Shoe Talk and Shoe Silence
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Like the gait of one unfamiliar with walking in stiletto heels, the two parts of this essay move, at times arrhythmically, between explorations of objects in environments. Part one embeds the shoe in human-centric environments as an instrument that’s used as much to displace particular autopoietic systems as it is to display others. Part two embeds the human in ontic environs, in the triangulation of semantic disclosure, withdrawal, and density in the shoe-dog-human network in act 2, scene 3, of William Shakespeare’s The Two Gentlemen of Verona. My purpose is to apply the language and architecture of speculative realism to consider both the gaps in knowledge and the interplay of objects as yet underexplored in historicist critical engagement. The strategic ahistoricism employed by OOO I adopt here enables me to wander and “wonder unburdened” among objects and environments in a manner that is, not unlike the precariousness of some shoes, at once alluring and promiscuous in its embrace of instability.

1 I follow the definitions of autopoietic and allopoietic machines laid out by Levi Bryant, who adapts Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela’s terminology developed in “Autopoiesis: The Organization of the Living.” Bryant writes of their definitions, “it is sufficient to note that when Maturana and Varela refer to autopoietic machines, they are referring to living objects, while when they refer to allopoietic machines they are referring to non-living objects” (137). See Levi Bryant, The Democracy of Objects (Ann Arbor: Open University Press, 2011).

2 Onticology asserts that “there is only one type of being,” which is the being of objects. “Humans are not excluded” from onticology, “but are rather objects among the various types of objects that exist or populate the world, each with their own specific powers and capacities” (Bryant, The Democracy of Objects, 20).

3 Ian Bogost, Alien Phenomenology, Or What It’s Like To Be a Thing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 133.
I. SHOE TALK

The vocabulary of shoemaking and the language we use to talk about the shoe construct the object as its own other. The established lexicon of shoe parts traces the human body on the object. Let us consider, for instance, some of the parts that comprise a shoe: eyelets, waist, rib, shank, tongue, and breast. While its name does not underscore a link to the human form, the “shoe tree,” a device designed to store shoes and retain their shape, health, and appearance, connects the anatomy of the shoe to the anatomy of another familiar living organism within an ecological system. Our insistence in language that shoes are parts of the human body, or at least a body that is capable of life (breathing, reproducing), of absorbing lightness or heaviness, shapes familiar discursive practices in philosophy, art, design, and literature that are applied to our attempts at knowing shoes.

On December 2, 2013, I found a pair of men’s shoes sitting atop one of the recycle bins outside my residential complex. The image (opposite page), like many of Vincent van Gogh’s paintings of shoes, lends itself to a series of meaning-seeking exercises, remediations that render inextricable the shoes’ relationship to the human.  

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4 Wood is a familiar ingredient in the construction of protective shoes. The Swedish clogs and the Japanese geta are just two types of wood-based footwear that symptomatize human wearers’ desire to use something of the soil—the tree—to avoid soiling our feet. But wood is also the preferred material used by us, both to protect the shoe from a variety of environments and display the object’s elevated place in our aesthetics. Thus, Nancy Macdonell notes, in the early twentieth century the American socialite Rita de Acosta Lydig went so far as to have “exotic” shoe trees custom-made “from the wood of violins” to protect and display her shoes (56). See Nancy Macdonell, The Shoe Book (New York: Assouline Publishing, 2014).  

5 While van Gogh painted multiple images of shoes, most notable among them are Shoes (1888) and A Pair of Shoes (1886). Shoes, now part of the collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, is a typical example of van Gogh’s preoccupation with the representative potential of shoes. The description, as noted on the Met’s website, draws the viewer’s attention to the “specific spatial context” within which the shoes are placed. See http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1992.374. Similarly, A Pair of Shoes, which is now part of the collection at the van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, prompted Martin Heidegger’s phenomenological analysis of the painting in “The Origin of the Work of Art.” Art historian Meyer Schapiro’s claim that Heidegger may have amalgamated multiple van Gogh shoe paintings is crucial. While we may not be able to ascertain which particular pair of shoes or painting caught the philosopher’s attention, Schapiro’s statement suggests that, for the philosopher, all the shoes in van Gogh’s paintings fall under
Whose shoes were these? Why were they abandoned? Given that they were placed on a recycle bin, presumably the person discarding the shoes intended for them to be taken up for use by another. Who might take up these shoes? What might his/her need or desire for the shoes suggest about his/her economic, cultural, aesthetic, and political environment? The shoes disappeared by the morning of December 4, 2013, but my questions persist. Notably, my initial questions about them had less to do with the shoes themselves and more to do with their past and potential human wearer. The questions fed my imagination because their answers promised to reveal something about the shoes’ connection to the human. Had I stepped into the shoes and walked around in them for some time, I might have been able to discover something about the previous wearer’s height and gait, about whether or not he placed weight or strain on particular parts of his feet and shoes, about the kind of time he spent standing or walking from place to place. The shoes, in other words, might have materialized the wearer as well as parts of his world.

