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OBJECT-ORIENTED ONTOLOGY AS A TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY LITERARY THEORY: ORIGINS, DEVELOPMENT, MAJOR CONCEPTS, AND CONTEMPORARY DIRECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) has become a major philosophical movement of the twenty-first century that has implications for the study of literature. This article considers how OOO has emerged, how it has evolved, and its key ideas, with an emphasis on Graham Harman's assertion that objects have realities that are beyond the scope of human perception, interpretation, or relational contexts. The paper builds on Harman's notions of withdrawal, flat ontology, and the quadruple object to examine how they problematize anthropocentric premises of existing literary theories such as New Criticism and New Historicism. It claims that literary texts, characters, landscapes, animals, technologies, and material artefacts have more than their symbolic uses and interpretations; they possess characteristics which defy conceptualization. The article also explores the intersections of OOO with New Materialism, posthumanism, Actor-Network Theory, ecocriticism, science fiction, and digital literature, revealing OOO's ability to make literary criticism go beyond the human. At the same time it seeks to overcome key restrictions, such as OOO's notion of relationality, its historicity, its political power, and its embodiedness. The study does not suggest that OOO is a panacea for current methods, but rather that it has the potential to be a valuable complement to historically and politically focused methodologies. Finally, it situates OOO as a useful theory to analyze the ontological autonomy of literary objects and the possibilities of interpretation within such a bewildering material, environmental, and technological world.

Keywords: *Object-Oriented Ontology; Graham Harman, Speculative Realism, Object Withdrawal; Flat Ontology, Materiality*

Introduction

Literary theory can be seen as an ongoing effort to reevaluate the connection between men, language, literature and reality. Literary theory has continually challenged inherited ideas about the nature of literature and its ways of reading, ranging from Formalism and New Criticism to Structuralism, Marxism, Psychoanalysis, Feminism, Poststructuralism, New Historicism, Postcolonialism, and Cultural Materialism. However, many influential approaches to literary study have continued to maintain a generally anthropocentric perspective, despite the many differences. Literature has generally been studied under the context of human consciousness, social structure, historical context, ideology, language, identity, or power structures. But this human centred approach has come under attack with the rise of twenty-first century theory movements. Material turn, ecological turn, posthumanism, speculative realism and new understandings of ontology have brought

critical focus to bear on matter, objects, animals, technologies, environments, and other nonhuman elements (Bennett, 2010; Braidotti, 2013; Wolfe, 2010).

Among this intellectual revolution, Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) is one of the most unique philosophical movements of the early twenty-first century. Closely related to the philosopher Graham Harman, OOO suggests that objects have realities that cannot be entirely accounted for by human perception, language, practical use, scientific description or even their relationships to other objects. Harman's basic argument is that objects "withdraw" from any relation they enter into, and that no relation can ever provide them with full access to the reality of an object (Harman, 2002, 2011, 2018). According to the Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature, withdrawal is the main proposition of OOO and that OOO emphasizes two forms of object – real objects and sensual objects – and two forms of quality – real qualities and sensual qualities (Harman, 2019).

While it is not to be identified with the movement known as Speculative Realism, OOO is part of the larger intellectual field. Speculative Realism has been a rejection of what Quentin Meillassoux (2008) refers to as "correlationism," which is the philosophical practice of dealing with being on the basis of correlation between human thinking and the world. Sharing the speculative realist aim of thinking reality independently of human access, Harman takes this ambition further by claiming that all objects can be said to withdraw from one another (Harman, 2018).

This importance of OOO in literary studies is especially great because literature is populated by objects. There are houses, machines, landscapes, animals, roads, books, photographs, commodities, technological devices, bodies, buildings, rivers, weapons, clothes and all sorts of other things in novels, poems, plays, and films. Typically, these are understood as symbols, metaphors, settings, narrative devices, or human concerns in traditional literary

interpretation. OOO invites readers of literature to think about what might be done if such things were recognized as objects, which have their own lives outside of the significance humanity gives them. In this way, OOO is not simply proposing another mode of interpretation, but it calls into question the anthropocentric underpinning of interpretation itself.

