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The Rustle of the Anthropocene: Kafka's Odradek as Ecocritical Icon

Ian Thomas Fleishman

This article interrogates the uses and abuses of Franz Kafka's enigmatic figure Odradek as an illustration for three recent approaches in the environmental humanities: Timothy Morton's notion of the hyperobject, Jane Bennett's vital materialism, and J. Hillis Miller's theory of the ecotechnological. Putting pressure on the consonances and dissonances between these concepts will reveal an implicit attempt to make of Odradek an idiom capable of conceptualizing the forces of a climate change exceeding current modes of thought.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Jane Bennett, climate change, Franz Kafka, J. Hillis Miller, Timothy Morton, Odradek

Intellectualizing in an era of impending ecological catastrophe means thinking the unthinkable—or at least imagining ourselves capable of such. It presents us with the double-bind of advocating ethical responsibility toward our environment while simultaneously recognizing (in many ways *because* we recognize) the relative insignificance and contingency of the anthropological in the grander scheme of things. Theoretical and philosophical approaches to what has now come to be called the age of the Anthropocene—the (geological) epoch in which human activity has a significant and likely irreversible global impact—have therefore attempted with increasing urgency to redefine how we as human subjects conceptualize the entities and environments surrounding us. It is time, this self-proclaimed new thinking has it, to become more attuned to *things*.

Ian Thomas Fleishman is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures at the University of Pennsylvania. He has published in *German Quarterly, French Studies, The Journal of Austrian Studies, Essays in Romanticism, Mosaic* and elsewhere on subjects ranging from the Baroque to contemporary cinema. His first book, *An Aesthetics of Injury: The Narrative Wound from Baudelaire to Tarantino*, was the winner of the 2015 Northeast Modern Language Association Book Award and is forthcoming from Northwestern University Press.

Grouping a variety of recent perspectives under the general heading of "object-oriented ontologies (plural)"[1] (Cole, "On the Call" 106), Andrew Cole has panned what might, phrased differently, be designated as an ecological turn in recent philosophy:

> according to the new line of thinking, objects should be recognized for their indifference to us, for the sorts of things they do behind our backs, and for [the way] they 'are' behind appearances. Objects, that is, do not need us to actualize their ontology (. . .) withdrawn into their dim worlds of non-relation but expressive of their forces and tendencies. Objects are actants, falling in and out of assemblages and entering into collectives of their own making. And we are the posthumans, objects in a world of objects, who in fact have the capacity to describe that which Kant said cannot be described, to think that which cannot be thought: things in themselves. ("On the Call" 106)

Shifting the emphasis from human subjects to their surroundings, this purportedly novel[2] way of looking at things would be inherently *eco*critical—to employ the term broadly[3]—with its sustained focus on *objects* intended as a new and improved way of thinking through what was once called the *environment*.[4] The stakes, in both scenarios, are the same: a sublime experience of what cannot be experienced, to wit, the world without

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[1]This plural is intended to distinguish these "ontologies" from the specific speculative realism (object-oriented ontology, or OOO as its proponents abbreviate it) of Graham Harman, Levi Bryant, Ian Bogost, and others. Cole's plural, adopted here as well, expands on the program of OOO proper to include perspectives such as Bennett's vitalism.

[2]Or really not so novel, as Cole points out; his project, in recent studies, is to reveal the Kantian underpinnings of these often ostensibly anti-Kantian approaches to object-oriented ontology and to establish the premodern and modern inheritances too often unconsidered (or, on occasion, misinterpreted) by contemporary "posthumanist" perspectives. While not the main focus of his critique, both Morton and Bennett make guest appearances; Miller is (for reasons I will elaborate in due course) not mentioned.

[3]As Timothy Clark notes in the *Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, "No distinctive method defines environmental criticism. Its force is best characterized in terms of its various challenges. Many ecocritical studies may be much like other research in cultural history (. . .) differing only in taking the environment in some sense as [a] topic" (*The Cambridge Introduction* 4). Among the more or less common features of the many different brands of ecocriticism—social ecology, posthumanism, animal studies, ecosophy, ecofeminism, and others—Clark lists ethical engagement, necessary interdisciplinarity, a concomitant reflection on conceptual limits an attempt to overcome anthropocentrism.