I am not alone in desiring a shoe that tells a human story. Most art historians agree that van Gogh’s *Shoes* narrativizes the life and conditions of the human subject, the invisible wearer of the item. That is, the shoes stand not only for the wearer, but also for the wearer’s experience (his movements, poverty, plainness, suffering, and humility). For Heidegger, van Gogh’s *A Pair of Shoes* reveals the equipmental nature of the object’s being by drawing out what he claims is the primary use of the shoe. Although Heidegger declares the painting is just of “a pair of farmer’s shoes and nothing more,” famously he follows the statement with an elliptical “And yet—” (33). Heidegger anatomizes the shoe’s environment, assuming the object in the painting belongs to a female peasant: “[t]he farming woman wears her shoes in the field. Only here are they what they are. They are all the more genuinely so, the less the farming woman thinks about the shoes,…or is even aware of them” (33, emphasis added). For Heidegger, the shoes’ being hinges on their being forgotten by the peasant woman. At the same time, in those of us that encounter their image, the shoes provoke thought and refuse to be forgotten. Heidegger goes on to frame the shoes in the context of absence and presence, abundance and

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one interpretive umbrella—they all represent the experience and the labor of the absent wearers.

scarcity: “From out of the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth…. The shoes vibrate with the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of ripening grain…and the earth’s unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field” (33–34). This is the “And yet—” to which Heidegger draws our attention. Had the farmer been present, she may not have been able to tell the story of the earth better than her shoes do. The shoes, then, not only tell the truth about their true identity (their primary use or equipmentality), for Heidegger they also share a greater knowledge about the conflicts inherent in the natural and human environs.

There is no denying Heidegger maintains a representational approach to the farmer’s shoes and to the painting. His focus remains the absent subject that is the farmer, whose living conditions or truth he extrapolates from the object that she uses everyday.7 As I’d attempted to do when I sought answers about the shoes on the recycle bin, Heidegger mobilizes multiple interpretive tools to construct a world or environment within which the shoes operate as a synecdoche of the human network into which their object being is absorbed. As autonomous objects, the shoes in the painting seem to bear no significance for the philosopher.8 That he

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7 I’m grateful to Jeffrey Cohen for drawing my attention to Victims’ Shoes, which is part of the permanent exhibition at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Like Heidegger’s observations about human experience codified within / by the shoes in van Gogh’s painting, Victims’ Shoes bears a heavy representational weight insofar as the four thousand shoes in the exhibit stand in not only for the staggering number of humans that died at specific Nazi killing camps in Europe but also for the uncounted victims of the Holocaust whose lives, experiences, and deaths are not linked to the particularities of specific objects. In this sense, Victims’ Shoes draws attention powerfully to the affective semantics of human absence that is vehiculated by the tactile poetics and survivability of objects. See http://www.ushmm.org/information/exhibitions/permanent/shoes.

8 Heidegger isn’t alone here. There is no consensus on the topic of the identity of the shoes’ wearer and / or owner. Nor is there agreement on what the shoes represent. Meyer Schapiro’s “The Still Life as a Personal Object—A Note on Heidegger and Van Gogh,” which focuses on Heidegger’s flawed interpretation of van Gogh’s painting, remains one of the most influential analyses of A Pair of Shoes. Schapiro argues that the shoes depicted in the painting aren’t a peasant’s but rather the artist’s own. As opposed to Heidegger’s insistence on situating the shoes in an invisible yet palpable environment of rural agrarian labor, Schapiro positions them as representations of van Gogh’s urban wanderings across Europe. Derrida draws attention to the limits of both Heidegger’s and Schapiro’s interpretations while acknowledging that the objects primarily occupy a representational place, standing
doesn’t engage with the shoes’ inner life or immanence is symptomatic of a larger, institutionally structured anthropocentricism of which he is a part, one that relies on the potentiality of objects to reflect the human.