Graham Harman's contribution to literary criticism is particularly significant. Harman (2012) has explicitly worked out an object-oriented literary criticism in his influential essay "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer," which he juxtaposes with New Criticism and New Historicism. According to him, New Criticism is right to suggest that the literary work is autonomous, but it is also a tendency to reduce the elements of the text to the unity of the whole text, while New Historicism is more likely to reduce the literary object to the historical and cultural relations in which it is embedded. Rather, OOO suggests that – like any thing – literary things have an irreducible reality that is beyond their relationships.

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This essay explores the ways in which OOO is a stunning twenty-first-century literary theory. It recovers its intellectual path, outlines its rise in Speculative Realism, outlines its central tenets, addresses its implications in literary criticism, discusses its connection with New Materialism, Posthumanism, Actor-Network Theory, Ecocriticism and current literary studies, and examines its main critics and limitations. The central argument is that OOO provides an important tool that aims at a de-anthropocentrist literary theory by rethinking the ontological status of the nonhuman, but that can be used most effectively in conjunction with a critical consideration of history, politics, embodiment, relationality and material processes.

Intellectual Origins: Heidegger, Phenomenology, and the Problem of Objects

While OOO is a new, twenty first-century theoretical progression, its philosophical roots reach back into earlier traditions of phenomenology and ontology. Among its most significant antecedents is Martin Heidegger, especially his discussion of equipment and objects in his Being and Time (1927/1962). When an object is functioning like a tool, it generally falls out of consciousness, as Heidegger notes. For instance, the hammer itself is only rarely perceived as an isolated object when one is hammering; it comes to the attention as an object when it's broken or malfunctions. Harman (2002) says it is this insight that provides him with a necessary point of departure for his own philosophy of objects.

Harman's contribution is the attempt to generalize Heidegger's theory of equipment to be an ontology. Heidegger (1962) associates the withdrawal of the tool with human involvement in the world and Harman (2002) takes this principle beyond humans. When the hammer is used as equipment, Harman asks: "Why should a hammer's withdrawal be limited to human consciousness? He says that objects have a intrinsic property called withdrawal. No object is totally consumed by its manifestations, operations, or other connections.

The change is an important shift from phenomenology to speculative ontology. OOO does not ask about how objects look to human consciousness, but about what objects are without reference to their particular encounters. Harman's position thus contradicts that of those who want to define entities only in terms of their relationships. Objects are not just a collection of properties, functions, effects, or relations. There is always more than this specific interaction (Harman 2005, 2011).

The significance of this argument for literary theory is at once evident. Literary works may be interpreted in a historical, political, psychological, formal, linguistic, and/or cultural way. But none of these treatments is necessarily the final one. Likewise, a fictional character can be psychoanalysed, feminised, Marxised, narratologised, readertheorised with respect to any of these and yet it may still be beyond each of these interpretive modes. OOO thus offers an ontological basis for something that literary critics have long known in practice: the non-interpretable nature of literary texts.

How Object-Oriented Ontology has come about.

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Harman's Tool-Being (2002) is the first phase of what would eventually develop into OOO. His later writings elaborated on the theory, increasingly systematically discussing objects, causations, aesthetics, and relations. The idea that objects have a quadruple structure was further explored in the book The Quadruple Object (Harman, 2011), and the idea that objects cannot be reduced to their relations was explored in the book, Guerrilla Metaphysics (Harman, 2005). In his later work, he expanded the framework to social theory, aesthetics and more general philosophical questions (Immaterialism, Harman, 2016; Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything, Harman, 2018).

