

Against Paraphrase *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*

Graham Harman

Washington: Zero Books, 2012, 268 pp., \$24.95,
ISBN: 978-1-78099-252-5.

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In *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*, Graham Harman advances an analysis of H.P. Lovecraft's *oeuvre* in order to support his claim that Lovecraft is to speculative realism and object-oriented thinking as Hölderlin was for Heidegger: a literary figure whose works expose the workings (perhaps even the necessity) of a philosophical project. The central theme throughout Harman's book is the indissoluble tension between style and content. This tension illuminates the central concern for object-oriented thinking: the dual polarities in the world (between the real and the sensual), and between objects and their qualities.¹ Harman insists against assessing Lovecraft's fiction through what he calls “paraphrasing,” a term of technique whereby one attempts to literalize any artistic statement.² Recognizing and touching upon the history of literary criticism surrounding paraphrase as a strategy for critique, Harman advances a novel criticism against paraphrase: the problem with this form of critique is that it claims to convert the literary into “an accessible meaning without energy loss.”³ Harman divides his book into three sections, although arguably this is a book in two parts, with the initial section bifurcated by a lengthy demonstration of Harman's novel analytical technique, ruination.

Section one of the book lays out the core concerns for object-oriented thinking: that the world is a strange place that cannot be adequately expressed by linguistic propositions, neither can it be directly accessed by any other objects, nor can the untangling of these relationships between objects exhaustively describe the nature of the world. Against these attempts at erasing the gaps between what is observable and *what is*, Harman offers Lovecraft as the exemplar of the opposite philosophical tendency, a creator of gaps. Against the reductionist strategies of some philosophers, Harman coins the term “productionist” and assigns the term to Lovecraft's writings.⁴ Whereas some may read Lovecraft's descriptive prose and lament the inability to suss out an accurate portrayal of what is presented in that moment, Harman argues that this is the key to appreciating the speculative attunement possible in Lovecraft's writings. As Heidegger claimed that Hölderlin was “the poet's poet,” whose workings exposed the being of the

1 Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*, 4.

2 Ibid., 9.

3 Ibid., 257.

4 Ibid., 3.

artform itself, so too can Lovecraft's writings reveal to the reader the un-representability of reality because reality is fundamentally too weird to be subsumed under realist representation. Thus the first description of Cthulu, "If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing...but it was the general outline of the whole which made it most shockingly frightful..."⁵ is for Harman an exemplary bit of prose that communicates a central Husserlian concept: the object-giving act in our conscious experiences.

Human existence is experienced in a tension between having adequate capacity to know the truth of the world as it appears before us and yet having no access to the truth of the objects that comprise the world. Thus, we experience the world of objects that have sensual qualities and are themselves real, but our experience is dependent upon our relation to the placement of that object and simultaneously to that object's relationships to the other objects that enable the transmission of its qualities. For Harman, this state—of both having and not having the truth—is a ground condition necessary for humans to act, as well as the mission of philosophy.⁶ Lamenting the inability for language to adequately communicate the abysmal terrors that visit his narrators, it is Lovecraft's gift to obstruct, paraphrase, and present monsters and cities that can only be alluded to, but never successfully encapsulated. For Harman, this makes Lovecraft "the writer of the essence of philosophy."⁷

The second, and largest, section of the book presents the findings of Harman's experimental program. Advancing his technique of ruination, whereby the quality and effects of literary statements can be determined by assessing the number of ways in which a statement can be ruined, Harman presents one hundred passages from Lovecraft's literary corpus that are systematically ruined by Harman's interventions. This ruination presents itself in a manner of literary carpentry, perhaps. A means of engineering propositions and building/breaking concepts. But it should be noted that the materiality present here is not scientific in the sense that some may take the term: to submit the materials of the world to a method that eradicates mysteries. Rather, this materiality shares that same scientific lineage of "baffled alchemists and mystics."⁸ Harman's candor is appreciated when he states that he has selected one hundred passages because it is a round number that conveys "immense effort,"⁹ the gesture foreshadows a slow-going reading through the bulk of the book. Scholars and enthusiastic fans of Lovecraft may appreciate the findings yielded by Harman's ruination analytical method as they present further facades for reflecting on Lovecraft's prose.