[4]The latter (like the notion of "nature" itself) has become a contested term, associated with anthropocentric thinking. As Timothy Morton has it in his *Ecology without Nature*: "The idea of environment is more or less a way of considering groups and collectives—humans surrounded by nature, or in continuity with other beings such as animals and plants. It is a being-with. (. . .) [H]owever, the actual situation is far more drastically collective than that. All kinds of beings, from toxic waste to sea snails, are clamoring for our scientific, political, and artistic attention, and have become part of political life—to the detriment of monolithic concepts of Nature" (*Ecology without Nature* 17). The recently departed sociologist Ulrich Beck objected to the concept for somewhat more nuanced reasons: "There is an important background assumption which shares in the general ignorance concerning environmental issues (. . .) this is

us in it—an aporia that applies equally to the utopian thinking of conservationism and to apocalyptic imaginings of the doomsday horizon of human extinction. Truly conceptualizing climate change, it follows, would require fundamentally different, unprecedented modes of thought, as yet inconceivable approaches to seeing things without an anthropocentric, without even an anthropo*logical* lens. As Tom Cohen puts it in the introduction to a recent volume on critical theory in the era of global warming: "What has been absent to date is any shared or possible *climate change imaginary*—or a critical matrix. The problem is that the *other materialities* that constitute the forces of climate change would pulverize whatever informs imaginaries in general, which have always been tropological systems" (18, original emphasis). In short, an apposite ecocatastrophic awareness would inherently exceed not only current tropes and discourses, but the very logic by which these tropes are structured.

This call for rhetorical revolution as the necessary precondition for a radically new conceptual framework supple enough to accommodate these "other materialities" makes careful consideration of the *tropology* of the ecocritical turn in recent theory all the more essential. It can be equal parts amusing and enlightening to recognize the shared rhetorical-conceptual features of a certain strand of recent ecologically oriented thought—from its sometimes tongue-in-cheek Latourian litanies[5] (glaciers, coal mines, toaster ovens) to the ubiquity of certain textual darlings repeatedly chosen to exemplify what would otherwise appear to be

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the category of 'the environment'. If 'the environment' only includes everything which is not human, not social, then the concept is sociologically empty. If the concept includes human action and society, then it is scientifically mistaken and politically suicidal" (257). As Morton acknowledges, his notion of the hyperobject draws on Beck's theory of *risk society*: "my central concept is not 'crisis' but 'new global risk'. Risks are, essentially, man-made, incalculable, uninsurable threats and catastrophes which are *anticipated* but which often remain invisible and therefore depend on how they become defined and contested in 'knowledge'. As a result, their 'reality' can be dramatized or minimized, transformed or simply denied, according to the norms which decide what is known and what is not" (Beck 261).

[5]The term *Latour litanies* is Bogost's, first coined in his 2012 study *Alien Phenomenology* and since adopted by Harman (whose own "rhetoric of lists" [39] Bogost discusses) and others. Bogost dedicates a considerable portion of his book to examining the philosophical stakes of such rhetorical tendencies (and, as it happens, he himself employs the trope *ad nauseam*). As Cole remarks: "Names, characters, objects, and, of course, quirky lists of things, like aardvarks, baseball, and galaxies; or grilled cheese, commandos, and Lake Michigan—these ('Latourian litanies,' as they are called) salt the prose of every object-oriented ontologist" ("Those Obscure Objects" 319). Morton celebrates such "random lists of objects [as] the hallmark trope of OOO" ("Here Comes Everything" 173)—taking special care to exonerate these litanies of the charges he otherwise levels against what he calls *ecophilosophical* lists: "Latour Litanies evoke OOOs flat ontology without hierarchies, without Nature (. . .) but unlike ecophilosophical lists, they are open about their rhetorical status. They hamper the arrival of a (positive, independent) Nature or Non-Nature: the shadow side of objects remains obscure, flickering. Unlike ecophenomenology, when OOO talks about objects encountering one another without people, it really means it" ("Here Comes Everything" 1173–74). Much of Morton's critical project relies (as in *Ecology without Natur*e, where his rejection of what he names *ecomimesis* depends in part on distinguishing between good and bad iterations of Romanticism; or in *The Ecological Thought* where he ceaselessly lists would-be allies on the political left, only to dismiss most schools and movements for an insufficient radicalism in their conceptual approach) on his apparently privileged position as an arbiter of who "really means it" and who does not.

contrasting theories. In what follows I would like to focus on one particular pet illustration: Franz Kafka's enigmatic figure Odradek, from the 1919 miniature, "Die Sorgen des Hausvaters."

