In Act 3 of Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, Henry Bolingbroke requests the restoration of his family’s lands while painting a picture of the ecology of war. Henry claims that if his inheritance is not restored he will “use the advantage of [his] power/And lay the summer’s dust with showers of blood/Rain’d from the wounds of slaughter’d Englishmen” (3.3.42–44). In other words, Henry argues that if he is refused the territories that he believes are rightfully his, he will drench the lands with the blood of a people whom he also claims are his own. As he makes this statement, Henry lays out a chain of cause and effect in which he becomes the primary human agent and interpretive consciousness that orders the climate of the surrounding countryside. Objects (be they land, elements, or citizens) exist in order to be possessed and acted upon by him, and ultimately the picture his words paint makes a case for how the listener/viewer is supposed to see the landowner as well as the earth and the English citizen’s relationship to it. Henry suggests that the landscape, and the organisms within it, are ordered and sustained at his will.

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1 All quotations from Shakespeare follow *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

2 My argument about Henry’s will may be complicated by the claim that he is only a character in a play. I join S.E. Cosgrove in arguing that to see his performance of agency or will as irrelevant because he is only a “character” overlooks the numerous performances that often comprise agency. It may also, by implication, strengthen the notion that only “real human” agents are capable of agency and action. As James Phelan notes: “Silently underlying this discussion of the mimetic component (of the fictional character) are some messy problems. First, all this talk about characters as plausible or possible persons presupposes that we know [with certainty] what a person is” (qtd. in S.E. Cosgrove, “Radical Uncertainty: Judith Butler and a theory of character,” in *The Ethical Imaginations: Writing Worlds Papers—The Biology of Rain*).
It is perhaps unsurprising then that, faced with Henry’s rhetorical positioning of himself as a force who determines a series of relations between objects, his rival responds by amplifying and translating Henry’s “showers of blood” anew. King Richard looks on Henry’s anticipated bloody rain and responds by arguing that, as reigning monarch, he himself is supported by an “omnipotent” force that will also summon “clouds on [his] behalf.” Furthermore, the blood rain that Henry spills will not quench the dry “summer’s dust.” Instead it will:

…ill become the flower of England’s face,  
Change the complexion of her maid-pale peace  
To scarlet indignation and bedew  
Her pastures’ grass with faithful English blood. (3.3.97–100)

Richard draws his listeners’ attention to a different interpretation of the form the land will occupy at the end of Henry’s threatened attack. In doing so he argues for an alternate understanding of the relationship between actors and objects where interpretive mastery dictates the form and function of the objects that surround the ruler. Henry threatens to turn the blood of English soldiers into rain, but Richard translates and transforms Henry’s portrait of the dusty earth into a body—a face—whose complexion will be permanently altered by the dew of citizens’ blood. Henry may be able to make it rain, but Richard claims to dictate the effects and meaning of this precipitation.

Although both characters essentially imagine the same incident, they argue from opposing perspectives. Each character claims to shape the substance of the landscape and implicitly places a human actor as the central organizing force in the environment. In the rhetorical volleys of these two characters, we find an example of what Graham Harman identifies as the fight for “cognitive mastery” that an Object-Oriented Literary Criticism attempts to resist. In fact, Object-Oriented theorists might go so far as to claim that there is an “unreal” competition going on between these two characters. As these men fight for possession of objects, they fail to acknowledge the way that blood, rain, and soil also withdraw from the immediate context of their quarrel by always also existing beyond
the shaping power of the discourse that describes them. Lowell Duckert, describes this succinctly as he claims, “Rain resists our attempts to know its intentions, yet it also resists the separations between climate and culture, life and matter, and subject and object.”

Richard and Henry’s words, therefore, stand in contrast to the “deeply non-relational conception of the reality of things [at] the heart of object-oriented philosophy.” As Richard and Henry fight to translate objects in a given context, they neglect, as Timothy Morton suggests, to consider that these objects “exist prior to the one ‘for whom’ they are fluid or static.” In other words, Henry and Richard assume that the objects around them are within their reach and completely open to their manipulation and mastery. They fail to conceive of objects at a distance.

Graham Harman argues that conceiving of objects at a distance (even from themselves) may serve an ethical purpose, for, as objects are divorced from an individual agent’s perception or particular context, “the objects of object-oriented philosophy [become] mortal, ever-changing, built from swarms of subcomponents, and accessible only through oblique allusion.” Object-Oriented Ontology offers “not the oft-lamented “naïve realism” of oppressive and benighted patriarchs, but a weird realism in which real individual objects resist all forms of causal or cognitive mastery.” OOO refuses to allow objects to become the pawns of masters or kings who rule over them. Instead objects remain always somehow foreign and elsewhere, just beyond reach.