OOO emerged along with a diffuse philosophical trend known as Speculative Realism and its chief practitioners Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant and Harman. Though there are significant differences between these philosophers, on the philosophical side they all agree on the dissatisfaction of ontological approaches that take the access of humans to reality as their starting point (Meillassoux, 2008; Brassier, 2007; Harman, 2018). What is at stake here is especially the correlationism that Meillassoux (2008) introduces. Correlationism is the belief that we cannot think without the connection to thought. Speculative realism is a project to overcome this philosophical correlation, and to begin to ask what reality might look like without human cognition.

Harman's answer is unique. He does not focus on the possibility of thinking of a world without humans, but rather on an ontology where all entities are objects. Animals, machines, buildings, works of art, fictional entities, social institutions and even natural entities are objects, as well as human beings. The world is not, then, basically split into a subject and an object in Harman's formulation. Rather, it is composed of objects that do not enter into and are not fully used up in their relations, but remain (Harman, 2013).

In Harman's own later synopsis of object-oriented philosophy, it is important to assert that artificial, social and fictional entities are treated in the same way as natural entities, and that reality can only be approached indirectly or allusively (Harman, 2013). This is particularly significant for literary theory, since it assigns philosophical significance to fictional objects, rather than just secondary representation.

The principle of withdrawal is applicable to objects.

OOO is grounded in the notion of withdrawal. According to Harman (2011, 2018), an object can never be completely accessed by another object. Each relation is only a representation of a certain aspect of the object. Consider a book. It can be presented to a reader as a literary text. A librarian might come across it as an item in a collection. A publisher could

find itself with it as a product. It could be presented to a student as a book. It may be found by a historian as evidence of a period. It can be a valuable material artefact which a collector will find in the course of collecting. All of these encounters are true, and none completely fulfills the book.

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The book thus retracts from all of these relationships. Literary texts are no different. One could interpret a novel from a Marxist perspective, from a feminist perspective, from a psychoanalytical perspective, from a postcolonial perspective, from a new historicist perspective, from a structuralist perspective or from a deconstructive perspective. In each attempt there may be real aspects of the text that are found. However, from the OOO point of view, the text is not reducible to any of these interpretive relations. The literary object outstrips its interpretations.

The real objects and real qualities are not directly perceptible, not practically useful, not thinkable, not even causally related, but sensual objects and sensual qualities exist for particular entities, as Harman (2019) says. This is important to differentiate from OUP Academic and to ensure OOO is not misunderstood as simply saying objects are hard to know. It is not only an epistemological but also an ontological problem. Objects do not withdraw because human beings have incomplete knowledge; objects withdraw because there is no relation to whatever can exhaust them.

The Quadruple Object

The most systematic development of OOO is Harman's notion of the quadruple object, which he developed most explicitly in The Quadruple Object (2011). The four dimensions in every object are the real object, sensual object, real qualities and sensual qualities. These four dimensions create tensions in each and every object and account for why one encounter does not give full access to an entity.

The real object is the withdrawn object which can't be accessed completely in any relation. Sensual Object is the object in a specific encounter. Qualities are real qualities where they are in the withdrawn object, and sensual qualities are qualities that appear in a given encounter (Harman, 2011). The contrast can be fruitfully discussed as it relates to literature. Think about a make-believe house in a Gothic novel. Darkness, decay, architecture, sound, smell or atmosphere are the senses through which readers experience the house. These are the qualities of the senses. The house is also used as a setting and maybe even symbolically as a metaphor for memory, trauma, patriarchy, or social decay. But each of these dimensions falls short in rendering the house a literary object.

This house is more than a representation; it is more than an interpretation. The fourfold structure remains one of the most characteristic features of OOO and is a topic of ongoing research. Recent conversations highlight how Harman's model can differentiate between real and sensual qualities, and between real and sensual objects, while at the same time OOO can use it to account for the irreducibility of objects within the context of their relations (Harman, 2011; Nagle, 2024).

Flat Ontology and the Decentering of the Human

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Flat ontology is another principle of OOO. Traditional Western thinking has often ranked beings in a hierarchy with human consciousness at the top, above animals, plants, machines and inanimate matters. OOO criticizes such a hierarchy by suggesting an ontological status for entities regardless of their usefulness or accessibility to human beings.