This properly grotesque creature is cited by all three of the ecotheorists whom I will be critiquing here in their attempts to rethink *things*. For Timothy Morton, the figure resembles what he dubs the *hyperobject*—his attempt to conceptualize "objects" so enormous and pervasive (such as climate change) that they would appear to be beyond the scope of human apperception. For political philosopher Jane Bennett—whose *vital materialism* is an effort to "give voice to the vitality intrinsic to materiality" (*Vibrant Matter* 3) or, more playfully, to "give a voice to thing-power" (*Vibrant Matter* 2)—Odradek is a prime example of what she aspires to reveal as *vibrant matter*. For J. Hillis Miller, Odradek is the preeminent example of what he terms the *ecotechnological*: "a pantechnologization into which we and our bodies are plugged as a flash memory stick is plugged into a computer's USB connection, ready to receive whatever information is downloaded into it" (73–74). It is time, these theories tell us, to be more attuned to what is around us. But these three perspectives are by no means identical, nor are their central terms (hyperobject, vital materialism, ecotechnological) synonymous. In point of fact, these disparate perspectives are often careful to distinguish themselves from one another—making the commonality of the Kafkan illustration somewhat baffling. It is a question frequently encountered when reading scholarship on this modernist master: How can Odradek (or really almost any other text by Kafka) possibly be all things to all readers all at once?

The easy answer to this riddle is that Odradek achieves precisely what these recent theories hope to: It disturbs the discourse at its origins, at its *a priori* judgments, troubling not only given tropes but the very bedrock of tropology *tout court*. Kafka, as an author, is himself an ecological event—a tidal wave, a seismic shift—not (only) in a literary-historical sense but rather (also) as a repeated reading experience, as Slavoj Žižek has described it in one of his interpretations of the Odradek text:

> Reading Kafka demands a great effort of abstraction—an effort, not of learning more (the proper interpretive horizon to understand his works), but of unlearning the standard interpretive references, so that one becomes able to open up to the raw force of Kafka's writing. (. . .) [A] childish naïveté has to be regained in order for a reader to be able to feel the raw force of Kafka's universe. Which is why, in Kafka's case, the first (naïve) reading is often the most adequate one, and the second reading is the one which tries to 'sublate' the first reading's raw impact by way of forcing him into the frame of a given interpretation. (136)

An examination of this process of sublation in the thinking of the three ecocritics discussed here not only will reveal the *a priori* prejudices of their paradigms but also, and more pertinently, will allow us an occasion to reconsider the explicit or implicit ethical charge of each of these three readings—I am tempted to call them *instrumentalizations*—of

Kafka's text.[6] Each takes Odradek as an occasion to reconfigure ecological language (and, subsequently, thought) according to a *flat ontology* no longer privileging the human or even the organic: Morton does this by considering Odradek as an *object* (in a specific philosophical sense to be elaborated below); Bennett by treating Odradek as matter or *material* in a way that blurs the boundaries between the living and the inert; and Miller by reading Odradek's apparently aimless animation as an example of a *techné*, treating the object as a mindless but well-oiled machine.

Essentially, Morton's particular philosophical prejudices oblige him to consider Odradek as *discrete* and *stable*, whereas both Bennett and Miller (mis)read the figure as a (for Bennett: borderless) being in perpetual flux. The latter interpretations also differ, though, in the teleology they ascribe to this (d)evolution: Bennett is concerned primarily with Odradek's ostensibly unstable edges, as this supports her understanding of the figure as a case study for continuous *becoming*, whereas Miller instead reads Odradek as an example of a peculiar deconstruction, as a "destructuring" structure or, as one might put it for the sake of symmetry, as an instance of *unbecoming*. Subtending all these perspectives, I will argue, is an implicit understanding of Odradek as an *idiom*, as a *language* capable of expressing the ineffable and conceptualizing the inconceivable—as a rhetorical model commensurate to "the end of the world."

If all three readings, to differing extents, ultimately prove insufficient, it is primarily because they insistently (if perhaps inadvertently) translate this idiom into the more comfortable vernacular of their preferred philosophical discourses, thereby succumbing to a tautological self-performativity that hampers the ethical engagement of their theories. Reducing the text to an illustrative function, in lieu of practical ethical prescriptions, each interpretation instead offers mostly confirmation of the underlying assumptions of its own attempted epistemological-rhetorical shift. But rhetoric alone is not enough. And while I am sympathetic to the critical need for new modes of thought and expression, the difficulty in deploying Odradek as an icon for new approaches in the environmental humanities is that the figure defies all discourses—defies discursivity itself. Indeed, the eponymic *Hausvater* who narrates the brief text begins his account by summarizing speculations as to the etymology of the *name* Odradek, wondering whether it has its origins in Slavic or in German and performatively failing to assign the word to either—a conceptual uncertainty pertaining also to the object itself:

> Es sieht *zunächst* aus wie eine flache sternartige Zwirnspule und tatsächlich scheint es auch mit Zwirn bezogen; allerdings dürften es nur abgerissene, alte, aneinandergeknotete, aber auch ineinanderverfilzte Zwirnstücke von ver-

[6]Which is not to claim that these are *mis*interpretations of Odradek (indeed, even Žižek himself could be said to sublate Kafka into a revised Lacanian framework), but rather that the broader view of Kafka's text, the *naïve* reading, as Žižek puts it, may allow the full force of the figure to come to light precisely in those instances, those points of tension, where these discrete interpretations disagree. This learning qua *un*learning how best to understand an apparition such as Odradek might ultimately afford us a new mode of reading more adequate to the conceptual and ethical difficulties encountered when attempting to take stock of climate change. Žižek, as it happens, has had his own debates with object-oriented ontology, but there will not be room to treat those here.

> schiedenster Art und Farbe sein. Es ist aber nicht nur eine Spule, sondern aus der Mitte des Sternes kommt ein kleines Querstäbchen hervor und an dieses Stäbchen fügt sich dann im rechten Winkel noch eines. Mit Hilfe dieses letzteren Stäbchens auf der einen Seite, und einer der Ausstrahlungen des Sternes auf der anderen Seite, kann das Ganze *wie* auf zwei beinen aufrecht stehen (282–83, my emphasis)

Changing according to perspective, neither fully human nor nonhuman, Odradek's apparent anthropomorphism is, in fact, the result of a rhetorical disposition—in this case, simile: it stands *as if* on two legs. Nor is Odradek entirely organic or inorganic, answering questions with a cryptic laughter resembling the rustling of falling leaves: "es ist aber nur ein Lachen, wie man es ohne Lungen hervorbringen kann. Es klingt etwa so, wie das Rascheln in gefallenen Blättern" (284). The text concludes by questioning Odradek's (im)mortality: the object is obviously harmless, concedes the *Hausvater*, and yet, "die Vorstellung, daß er mich auch noch überleben sollte, ist mir eine fast schmerzliche" (284). This poignant if discomfiting conclusion serves as the point of departure for all three readings treated here: Odradek is how our world ends—not with a bang but with a rustle. And yet, beyond our own demise, beyond *our* understanding, the world itself remains.

1. Odradek as Hyperobject

Developed initially in his widely cited *Ecological Thought* (2010) and much more expansively elaborated in his most recent volume, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013), Timothy Morton's concept of the *hyperobject* has undoubtedly been one of the most influential notions introduced by the ecocritically inflected scholarship of the last half-decade. The problem with global warming,[7] put quite simply, is that it is just too big to understand on any immediate level and, thus, in an important way, too big truly to care about. This it has in common with plutonium and oil spills and the Great Pacific Garbage Patch—entities that Morton theorizes as hyperobjects. (Examples and illustrations such as these are the bread and butter of object-oriented thought; this bears repeating, as it is one such *illustration* that concerns me in the present study.) Hyperobjects make us painfully aware of the inadequacies of current modes of thought by engendering reactions Morton designates as *weakness, lameness*, and *hypocrisy*:

> *Hypocrisy* results from the conditions of the impossibility of a metalanguage (and as I shall explain, we are now freshly aware of these conditions because of the ecological emergency); *weakness* from the gap between phenomenon and thing, which the hyperobject makes disturbingly visible; and *lameness* from the

[7] As he explains in the introduction to *Hyperobjects*, Morton prefers this term to "climate change," which he sees in no uncertain terms as a failed and politically suspect euphemism: "*climate change* as a *substitute* for *global warming* is like 'cultural change' as a substitute for *Renaissance*, or 'change in living conditions' as a substitute for *Holocaust*" (8).

> fact that all entities are fragile (as a condition of possibility for their existence), and hyperobjects make this fragility conspicuous. (*Hyperobjects* 2)

Of these three reactions, what Morton calls hypocrisy, the impossibility of any possible metalanguage, is, from an ethical point of view, the most significant, since it results in an inability to take ourselves seriously and thus to do anything to combat problems such as global warming: "Every position is 'wrong': every position, including and especially the know-it-all cynicism that thinks its knows better than anything else" (*Hyperobjects* 136). And yet, as our reading of Morton's reading of Odradek will reveal, the evident zeal for neologism displayed by these three idiosyncratic redefinitions (hypocrisy, weakness, lameness) is an attempt at achieving precisely what hypocrisy (in Morton's sense) denies us: a kind of metalanguage capable of describing new and terrifying phenomena that have hitherto been indescribable.