Even when work and wanderings do not erupt in the body of the shoe, that is, when the shoe is not clearly demarcated in the world of its function (in its wear and tear), the object represents the wearer’s economic position and relationship to labor. Pietro Yantorny, who in the early twentieth century designed and made shoes for wealthy Americans and Europeans, cherished his relations with Rita de Acosta not only because she owned 150 pairs of shoes made by him, each of which cost her approximately $1000, but also because he found she was the only woman he knew who was conscious of “how to place her feet.” Indeed, severed from the context of obvious functionality, the shoe is made to represent (take the place of) a variety of human bodily preoccupations and pleasures. It gains life in metaphor, but it is predominantly a human life that the shoe is made to gain.

Certain types of women’s shoes have an established history in human sexuality and sex acts, for example. Art, design, and commerce work in

for the human. See Jacques Derrida, The Truth in Painting, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Matthew Ruben offers an excellent critique of Heidegger’s and Derrida’s readings of the painting, as well as a defense of Schapiro’s interpretation of the painting, which he contextualizes in the Jewish experience of nomadism during the Nazi regime. See Matthew Ruben, “The Sole of Deconstruction: Preparations for the Truth in Mourning,” Critical Quarterly 39.4 (Winter 1997): 25–38. What is clear in all the texts is that, for the authors, the meaning of the shoes contains the meaning of the wearer and the wearer’s environment.

9 Macdonnell, The Shoe Book, 56.

10 In his discussion of the human practice of collecting certain objects, Jean Baudrillard notes of non-functional objects, which he defines as things that are “no longer specified by (their) function,” that their value (to the subject or collector) is “directly linked to (their) regressive character” (92, 107). Baudrillard likens this “regressive character” to perversion, specifically sexual perversion: “If perversion as it concerns objects is most clearly discernible in the crystallized form of fetishism, we are perfectly justified in noting how throughout the system…the possession of objects and the passion for them is…a tempered mode of sexual perversion” (107). See Jean Baudrillard, The System of Objects, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 1996). Considerably less theoretical in its approaches to objects, The Shoe Book, which includes pithy interviews with renowned shoemakers and entertaining anecdotes about collectors of footwear, offers a pop-historical overview of the connections between shoes and sexual desirability and accessibility.
conjunction to map sexual language onto women’s shoes. From the strategic positioning of the falling shoe in Fragonard’s *The Swing* or Shonibare’s *The Swing (After Fragonard)*, to the cover image of the 1953 issue of the “fetish’ erotica magazine” *Bizarre* featuring a “kinky twist on the children’s nursery rhyme ‘The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe,’” to the sculpted images of unwearable shoes in Louboutin and Lynch’s *Fetish* pieces, the uselessness of the shoe is made to bear sexual meaning in the context of femininity. Alienated from the context of practical functionality, the shoe not only becomes sexy, as metaphor it becomes a visible element that displays a system of sexual organs and organization.

But the shoe is also made to bear resemblance to other parts and organizations of the human body. In an interview held in 2011, shoe designer Christian Louboutin discusses the traits of the particular shoe varietal that is the pump, a woman’s shoe, and refers to it as a human face: “When I am designing shoes, the most important thing is the bone structure. A shoe, a pump, is basically a face with no makeup.... A pump is... a whole silhouette; it’s a heel, it’s a front, and it’s an arch. So it really is like a bone structure of a face.” The shoe, then, holds a unique place within the autopoietic environments in which we locate it. If our relations to the shoe are the limited means by which we understand the thing, the language that we mobilize to speak about a shoe—its parts, its types—manages to transform it into something other than a shoe and, in its idealized form, even into ourselves.

Useful or useless, shoes are bound to our interpretations of the human body and subjectivity: as ironic or sincere commentary on or representation of the affects of human-ness (of sexuality and class, for example). Constructed to extend, represent, or reflect on our autopoietic relations, the shoe entices us with its mysterious ability at once to display and displace us. Yet, without consistent interface with the human, it loses its relevance to the environment within which we construct subjectivity. The slipper in Fragonard or Shonibare and the stiletto in Lynch/Louboutin serve as examples of the confined affective relations within which we understand the shoe. But the triangulation of shoe, human, and environment remains a closed network precisely because determined by human

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12 The interview with Louboutin is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wpLa6f5fxE.
directives. The shoe’s other, undisclosed, relations—for instance, the stiletto heel’s with the earthworm—contribute to its density. Indeed, never is the shoe “just a shoe,” as Heidegger and Louboutin, among others, discover. But especially as a thing that recedes from human-centered histories and other systems of knowledge, the shoe is not “just a shoe.” Heidegger’s “And yet—” haunts us, just as the shoe’s ontic being closes itself off from being accessed completely.