Flat ontology is not equal to all entities are equal. Obviously, a human being is not the same as a stone, a river or a computer. Instead, there is a "flat ontology" whereby differences between entities do not necessarily become differences in "ontological dignity." A lightning bolt, an animal, a building and a person can have very different properties, but they are still all objects (Harman, 2018). This principle is relevant to literary studies. Often in literature, nonhuman objects become the means of human expression. The forest is a symbol of danger, the river is a metaphor of life, the machine is a symbol of technological anxiety, and the animal is a symbol of humans' instincts. It is not that symbolic readings are not accepted in OOO, rather the critics are asked to acknowledge that it is more than just symbolic. A recent study also highlights that, although the basic ontological status of nonhuman objects and humans may be the same in OOO, there are differences in complexity and moral value (Harman, 2019).

OOO and Literary Criticism

The relevance of OOO is especially timely when it is directly put to the test of literary criticism. Harman's (2012) "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer" is a seminal pronouncement of object-oriented literary criticism. In particular, his comparison of OOO and New Criticism and New Historicism is of great importance because it allows OOO to be situated within the history of literary theory, instead of being an entirely other philosophical system.

The emphasis on the autonomy of the text seems to align New Criticism with OOO, both in that they do not seek to reduce the literary work to the author's intentions or historical context. But ultimately, Harman (2012) puts it that New Criticism renders the text too unified as its parts are made subservient to the whole. The problem of the New Historicism is the other way round: it disembeds the literary object in social and historical connection, and it becomes vulnerable to reduction to its social and historical context.

But OOO aims to transcend both of those positions. The text is related but not reduced to a relation. The text is not merely an autonomous formal unity, and its internal elements have some autonomy. Literary work becomes a thing with a reality that oversteps inner structure and outside context. This role has the potential of transforming the reading process of close reading. The critic may ask how the object plays a role, which relations it is involved in, which qualities it displays, and what it cannot do in these relations. The interpretive activity with literature is thus no longer a search out of a final sense, but a meeting with something whose reality is beyond interpretation.

OOO and Aesthetics

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Aesthetics has a special role in OOO as Harman (2012, 2018) sees aesthetic experience as one of the most obvious forms of indirect relations between objects. Art is not a mere copy of objects, but a new constellation of objects, which maintain their excess. The importance of metaphor is particularly salient. The moon is not fully metabolized into a silver coin when a poet says that the moon is like a silver coin. The metaphor establishes a relationship between two objects but does not completely obliterate the independence of the objects. This ability of aesthetic language to create relationships without total identification makes literature highly amenable to the object-oriented mode of thinking.

Harman (2019) speaks of OOO and literary studies, which focuses on the potential of literature to produce strange and indirect encounters with objects. His talk on Lovecraft, Poe, Dante and Kant suggests that the literary implications of OOO are tightly bound up with aesthetics and the experience of object which cannot be conceptualized fully. Thus, the literary text is an exemplary site around which to explore ontological withdrawal. A poem can make an object known and show the limits of language at the same time.

OOO and the Weird

The works of H. P. Lovecraft are particularly pertinent to OOO as Lovecraft's narratives often depict things that defy human imagination. His cosmic creatures are terrifying, not only because they pose a threat to human beings, but because they expose a universe in which human beings are ontologically unimportant. From a philosophical standpoint, this "weirdness" is healthy for OOO. The strange encounter presents a metaphor for the difference between an object and its qualities through which it can be experienced. Lovecraft's monsters are thus instances of things that defy anthropocentric understanding (Harman, 2012, 2019).

This can be expanded to Edgar Allan Poe and Dante. Both authors produce literary things and characters that are not easily susceptible to simple allegory. Their works create experiences that generate emotional and aesthetic connection with the object that maintains some level of mystery and excess (Harman, 2019).