I am intrigued by the liberating possibilities of such a claim. At the same time, I would like to ask if imagining the distant and withdrawn might sometimes lead us back to the familiar and presumably understood. I do this not to reify the human as the primary actor in a world

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7 In this way, my thinking aligns with Nathan Brown’s. Brown asks if an object might be productively “constituted by the current context of its relations with other entities and be differentially constituted by relations with new entities and contexts?” See “The Nadir of OOO: From Graham Harman’s Tool-Being to Timothy Morton’s Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality,” Parrhesia 17 (2013), 63.)
of subordinate objects but to draw attention to the way that positioning objects as distant may sometimes be an act of interpretive mastery as well, or at least something that looks very much like it. Considering this possibility seems like it would be of vital importance to a movement that concerns itself with the ethical consequences of how we position and conceive of objects. If not mastering sometimes also looks like mastering, then is there more to be said about what this project attempts to achieve and how that, in-and-of-itself, should look?

I would like to begin exploring this question by letting an object lead me. John Tradescant’s *Musaeum Tradescantianum*, which catalogs hundreds of items housed in Tradescant’s Ark in South Lambeth during the 1600s, describes a location that exhibited a multitude of natural and constructed objects collected from around the globe. These items were put on display for the London viewing audience’s entertainment and edification, and I turn to a consideration of this document and the location it depicts precisely because it gives me an opportunity to consider how objects have a long history of being positioned as withdrawn and the ends to which these objects may be put. The items in Tradescant’s Ark are often studied as an example of the curious and distant. Tradescant’s project then serves as a very apt example of the way that objects may be positioned as withdrawn for a variety of purposes, many of them lucrative.

The Ark, like many other European curiosity cabinets, was a middle-class undertaking that capitalized precisely on an object’s ability to resist cognitive mastery. Marjorie Swann puts it particularly well when she points out that: “Not only were objects selected for their anomalously, but the unusual qualities of individual things were emphasized through their physical juxtaposition with strikingly different items.” Furthermore, some scholars of the period have argued that these unusual juxtapositions may be understood as highly theatrical gestures that rely, in part, on the desire to escape rigid systems of organization and ownership. Steven Mul laney, in his work on the relationship between London’s theater culture and curiosity cabinets like Tradescant’s, highlights the ethical stakes of these locations and argues that both curiosity cabinets and the London stage operate as chaotic sites of disorder that reflect the “suspension of

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cultural decorum and discrimination” in early modern society. Although Mullaney is not an OOO scholar, his assessment seems to align spaces like Tradescant’s with a desire to resist the strictures of an interpretive practice that can easily account for objects as known, understood, close by, and easily possessed. The collection of items attempts to exist beyond cultural categorization itself. “Ambiguous things” find a place here in an unusual, seemingly arbitrary, assembly that, as Mullaney goes on to explain, “lodges them beyond the bounds of cultural hierarchies and definitions.”

Although I find attractive the idea that the seeming disorder present in Tradescant’s Ark illustrates a desire to reject the strictures of a rigid system of classification and order, I would also like to propose that this potential disorder might also be marshalled in the service of bolstering other forms of social order. Section VIII of Tradescant’s catalog, provides an example of an item I wish to consider further in this regard: “Blood that rained in the Isle of Wight.”

The blood mentioned in Tradescant’s catalog is unusual for two reasons. First, it is indexed next to objects procured, for the most part, from travels abroad. The local blood rests alongside artifacts from North America, charms from Turkey, musical instruments from Portugal and Spain, and even the trunnion from Drake’s sailing vessel. Second, the blood is one of the few objects that is connected to an individual, for it is “attested by Sir Jo. Oglander.”

We know nothing for certain about how John Oglander specifically “attested” to the blood rain on the Isle of Wight. We do, however, know a fair deal about Oglander’s life though the account books that he kept for his estate on the Isle. According to Adam Nicholson, Oglander was an individual whose “entire being was distributed among the structures that framed and supported him.” His account books provide a vivid record of daily life, of relationships between land, animals, tools, buildings, purchased luxuries, and humans. Throughout these records Oglander emerges not simply as a landowner who is deeply attached to his

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property and country, and deeply mystified by the workings of the world, but also as an object himself.