II. SHOE SILENCE

In The Democracy of Objects Levi Bryant studies “the self-othering of objects in terms of the relationship between the perpetually and necessarily withdrawn virtual proper being of objects and the local manifestations of objects that take place through the internal dynamics of substance and the exo-relations they enter into with other objects.” Appropriating Alfred North Whitehead’s language, Bryant states that objects “must have a structure for the ‘how’ of prehensions to take place at all and that this endo-structure constitutes the substantiality of objects.” It is the “endo-structure” of the object, in other words, that comprises its “virtual

13 In a section of Vibrant Matter Jane Bennett tells a story about worms. Taking both Charles Darwin’s and Bruno Latour’s observations on the agency of worms as her starting point for theorizing ontological heterogeneity, Bennett argues that we need to “consult nonhumans more closely, or to listen and respond more carefully to their outbreaks, objections, testimonies, and propositions” (108). See Jane Bennett, Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). I bring up the example of the relations of the earthworm and stiletto heel to suggest there is no certainty we will be able fully and successfully to “listen and respond” to the calls and languages of allopoietic beings. Yet it is important that we pay attention to them more variedly than we are trained to do, which is anthropocentrically.

14 Bryant, The Democracy of Objects, 136.

15 Bryant, The Democracy of Objects, 137. According to Whitehead, “[E]very prehension consists of three factors: (a) the ‘subject’ which is prehending, namely, the actual entity in which the prehension is a concrete element; (b) the ‘datum’ which is prehended; (c) the ‘subjective form’ which is how that subject prehends the datum” (qtd. in Bryant, The Democracy of Objects, 135). For Bryant, both the prehending entity and the material prehended are objects or substances.
proper being.”16 The problem, as noted by most practitioners of ooo, is that things lock out other things, including individuals, groups, and systems, thus making their structure difficult, even impossible, to discern. Bryant refers to this locking out process or phenomenon as “operational closure” and suggests that the shifting nature of things is marked by their selective exposure (self-exposure) to other objects and environments.17 But even as they lock and unlock themselves, objects “perturb or irritate one another,”18 producing information in the process. Bryant is careful to note that it is the irritated or perturbed system that constructs information and, following Niklas Luhmann, he asserts that the information produced is something that cannot be exchanged among systems to result in a transparent and complete knowledge of objects. Moreover, the information produced is tentative and constituted, and there is no guarantee that the “receiver” or the system attempting to make sense of its irritation decodes “the information received as identical to the information transmitted.”19

I’ll turn to Launce’s monologue in The Two Gentlemen of Verona to explore the various intersections of perturbations and irritations, of knowledge produced and withheld by systems and things. Launce enters the scene with his dog Crab and states:

Nay, ’twill be this hour ere I have done weeping. All the kind of the Launces have this very fault. I have received my proportion, like the prodigious son, and am going with Sir Proteus to the imperial’s court. I think Crab, my dog, be the sourest-natured dog that lives. My mother weeping, my father wailing, my sister crying, our maid howling, our cat wringing her hands, and all our house in a great perplexity, yet did not this cruel-hearted cur shed one tear. He is a

