastic objects remain opaque, surprising readers and narrators alike.

GH: Agreed on all of this. I would simply add that the opacity of objects for OOO comes from the fact that they are *inherently* unknowable, though not for that reason “unworldly,” as some read Plato’s forms or Kant’s thing-in-itself. There are really only two kinds of knowledge that we can have about things. When someone asks us what something is, we can tell them either (1) what it is made of, or (2) what it does. These two possibilities exhaust the sphere of human knowledge; I have found no counter-examples. Nonetheless, knowledge does not exhaust the sphere of human cognition. A good example is art. If we confront an artwork and try to explain it away in terms of its physical/biographical constituents or in terms of its socio-political effects, we have failed to grasp the artwork as an artwork, which is never reducible to either of the two kinds of knowledge. Another example, often overlooked, is philosophy. When Socrates repeatedly claims that he knows nothing and has never been anyone’s teacher, this is not just ironic rhetoric. There is no place in Plato’s Dialogues where Socrates ever reaches a final definition of anything, whether love, virtue, or friendship. *Philosophia* means love of wisdom, not wisdom itself, which Socrates thinks is attainable only by a god. In short, philosophy is an *indirect* way of getting at things, not a direct one like mathematics or science. In the modern period, philosophers have suffered from a combination of physics envy and geometry envy, when the arts are actually a better model for what philosophy does. This was seen but not developed by Husserl’s teacher Franz Brentano in a wonderfully acerbic Vienna lecture of the 1890s, when he said that in one respect philosophy makes incremental progress like the sciences, but in another sense is more like the fine arts with their alternating periods of ripeness and decadence. This second face of philosophy has been nearly forgotten amidst the various modern struggles to attain a “scientific” philosophy, as if that were automatically a proper goal.

Question #3: Realist novels feature a lot of objects. Can they be considered Fantastic?

CC: While Todorov tackles the question of the Fantastic from a generic perspective, I don’t think of it as a genre. I look at the Fantastic primarily as a mode, a literary moment when the text speculates the existence of an ontology that places humans and objects on the same level or theorizes the presence of willful noumena. There are times in the Realist novel when a cigar is just a cigar, that is, when the described objects contribute to what Barthes has called an “effet

de réel.” Barthes argues that an object like the barometer in Flaubert’s *Un Cœur simple* is a “détail superflu” and “inutile” and serves only to add to the journalistic realism of the narrative, to connect the narrative to the concrete world in which the reader herself lives (84–85).

That said, Realist (and indeed many post-Enlightenment) novels can and do, at times, shift into the Fantastic mode. In Zola’s *Thérèse Raquin*, for example, the portrait of the murdered Camille watches his widow Thérèse and his killer Laurent, and even comes out of the frame and sleeps in their bed (199; 210). “Il s’assit sur les sièges, se mit devant la table, s’étendit dans le lit, se servit des meubles, des objets qui traînaient” (284). At the same time as the portrait begins to act and inhabit the humans’ sphere, Thérèse’s mother-in-law evolves in the opposite direction: “Elle devenait une chose”; “Elle [. . .] servait de meuble” (225; 274). In these moments, where the subject-object hierarchy is flattened, where the narrator or a character speculates a surprising object-oriented perspective, the Realist text shifts into a Fantastic mode.

GH: Though I’m no expert on the Fantastic in literature, I have written an entire book on Lovecraft, and therefore may have a few thoughts to offer. I see the Fantastic as a heightened version of the aesthetic more generally. Knowledge tends to identify objects with their qualities. When scientists discover a new object, such as when Chadwick discovered the neutron, it is their job to discover all the qualities or properties that belong to that object. If scientists merely stick with the proper name “neutron” and never discover anything more about it, then they have failed in their profession. Not so with the arts or philosophy. Socrates tells us explicitly in Plato’s dialogue *Meno* that he cannot talk about what properties virtue has until he first knows what virtue *is*. This is a paradox, since knowing what something is usually entails knowing what properties it has. But this is not so with an artwork, which only succeeds when it becomes a vaguely haunting object over and above whatever palpable qualities it has. And so too, we have just seen, when a philosopher like Socrates says that he wants to know what virtue is *before* he can ask what its qualities are.