Oglander’s tendency to account for himself and his family as objects may seem most notable to a twenty-first-century reader in the moments when, consumed by grief, he dramatically documents the death of family members in his own blood. However, it is apparent throughout the text that Oglander is regularly driven by an impulse to account for himself as he records both the unusual and mundane happenings of a lifetime and meditates on his relationship to his lands and house at Nunwell. In one particularly memorable instance he imagines himself as a vital and familiar participant in the landscape even after his own death. Describing his ghost, he writes:

I will give thee my owne Carracter. Conceive though sawest an Aged, somewhat Corpulent Man of middle stature, with a white Beard and somewhat big Muchatoes, riding in Blacke or some sad coullored clothes from Westnunwell up to ye West Downe and so over all the Downes to take the Ayre, Morning and Evening, and to see there his fatting Cattell, on a handsome midlinge blacke stone-horse, his hayre graye and his complexion very Sangwine, and, as Tully sayde, *Nunquam Minus Solus, quam Cum Solus.* [Never less alone than when alone.][12]

In this moment, Oglander positions himself as a figure who is simultaneously familiar and withdrawn. On the one hand he conjures a picture of his specter carrying out the daily actions of a landowner who dutifully tends to his property. His descendants may happen upon him some “Morning and Evening” as his shade dons characteristic attire and surveys Nunwell’s lands or animals. His presence seems to permeate the land around him. At the same time he depicts himself as mysterious and always out of reach. He is a figure in the distance, a removed presence whose solitude is anything but solitary. By becoming perpetually distant, he also becomes linked with the objects and locations that he surveys and which sustain his being.

This move may, on the one hand, seem unsurprising for a Royalist member of the gentry. After all, as Adam Nicholson notes, “The interfolding of people, land, animals, food, housing, and hospitality was in itself a

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model of the gentry’s idea of goodness. It was...civilization attached to a particular place. A form of organizing the land which was also a way of organizing society, an interlocked complexity, which was intended to be both stable and long lived and to lie at the root of the honourable, just and hospitable life.”13 However, faced with the demands of a rapidly changing social order, I would argue that when Oglander depicts his ghost he does more than simply comply with a traditional understanding of the neatly ordered life.

Throughout his accounts, Oglander rarely suggests that he is part of a tidy, ordered system. Interpretive or cognitive mastery seems frequently to elude him. For example, next to a listing of the cattle slaughtered on his estate in 1643, he writes (presumably in reference to the English Civil Wars), “I only knowe this, that I knowe nothing I cannot read eythor my selve, or other men, this world is Changed, and our Antipodes possess-eth owr places.”14 As he keeps a record of the mundane workings of an estate, Oglander positions himself as both profoundly connected to and distant from the nation, objects, and land that should be familiar to him. He claims to be incapable of locating himself in context, and we see him hyperbolically invoke, in this passage, a stock example of the withdrawn and foreign as he argues that his familiar land has been exchanged with the Antipodes (also tellingly described as “owr[s]”).

I have provided just one illustration of the many instances where Oglander’s accounts demonstrate the profound disorientation of a being who is uncertain about how to interpret the objects (including himself) that inhabit the world. However, the question remains: how does thinking about Oglander help me reflect on the blood that Tradescant housed in his curiosity cabinet, and why might it be useful to connect this object to Oglander at all? This seems, after all, to counter the entire purpose of the ooo project.

One answer to this question may be found by returning to the beginning of this chapter’s trail of thought. Studying a man did not lead me to this object. Instead, studying a collection of ambiguous objects led me to a man, a man who appears, in a roundabout way, to be asking many questions that are relevant to Object-Oriented Philosophy. I can only speculate, but it seems plausible that Oglander’s belief in the idea that familiar objects are beyond his cognitive mastery (and are as distant as the

13  Nicholson, Gentry, 114.
14  Quoted in Nicholson, Gentry, 131.
Antipodes) may help account for how blood rain from the Isle of Wight ended up in Tradescant’s collection of rarities. Lowell Duckert notes, that in early modern England, there was an “insatiable appetite for travel writing [that] coexisted with an increasing taste for climatic literature as well.”15 We do not have evidence that Oglander was a voracious reader of either of these genres. However, his reference to distant locations like the Antipodes, perhaps suggests that it is not a stretch to imagine that Oglander recognized the cultural value of placing a piece of his climate and everyday world in the realm of the fantastic, distant, and disordered. Perhaps this object (this blood rain) has drawn a line that points to the specter of a distant master who has always been close by. I would like to suggest that it is valuable to entertain such speculation because in doing so we are challenged to consider the possibility that deeming an object as withdrawn and beyond the grasp of understanding may also be placing it in a kind of context with very real causal effects. Unlike Henry Bolingbroke, Oglander does not claim fully to master the objects around him, but his lack of certainty about objects helps place them in locations that have masters just the same.

15 Duckert, “When It Rains,” 117.