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16 Bryant, The Democracy of Objects, 140.
17 Bryant, The Democracy of Objects, 140. Critics of ooo focus on concepts like operational closure to argue that, not only does onticology remain rooted in an anthropocentric engagement with things, it also romanticizes the identity of objects by presenting them as a mostly voluntary phenomenon that is independent of its relationship to the human. For example, see Andrew Cole, “The Call of Things: A Critique of Object-Oriented Ontologies,” The Minnesota Review 80 (2013): 106–18. The scope of this essay does not permit me to elaborate on or respond to the criticism, which Bryant addresses in the penultimate chapter of The Democracy of Objects.
18 Bryant, The Democracy of Objects, 153.
19 Bryant, The Democracy of Objects, 153.
stone, a very pibble stone, and has no more pity in him than a dog. A Jew would have wept to have seen our parting. Why, my grandam, having no eyes, look you, wept herself blind at my parting. Nay, I’ll show you the manner of it. This shoe is my father. No, this left shoe is my father. No, no, this left shoe is my mother. Nay, that cannot be so neither. Yes, it is so, it is so—it hath the worser sole. This shoe with the hole in it is my mother, and this is my father. A vengeance on’t! There ’tis. Now, sir, this staff is my sister, for look you, she is as white as a lily and as small as a wand. This hat is Nan, our maid. I am the dog. No, the dog is himself, and I am the dog—O, the dog is me, and I am myself. Ay, so, so. Now come I to my father: “Father, your blessing.” Now should not the shoe speak a word for weeping. Now should I kiss my father—well, he weeps on. Now come I to my mother. O, that she could speak now like a wood woman! Well, I kiss her—why, there ’tis: here’s my mother’s breath up and down. Now come I to my sister: mark the moan she makes. Now the dog all this while sheds not a tear nor speaks a word, but see how I lay the dust with my tears.20

Launce makes no attempt to conceal he is irritated by Crab, the dog that refuses to share in the Launce household’s environment of “great perplexity.” The perplexity, which has been brought about by the event of Launce’s imminent departure from Verona, results in unified action among most autopoeitic beings that inhabit the household. They shed tears and make sounds that express their sorrow. But while these things, human and non-human, produce information that is consistent with the clown’s understanding of his environment, Crab’s semantic withdrawal from the otherwise unified household response to the impending event of Launce’s departure perplexes his master. More precisely, Launce is struck by “wonder” at Crab’s withdrawal from his environment. “Wonder,” Bogost states, “describes the particular attitude of allure that can exist between an object and the very concept of objects.” It is also an event that detaches us “from ordinary logics, of which human logics are but one example.” Wonder destabilizes and unhinges us from familiar systems of interpretation; it

compels us to “suspend all trust in (our) own logics...and to become subsumed entirely in the uniqueness of an object’s native logics.”

Wonder is not unlike what Deleuze and Guattari call “unnatural participation.” (It is no surprise that the philosophers’ influence on present and anticipated directions of vibrant materialism is profound.) They explain the phenomenon of unnatural participation using (somewhat uncannily) an example of human-shoe-dog triangulation of beings. Such participations among autopoietic and allopoietic beings, they claim, are the result of “a composition of speeds and affects involving entirely different individuals, a symbiosis.” They turn to Vladimir Slepian’s short story *Fils de Chien* to map the success (the deterritorializing line of flight) but also the limit (the reterritorialization) of participations among human, dog, and shoe:

> Being expresses (speeds and affects) in a single meaning in a language that is no longer that of words, in a matter that is no longer that of forms, in an affectability that is no longer that of subjects. *Unnatural participation*....Vladimir Slepian formulates the “problem” in a thoroughly curious text:...I’ll have to become a dog—but how? *This will not involve imitating a dog, nor an analogy of relations.* I must succeed in endowing parts of my body with relations of speed and slowness that will make it become dog, in an *original assemblage proceeding neither by resemblance nor by analogy*. For I cannot become dog without the dog itself becoming something else. Slepian gets the idea of using shoes to solve this problem, the *artifice* of the shoes. If I wear shoes on my hands, then their elements will enter into a new relation, resulting in the affect or becoming

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23 Jane Bennett makes this point in “Systems and Things,” where, citing Deleuze and Guattari’s example, she invites practitioners of OOO to consider such a direction in the future as might “make both objects and relations the periodic focus of theoretical attention, even if it is impossible to articulate fully the ‘vague’ or ‘vagabond’ essence of any system or any things, and even if it impossible to give equal attention to both at once” (227). See Jane Bennett, “Systems and Objects: A Response to Graham Harman and Timothy Morton,” *New Literary History* 43, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 225–33.

I seek. But how will I be able to tie the shoe on my second hand, once the first is already occupied? With my mouth. Which in turn receives an investment in the assemblage, becoming a dog muzzle, insofar as a dog muzzle is now used to tie shoes. At each stage of the problem, what needs to be done is not to compare two organs but to place elements or materials in a relation that uproots the organ from its specificity, making it become ‘with’ the other organ. But this becoming, which has already taken in feet, hands, and mouth, will nevertheless fail. It founders on the tail....The tail remains an organ of the man on the one hand and an appendage of the dog on the other; their relations do not enter into composition in the new assemblage.  