OOO and New Materialism

Although there are clear similarities between OOO and New Materialism, they should not be interpreted as equivalent. The assumption of the passivity of matter has been questioned by New Materialist scholars (Ed) Bennett (2010), Barad (2007), Braidotti (2013), and DeLanda (2006), who have highlighted the agency, vitality, relationality and dynamism of material entities.

This anthropocentrism challenge is shared by OOO. Both ways of thinking draw the attention of literary scholars to the materiality of matter, bodies, objects, animals, technologies and environments, and away from their status as inert on-screen props for human activity. The main distinction is related to relationality. The general focus in New Materialism is on processes of entanglement and becoming. For instance, Barad (2007) suggests that things are "intra-action", that is, they come into being in relation, not as fully

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fledged entities in advance and then as they meet other entities. Unlike OOO, however, objects have a reality that is more than their relationality (Harman, 2018).

This difference produces an important theoretical tension. New Materialism: How to become through relations? OOO: What remains beyond relations? The two methods can, however, complement one another in the field of literary criticism. 'New Materialism' can shed light on the networks and assemblages in which literary objects engage, while OOO can guard against a total networkization of literary objects.

OOO and Posthumanism

There are also significant overlaps between OOO and Posthumanism. Posthumanist scholars, however, have disputed the notion that human beings can be thought of as privileged and the focus of philosophical, ethical and cultural thought (Braidotti, 2013; Wolfe, 2010). Literature has turned into a significant arena for discussing human-animal-machine-environment-technology relations. OOO is a part of this intellectual project: it extends the practice of ontological thinking beyond human. This focus on objects invites critics to question the implications of the use of nonhuman objects that are not just symbol or representation but "actants" in literary worlds.

However, there's a key difference. Posthumanism often deals with the subjectivity of humans, as opposed to OOO which is more concerned with ontology. Posthumanism is about the nature of the human in a world of nonhuman things, while OOO is about the nature of the things themselves and what it means that they relate without humans (Harman, 2018; Wolfe, 2010). This difference makes OOO a potentially valuable philosophical add-on to posthumanist literary criticism.

Theoretical and methodological reflections on OOO and Actor-Network Theory

The connection with Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is no different. Latour (2005) challenges the notion that agency is only human and that networks of action involve both human and nonhuman actors. Production of social effects can involve objects, technologies, institutions, documents, machines, and physical infrastructures. OOO is based on the principle of taking nonhuman entities seriously that was developed by ANT. But Harman (2009) believes that relational frameworks like ANT are potentially in danger of simplifying objects to the webs of relations in which they are embedded. An OOO perspective is one in which an object is always more than its relations.

The distinction is significant for literary research. A novel can exist in a space of network including authors, publishers, readers, institutions, technologies, and markets. However, this network does not need to be the only one the literary object can be reduced to. OOO thus adds a welcome tension to relations: Relations are important, but objects are more.

OOO and Ecocriticism

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Amongst the most fertile applications of OOO is its ecological implications. Ecocriticism has begun to shift from the depiction of 'nature' to an examination of material agency, ecological systems, animals, climate change and the Anthropocene (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014; Heise, 2008). Timothy Morton's work is particularly important in this regard. Morton (2010) in The Ecological Thought, questions the traditional ideas of nature and highlights interconnectedness of the ecological. Morton (2013) proposes the notion of Hyperobjects, which are neither singular nor local, but are rather 'massively distributed' in space and time and hence cannot be experienced as a whole. Hyperobjects can be understood as climate change, radioactive materials or global ecologic systems.

This is why the hyperobject is particularly relevant to the field of literary criticism; it offers a language to grasp the discourses of the current ecological era. For instance, climate change does not easily lend itself to being rendered as a traditional narrative object. People experience some manifestations: heat, drought, floods, storms, and changing seasons—but it is more than any one of these experiences. OOO and similar ecologic methods thus offer a way for literary scholars to deal with issues of scale. Literature can be a part of an ecological whole which is unattainable (Morton, 2013).