Well then, what is most Fantastic in Lovecraft’s writing? One of the most important things he does is to split an object from its qualities, which is the primary way he achieves weird effects. When he tells us that a sailor was swallowed up by an angle of masonry “that was acute, but *behaved as if it were obtuse*” (32; emphasis added), we are not sure exactly what this could mean, but a rift has been created between acute angles and the normal behavioral properties of acute angles. The effect of this is unsettling. Or consider his first description of the idol of the monster Cthulhu viewed in a sculptor’s studio in Providence. Some critics of Lovecraft claim that “a dragon with an octopus head” (not a bad description of Cthulhu) is not scary. They may be right about that, but Lovecraft

does not stop with calling Cthulhu a dragon with an octopus head. He hints that there is something a bit wrong with that literal description, and adds that it was “the general outline of the whole” (3) that made the idol truly terrifying. We are again not sure what this means, and no painting or potential film of Cthulhu would be able to scare us enough. But through the skillful use of language, Lovecraft creates the very rift between an object (Cthulhu) and its qualities (dragon body plus octopus head) that art and philosophy both require. For this reason, I think that the Fantastic in literature has a long, even inevitable future. Its tricks as a mode are closely bound up with the nature of aesthetics in general.

Question #4: How is the Fantastic different from magical events in medieval literature? How is the Fantastic different from magic realism or science fiction?

CC: The Fantastic mode is expressly counter-Enlightenment. Magical events in medieval literature (or in Magic Realism) do not generate surprise on the part of the characters that encounter them or live through them. In Marie de France’s *Guigemar*, for example, the eponymous hero meets a speaking deer and unquestioningly follows its instructions before traveling on a magic pilotless boat without the slightest expression of awe. Magic is simply part of the worldview of pre-modern and early-modern texts. The Fantastic also exists in a particular cultural, philosophical, and literary context that predates the moment when writing about the otherworldly or the theoretical is bracketed into the genres of fantasy or science fiction.

GH: This is true. Lovecraft always goes out of his way to defend an Enlightenment conception of reason and science, and his characters are so surprised by the apparent violations of reason and science in the story that they often lose their minds.

Question #5: Don’t you think OOO may be more useful for analyzing the nouveau roman?

CC: It is true that objects figure prominently in works by the *nouveaux romanciers* and *nouvelles romancières*. But these objects remain trapped under the gaze of the author. Take, for example, the first chapter of Robbe-Grillet’s *Instantanés*, titled “Le Mannequin.” After descriptions of a coffee pot, the table upon which it is placed, and the room in which it is found, we read: “[Le mannequin] se trouve exactement dans la même direction que la cafetière qui est posée sur la table [. . .]. Le mannequin n’est pas à sa place: on le range d’habitude dans l’angle de la fenêtre, du côté opposé à l’armoire à glace. L’armoire a été placée là pour faciliter les essayages” (12–13). Notice the presence of the human subject permeating this description. The coffee pot “est posée sur la table.” By whom? Certainly by

a human who placed it there. “On le range.” “One” places the mannequin in a certain spot. And the armoire “a été placée” by someone who wants to make fittings more convenient. Despite the conspicuous absence of humans, the scene remains anthropocentric in the sense that the objects are placed by, focalized by, and in the service of humans. Unsurprisingly, the *nouveau roman* conforms to the Kantian human subject-object hierarchy.

Contrast this with Gautier’s description of a room in his 1833 *Le Bol de punch*:

C’était une chambre singulière [. . .]. Elle avait bien, comme toutes les chambres possibles, comme la vôtre ou la mienne, quatre murs avec un plafond et un plancher, mais la façon dont elle était décorée lui donnait une physionomie étrangement incongrue. [. . .] Une tête de mort, des besicles sur le nez, une calotte grecque sur le crâne, une pipe culottée entre les mâchoires, faisait la grimace à un magot de porcelaine placé à l’autre bout de la cheminée; des mandragores difformes se tortillaient hideusement, pêle-mêle avec des pétrifications et des madrépores, sur un rayon vide de la bibliothèque. Sur la table du milieu, c’était bien autre chose: il était certainement impossible de réunir dans un plus petit espace un plus grand nombre d’objets ayant de la tournure et du caractère. (*Jeunes France* 207–08)

Here, the action seems to stem from the objects themselves: “Une tête de mort [. . .] faisait la grimace”; “Des mandragores difformes se tortillaient hideusement”; the room itself has a “physionomie” and the objects possess a certain “tournure et du caractère.” These are far from the limp, lifeless objects in Robbe-Grillet.

For a more direct point of comparison, consider the coffee pot described in the first sentences of Robbe-Grillet’s *Instantanés* and the coffee pot that is the central animating character in Gautier’s “La Cafetière.” In Gautier’s story, the coffee pot comes to life, seduces the surprised narrator, dances with him, and sits lovingly beside him until she breaks into a thousand pieces of porcelain at dawn. In contrast, Robbe-Grillet’s “cafetière [. . .] est posée sur la table.”