5 H.P. Lovecraft, *Call of Cthulu*, 169, in *Tales*, New York: Library of America, 2005; Harman, in *passim*.

6 Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*, 17.

7 *Ibid.*, 33.

8 *Ibid.*, 58.

9 *Ibid.*, 51.

Returning to the presentation of object-oriented thinking and its relationships to Husserl and Heidegger initiated in section one of the book, section three attempts to bring together the threads: how do style and content interact? Style cannot be exhausted through an empirical cataloging of an author's works;¹⁰ it cannot be paraphrased without creating something other than the objects an author creates. Style is not simply the sum of its content, nor is it the result of the broader context of the author's time and place. Style is a real thing, an object, and in our pursuit of what makes style, we are frustrated by its wriggling free. Because we cannot have direct access to objects in themselves, only draw correlations about their nature from our experiences of their sensual qualities, it typically requires a break in the habitual order of our relationships to the objects that compose our lived experiences before we notice this fundamental tension at play. It is in these moments of breakage that a fission is possible, whereby our experience of the qualities of things as observers becomes so tense that we are forced to reckon with the underlying withdrawing object that situates those associated qualities. In these moments of fission, new objects are born.¹¹ Harman contrasts the punctuatedness of fission—what he terms “time”¹²—with the smoothness of fusion—what he names “space.”¹³ All fissions lead to a fusion and all fusions require a prior fission.¹⁴ The only contact between real objects—the observer—and the observed is through sensual objects. Sensual objects are characterized by their style of performing their particularity as *this object*, not *that object over there*. This leads to a universe that churns, constantly, with the generation of new objects as already existing objects are translated and/or transduced in their relationships to other objects.¹⁵ Because these objects are unparaphrasable, the sensual realm is filled with this constant production of objects stranger than they appear, a burbling subterranean reality at work. Our best access to these objects comes through innuendo and allusion.¹⁶ Because Lovecraft's literary style is marked by the gaps between unknowable objects and their sensible qualities and accessible objects with a flurry of palpable surfaces, Harman presents an author whose works speak to the pressing questions of our time.

Harman's book lays-out a host of fantastic claims and incites the imagination of the reader consistently throughout the first and third sections. And perhaps that is the point of this book: to read is to create. Just as we refer to some works of art as paintings (not painted), so too we understand reading to be a generative activity. These art objects can be assessed by their ability to fascinate and abuse the observer's claims to an adequate certainty of “how the world really is.” Harman sets-out, in this book, to experiment with a technique, the ruination of texts in order to demonstrate the generative principle at the heart of object-oriented and speculative thinking. Lovecraft's

10 Ibid., 50.

11 Ibid., 242.

12 Id.

13 Ibid., 239.

14 Ibid., 243.

15 Ibid., 260.

16 Ibid., 51.

writings, flayed open in the second section, do not possess the same allure they might have in their original contexts and through the explication of how Lovecraftian segments can be ruined by Harman's technical analysis, the reader is presented with a mash of stuff. The Lovecraft devotee may find this treatment of the text rewarding. The reader that is more concerned with assessing Harman's claim that Lovecraft's writings demonstrate core concerns within the speculative realist or object-oriented ways of thinking will find their interests met in the peripheries of the book.

Weird Realism is an experimental writing, a scientific report that presents its hypothesis, some background for the significance of the question; it then proceeds to explain the methodological approach that yielded what data, concluding with a discussion of the findings and implying future directions for research. Along the way, Harman puts forward some claims that require further assessment. Among these, I found most intriguing that philosophy is “the science of the background.”¹⁷ The technical concern of the philosopher, then, is to generate materials that provoke further examination of the prevailing conditions of the moments and environments in which we find ourselves; that “the background is where the action is.”¹⁸ The quality of one's contributions to this field can be assessed by how well these contributions inspire misreadings and generate a mysterious atmosphere. The craft of philosophical work is to create a deferential attuning of oneself to the matters at hand and of concern. The result is a radiation of this deferential attunement such that it permeates the atmosphere. Lovecraft's writing seems to do its heavy lifting when this deferential tendency is able to meet its mark: by inciting the reader to create a sensible reading of what is presented.

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17 Ibid., 18.

18 Ibid., 19.