Launce’s experience of wonder fails in a manner similar to that of the character in Slepian’s story who, in the end, fails to become dog. If anything, Launce jolts himself all too quickly out of his suspended state of wonder. To do so, he relies on interpretation and representation, two autopoietic tools (of language) essential to his re-establishment of familiar relations with and control over the surrounding environment. I’ll elaborate on his use of each of these. First, his dog’s refusal to shed a tear or speak a word becomes, for him, a sign of the animal’s cruelty: Crab becomes a “cruel-hearted cur.” What’s more, Crab’s cruelty and silence liken him to “a stone” in his master’s mind, that is, to an object whose semantic withdrawal and silence Launce accepts readily. Next, he turns to a reproduction of his household’s environment in hopes of representing Crab’s withdrawal. He seeks with his reproduction to get to the bottom of the dog’s motivation, to make his being accessible and thus manageable. 

Launce unleashes a series of interpretive systems to discover the knowledge that Crab withholds. He attempts to interpret Crab’s silence as a language that might be learned and understood. Launce’s clinging to language as the familiar key with which to unlock knowledge is an anthropocentric fallacy against which Harman and Bryant, following Bruno Latour, might warn us. “Objects themselves are already more  

25 Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 258–59; emphasis added.  
26 In Pandora’s Hope, Latour expounds on his theory of the multiplicity of and in language: “I am attempting to redistribute the capacity of speech between humans and nonhumans....Of course this means an altogether different situation for language. Instead of being the privilege of a human mind surrounded by mute things, articulation becomes a very common property of propositions, in which many kinds of
than present-at-hand,” Harman notes, even though we mostly overlook their secret being until they perturb us “in cases of malfunction.”27 This is Launce’s experience: it is because Crab malfunctions as loyal pet and vocal participant in the household grief that his master is perturbed by the animal and wishes through use of language to unravel his secrets. It is also the event of malfunction that prompts in Launce a series of concatenations. Since the differences among allopoietic and autopoietic beings are, as Adam Miller notes, “messy, muddy, blurry, constructed, and mobile,” all their “connections must always be forged by way of concatenation, a method that preserves the errant singularity of each object even as it finds ways to provisionally string some aspects of them into directional networks.”28

Let us consider the various concatenations in the scene from The Two Gentlemen of Verona. In a basic sense, we only encounter the one Launce (Launce the serving man) in the play. But in another sense Launce introduces us to the assemblage of links that comprises the Launce household. While the others in the household, even the cat, who wrings her hands, primate-like, to mobilize her sorrow, display attributes that Launce is able to interpret readily as expressions of sadness, the dog displaces himself from the family system by refusing to participate in a performance of semantic unity. Unable to grapple with Crab’s withdrawal, Launce seeks out the dog’s intention: why is Crab silent and unwilling to behave like the rest of the Launce household? For answers Launce leans on familiar interpretive schemas of what he takes to be natural participation. He begins unpacking the hitherto unbearable load of Crab’s silence by contrasting it to the utterances and actions of the Launce household. Except for the dog, “[a]ll” the Launces share the condition of tearfulness (2.3.1), he finds. (As I’ve noted earlier, where words fail them, most members of the family rely on the language of tears to convey their sadness at Launce’s departure from his home.) He itemizes each one’s actions in the context of the information he receives from them and which he assumes is “identical to

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the information transmitted” by them. Their tears are identical, Launce maintains, because they are of one mind.

Theirs is not the “unnatural participation” lauded by Deleuze and Guattari, insofar as it is not a “symbiosis” that involves “entirely different individuals.” It instead is a unity based on similarity among members of a household. Launce craves such harmonious activity particularly because it is accompanied by assurance that his family’s response is both transparent to him and consistent with his expectations of the functions of a single network: “[m]y mother weeping, my father wailing, my sister crying, our maid howling, our cat wringing her hands, and all our house in a great perplexity” (2.3.4–6, emphasis added). While each being listed by Launce makes a unique sound and/or movement that might be wonderfull, these singularities and differences are collapsed because they seem to signify one and the same recognizable thing: sorrow. The difference isn’t what he chooses to focus on, but rather he assures himself of the uniformity of his interpretation of the various sounds and actions of his family. If “wonder is a void,” Launce quickly transforms it into “a tunnel that leads somewhere more viable.” Launce accesses the “somewhere” suggested by Crab’s silence and gives it a meaning that, though undesirable, seems to him logical. Thus, Crab no longer is impenetrable but becomes translatable as a being whose silence represents cruelty, a trait that Launce associates with autopoietic being. Crab still remains outside the family structure, but now he is outside for reasons that make sense to the human.