Consider a final example that predates the *nouveau roman*: in his *Parti pris des choses*, Francis Ponge takes the *parti* of objects, considers them as equals, gives them life, and speculates their ontology. Like Robbe-Grillet, he describes objects, but instead of viewing them from a so-called neutral subject-centered perspective as we saw in *Instantanés*, Ponge theorizes a vibrant, pulsating ecology of objects: a pebble, water, a cigarette, a candle. In “Le Morceau de viande,” the piece of meat is an object in constant action: “Chaque morceau de viande est une sorte d’usine, moulins et pressoirs à sang. Tubulures, haut fourneaux, cuves y voisinent avec les marteaux-pilons, les coussins de graisse. La vapeur y jaillit, bouillante. Des feux sombres ou clairs rougeoient” (32). Ponge’s candle “s’incline sur son assiette

et se noie dans son aliment” (19). The cigarette creates a foggy atmosphere, “sa personne [est] une petite torche beaucoup moins lumineuse que parfumée,” and “sa passion” is characterized by its “bouton embrasé” (19).

While Ponge produces a text that often hews toward the Fantastic in the way it speculates the complex tangled existence and inner life of objects, these poems lack the ontological surprise that characterizes the Fantastic mode. I maintain that the Fantastic requires a collision of conflicting ontologies, or that the Fantastic mode occurs at the intersection of two ontologies: one that is empirical, scientific, Enlightened, and anthropocentric; the other that is materialist, not hierarchical, counter-Enlightenment, and object oriented.

GH: I cannot disagree with any of this. It is too often assumed that any author who simply lists or writes about objects is “OOO” in some sense. But that is not necessarily so. What is most characteristic of OOO is the tension it explores between objects and their own qualities, not just a listing of objects. OOO authors do often give lists of objects (we call them “Latour Litanies,” since Latour does this in an especially skillful way) but this is not an end in itself. We list objects only to focus the reader’s attention on a flat plane where all objects are equally listable: Popeye, centaurs, neutrons, the sun. It is a rhetorical technique for exploding the modern assumption that humans are one kind of thing and *everything else* is of another kind.

Question #6: It seems that you are saying humans are not important and there is nothing unique about the human experience. Is this true?

CC: Of course humans are important. OOO does not propose undermining the significance of human contribution. It proposes abolishing the Enlightenment hierarchies that justified colonialism and countless other -isms and challenges the creation of any new hierarchies. It holds that humans possess great potential and a unique, perhaps limitless, ability to create. And, like the Fantastic, it maintains that all objects—human and nonhuman—can interact and influence one another in surprising ways. To be fully human and humane is to accept my place in the network of objects—in a flat ontology—where hierarchy and oppression give way to equality and respect for all things.

GH: All of this is true. OOO also wants to challenge the assumption that humans fundamentally rise above the world in looking at it, and that *freedom* is an inherently limitless and desirable goal. In fact, the more we learn, the more naïve we become. The worlds of dogs and cats contain a relatively limited range of objects, while humans believe in all sorts of things: creatures in the depths of the oceans, countless stars and planets, millions of synthetic chemicals. Humans are the

most sincere creatures who have ever existed. We are not critical and transcendent beings, but fundamentally *amorous* ones (as Dante already recognized in organizing his cosmos and his theology around love), and we stop taking certain things seriously only in order to take other ones even more seriously. We may have stopped believing in magic and rain dances, but have replaced these beliefs with many others. Human progress does not go hand in hand with nihilism.

CONCLUSION

CC: This understanding of the Fantastic is critical, since in the nineteenth century what the new French republic required, of course, were subjects—not objects—and principally white, male, bourgeois subjects who would promote *les droits de l'homme* while subjugating and objectifying women, workers, colonies, and the environment as the nation moved triumphantly forward. To this end, according to Jan Goldstein, a new Enlightenment notion of the self (and specifically a Kantian notion of the self promoted by Victor Cousin) was taught and adopted by the French male upper class. It is precisely during this time of the anthropocentric willful French male self, that the Fantastic with its object-oriented perspective came into its own as a sort of resistance literature. The Fantastic stands as a troublesome reminder of the Enlightenment's blind spots and as a literary bulwark that challenges the philosophical basis of France's new power structure. In short, the Fantastic, with its individuated, stylized objects, operated against Kantian human-centered assumptions and by extension against the bourgeois idea of self that dominated nineteenth-century French thought.

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