OOO and Science Fiction

Another especially promising arena for object-oriented literary criticism is science fiction. Robots, AI, aliens, spaceships, virtual worlds, biotechnology and planetary systems are all commonplace features of the genre that often break down the barrier between human and nonhuman.

In traditional interpretation, the symbolic approach can be taken when dealing with such entities. A robot could be a fear of technology, an alien could be a fear of alterity, artificial intelligence of human obsolescence. An OOO approach does not negate these interpretations, but rather what happens when the robot, alien, or artificial intelligence is treated as an object in and of itself. The approach is especially relevant for science fiction in the present day, as technological objects are no longer just instruments but are also objects that change human potentialities. OOO makes it possible to explore these objects by literary criticism without reducing them to human meaning.

Digital Literature and OOO

The relationship between human authors and nonhuman objects is further complicated by digital literature. A digital literary work can rely on software, algorithms, databases, servers, electricity, interfaces, networks and hardware. This means that it is materially dispersed throughout the technological ensemble.

An object-oriented perspective of literature invites literary critics to pay attention to these material objects instead of viewing digital literature as a type of textual production. The computer is not simply a clear medium, a means of appearance of literature. Its materiality and software play a part in the constitution of possible literary experiences. This is more relevant in the age of generative AI. Literary creation in the modern era is

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characterized by engagements between human authors and computational systems, training sets, algorithms, interfaces and infrastructures. The idea of OOO provides a theoretical vocabulary that does not presume that each of the entities involved can be reduced to human intention.

OOO and Contemporary Literary Studies

The fact that OOO is still developing is a testament to the theories' not being limited to the philosophical controversies of the early 2010s. It remains a topic of study in the fields of aesthetics, architecture, environmental studies, media, technology and cultural theory today. For instance, a recent study discusses OOO in terms of visual technologies, and notes that Harman's conception of objects can be profitably discussed in terms of properties by which objects are made perceptible (Murray, 2025).

Other recent research has focused on OOO and robots, and speculative technological environments, and the quadruple object has been used to explore how the nonhuman entities meet and understand each other (see, e.g., recent work discussed in Open Philosophy, 2024).

Perhaps more important, recent philosophical scholarship still has some unanswered theoretical issues that remain in OOO. In 2025, a study of the "dormant object" proposes that Harman's mature theory is missing in a few ways and that there is a need for more conceptual development (Nagle, 2025). OOO must thus be thought of as an ongoing theoretical work, rather than a closed philosophical system.

Critiques and Limitations

OOO's intellectual force is bound up with its criticisms. The most important criticism relates to the way in which relations are treated in the theory. When objects are independent of relations, critics question the way in which relations can be said to contribute to the emergence, transformation or identity of objects. Process philosophers and relational materialists state that entities do not need to be pre-existing substances that then enter into relations; entities might be constituted in the relations themselves.

This tension has been articulated in ongoing philosophical debates about OOO. There are critics who have pointed out that Harman's focus on autonomy can be a problem in trying to explain interdependence and relational constitution (Brassier, 2007; Shaviro, 2014). A detailed examination of the problem argues that that tension between independence and interdependency is an important aspect of the philosophical appraisal of OOO.

The second objection relates to politics and history. Traditionally, literary theory has explored class, gender, race, colonialism and ideology and power. An ontology with a broadly flat ontological field might find it hard to distinguish between politically significant differences. A colonial archive is an object – and an instrument of power. But a border wall is an object, it's a political exclusion mechanism. A factory, though it is an object, is an entity in relation to labor and capital. Therefore, Marxist, feminist, postcolonial and

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historicist approaches should not be replaced by OOO. Instead, its true potential might be realized when it is juxtaposed with them. Materiality and objectivity of objects and their autonomy should not be an excuse to neglect historical and political relations that they belong to.