Of course it isn’t only the dog that prevents Launce’s smooth cooptation of wonder into the logical flow of knowledge. As he proceeds from interpretation to representation, he encounters other irritations. The shoes he uses to represent his parents are significant in this context. Launce’s recreation of the scene of Crab’s withdrawal from the household stumbles when he encounters the endo-structure of his shoes. “This shoe is my father,” he first claims in his adaptation, only to be confronted by a rivaling possibility: “No, this left shoe is my father” (2.3.10, emphasis added). The left and right shoe each contains unbridgeable differences that cannot be overcome without concatenation. Nor can their differences be eliminated. So, after going back and forth—“[n]o, no, this left shoe is my mother. Nay, that cannot be so neither”—Launce concludes that his left

29 Bryant, The Democracy of Objects, 153.
30 Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 258.
shoe is his mother, for it resembles her: it has a “hole in it” and “hath the worser sole” (2.3.11–12). The hole in the shoe becomes a metaphor for his mother’s female sexual organization, which in turn vehiculates a familiar Judeo-Christian misogyny about the inferior condition of her soul. In Launce’s adaptation, the left shoe’s sole becomes a soul and its stench becomes his mother’s foul breath, even as its hole remains a hole.

Other beings are also concatenated in Launce’s reproduction of his family farewell scene. Most of these don’t cause him trouble, for they do not seem to resist his adaptive logic. For example, the staff is transformed effortlessly into his sister, for it is “as white as a lily and as small as a wand” (2.3.14–15); and the hat stands for the maid Nan without need of explanation or justification. Unlike the character in Slepian’s story, who tries in his project to create “an original assemblage” that avoids both “resemblance” and “analogy,” Launce limits representation to comparative practices rooted in simile and metaphor, in a word, in likeness.

But the slippage among likeness, unlikeness, and becoming is inevitable when Launce once again finds himself unable to navigate Crab’s semantic opacity. Having managed tentatively to fold the dog into his autopoietic logics that aim at knowledge, Launce falters in prolonging his understanding of Crab. His adaptive narrative comes to a standstill as he struggles and fails to find a properly unique representative to stand in for Crab: “I am the dog. No, the dog is himself, and I am the dog— O the dog is me, and I am myself” (15–16). Hastily, Launce concludes this section of his reproduction with words not unlike Heidegger’s “And yet—”: “Ay, so, so.” Crab’s being and silence remain mysterious, hinting at the complications that arise when objects are simultaneously interactive and closed. “Ay, so, so,” Launce states resignedly, and returns to the more comforting parallels and analogies he drew earlier among other autopoietic and allopoietic beings.

Familiarly, therefore, the right shoe-father “weeps on,” the left shoe-mother’s breath stinks, and the stick-sister moans. The dog-self stands apart from all the other couplings; for even as the self (the “I” in the speech) “lay[s] the dust with (his) tears,” the dog “sheds not a tear nor speaks a word” (2.3.29–31). That is, the concatenated dog-self continues “to press in,” as Eileen Joy might state, and its paradoxical, “sensual and metaphysical thingness” demands attention, Launce’s and ours. Or, to adopt Timothy Morton’s words, the scene leaves us “in a bind,” in that

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neither can we “in good faith cancel the difference between humans and nonhumans,” nor keep the links “intact.”³³ Despite ourselves, we participate in connections that preserve the errant singularities of both the autopoietic and allopoietic machines that comprise the environment of which we are a variable part and about which we attempt to tell stories. Through these connections “life…names a restless activeness, a destructive-creative force-presence that does not coincide fully with any specific body,” but “tears the fabric of the actual without ever coming fully ‘out’ in a person, place, or thing.”³⁴ Between the disclosures and withdrawals of absent and present objects there peeps a multivalence of being that never does come “fully ‘out’” at once. But uncontained by modes of autopoietic citizenship and human fantasy, it trembles nomadically at the fringes of knowledge and language, inviting us to step out.

³³ Morton, The Ecological Thought, 76; emphasis added.
³⁴ Bennett, Vibrant Matter, 54.