The third criticism is related to epistemology. Where the actual object is completely removed, critics could wonder how OOO is able to engage in meaningful assertions regarding it. In response to the theory, the term indirect or allusive access, especially in the aesthetic sense (Harman, 2011, 2018), is introduced. However, there are some challenges in the exact connection. In recent scholarship, there have been efforts to further investigate incompletenesses and systematic issues in Harman's account, including the need for more specificity in understanding his ontology and the "dormant" dimensions of objects (Nagle, 2025). These criticisms do not detract from OOO. Rather, they suggest that it is most fruitful applied as a theoretical intervention, not as a universal explanatory system.

Future directions and contemporary significance.

This is especially evident in a world where an increasing number of things and places are being dominated by nonhuman forces. The idea that human beings are the only or even main actor of shaping reality is challenged by climate change, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, algorithms, global infrastructures, viruses, machines and planetary systems. The twenty-first century has therefore seen the emergence of situations where anthropocentric literary theory now seems less and less relevant. In the present, literary studies are forced to deal with entities with temporal and spatial dimensions that are larger than the human individual.

OOO presents one solution to the challenge. It is a notion of withdrawal which underlies the idea of the impossibility of fully expressing objects. It is an anti-hierarchical flat ontology that questions human exceptionalism. Its aesthetic theory offers the reason for why literature can produce experiences of realities beyond conception. It is useful to ecological research as a way of thinking through planetary phenomena and its implications for science fiction and digital literature enable criticism to take technical and nonhuman entities seriously.

Yet the future of OOO in literary studies should not be one of self-contained theory. The potential of its greatest value is in dialogue with other contemporary approaches. Marxism can account for the economic circulation of objects, feminism can provide an analysis of gendered material relations, postcolonialism can offer an analysis of imperial histories of objects and spaces, New Materialism can provide a theory of processes of material entanglements, Posthumanism can challenge anthropocentric conceptions of the subject, Ecocriticism can situate objects within ecological systems, and OOO can provide an account of the irreducibility of objects themselves. This kind of talk avoids OOO being either object-centric or politically disinterested.

Conclusion

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In the twentieth century, literary theory developed around a process called Object-Oriented Ontology, which challenges a long-held assumption in literary interpretation, namely that objects are principally related to people and people's meaning. Out of Graham Harman's rethinking of Heidegger and in the larger context of Speculative Realism, OOO posits that objects have realities which withdraw from any relation (Harman, 2002, 2011, 2018).

This proposition is of far-reaching importance for literary criticism. A literary text does not exist in strictly historical, ideological, syntactic, authorial, or readerly terms. A character is not just a psychological rendition, a landscape is not just a setting, an animal is not just a symbol, a machine is not just an instrument, and a literary object is not just a relation in which critics find themselves. Like all objects, the literary work has a surplus which cannot be completely

conceptualized. OOO thus brings with it a new kind of ontological humility to the world of literary studies. It is a reminder to critics that interpretation is not the same thing as mastery. The aim of criticism is not necessarily to reveal an ultimate meaning but sometimes to provide clues to the nature of an incomplete meaning. Nevertheless, OOO should not be taken as an alternative to the historical, political, ethical and material tradition of literary theory. Its focus on the autonomy of objects can be problematic if it underrates relations, history, ideology, power, embodiment, and social structures. Thus, its greatest theoretical value is in dialogue with other approaches.

OOO is important as a twenty-first-century type of literary theory because it opens the field of literary research beyond solely humans. In a world of ecological crisis, technological revolution, AI and progressively intricate material infrastructures, literature should be read as a space inhabited by not only human subjects but also by myriads of objects whose existence is beyond human control. OOO provides literary criticism with conceptual vocabulary with which to start that work.

In the end, perhaps the most lasting legacy of the theory is that there is more in the world than our interpretation of it. Objects withdraw. Texts withdraw. Literary meanings withdraw. But this withdrawal is not lack of knowledge, but a state of being. By acknowledging that condition, Object-Oriented Ontology invades an important new area for literary theory in the twenty first century.

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