Like Odradek, the hyperobject both *is* and *is not* the sum of its various parts, and this distinguishes it, as we shall see, from the kind of fringe phenomena described by Jane Bennett's *vital materialism*. Before all else, the hyperobject, as Morton has it, is an *object*—and this in a very specific sense: "Hyperobjects are not just collections, systems, or assemblages of other objects. They are objects in their own right, objects in a special sense [derived] from *object-oriented ontology* (OOO), an emerging philosophical movement committed to a unique form of realism and nonanthropocentric thinking" (*Hyperobjects* 2). As Morton summarizes his concept of hyperobjects in an essay on rhetoric, object-oriented ontology, and the "Sixth Mass Extinction Event" ("Sublime Objects" 207) of global warming: "These are objects that are massively distributed in time and space. Hyperobjects become visible to humans in an age of ecological crisis. Indeed, it's really the other way around: hyperobjects have alerted us to the ecological crisis that defines our age: for instance, global warming and nuclear radiation from plutonium" ("Sublime Objects" 207). Hyperobjects are hard to wrap one's head around because they are not to human scale; they remind us that the era of the Anthropocene may well be of our making, but it is anything but tailored to our tastes, our vested interests, or our epistemological preferences and preconceptions. Morton then goes on to list the qualities of hyperobjects that will, when fleshed out fully, form the core of his later book-length study on the subject:

> They're nonlocal. They're foreshortened in time. They're viscous—they have the strange quality of sticking to you the more you try to shake them off. The more you know about them, the more you figure out how enmeshed you are in them. The more you know about them, the stranger and even more terrifying they become. They occupy a high dimensional phase space so it's only possible for humans to see pieces or aspects of them at any one time. ("Sublime Objects" 207–08)

I will examine in a moment what all this has to do with Odradek, and why, for Morton, "object-oriented ontology gives us some much-needed tools for thinking hyperobjects" ("Sublime Objects" 207), but first I would like to suggest again that the most important aspect of this coinage is *its very status as a neologism*. In the very same essay—in fact, in the very next sentence—Morton explicitly designates his project and the promise of object-oriented

ontology more generally, as a *rhetorical* endeavor, specifically a new *turn* on the *trope of the sublime*: "To understand hyperobjects, we badly need *an upgraded theory of the sublime*, which deals in scary and unknowable things. And if we're going to do that, we might as well take on *the whole issue of rhetoric as it pertains to objects"* ("Sublime Objects" 208, my emphasis). It is precisely this new rhetoric of objects that I intend to examine here.

Morton's first major ecocritical study, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (2007), is an attempt, above all else, to void the two key terms of the title ("ecology" and "nature") of their othering quality, of their essentializing tendencies—and this project applies as much to literary and cultural criticism as it does to the objects (if I may still permit myself this word) under critical observation: "ultimately, environmental art, whatever its thematic content, is hamstrung by certain formal properties of language. I consider the literary criticism of environmental literature itself to be an example of environmental art" (3)—which is to say that Morton's ecocritical endeavor begins as and remains a fundamentally *rhetorical* critique: "Due to the properties of the rhetoric that evokes the idea of a surrounding medium, ecological writing can never properly establish that this is nature and thus provide a compelling and consistent aesthetic basis for the new worldview that is meant to change society. It is a small operation, like tipping over a domino" (3–4). Morton's project, then, aims at an estrangement almost Brechtian, as it is only through such alienation that established paradigms will come to light and our age-old power struggle with objects can be overcome in favor of true intimacy. But if Morton wants to be the one to tip this domino, then his own increasingly elaborate and idiosyncratic vocabulary (like the increasingly sophisticated vocabulary of OOO more generally) will ultimately have to be subjected to this same critical scrutiny.

It would be beyond the scope of this essay to do justice to (or to provide a thorough critique of) the theoretical complexity of object-oriented ontology—in this case, the more strictly party-line OOO of philosophers such as Graham Harman. But in broad terms, the reason that speculative realism is so helpful to Morton in conceptualizing the hyperobject is that the property of objects that it dubs *withdrawnness* transposes the Kantian divide (often with the pretense of refuting or correcting Kant) between the human subject and the object *an sich* into a relational principle governing the interactions between *all* objects—whether they are sentient or non-sentient, living or non-living, embodied or purely conceptual. "One of the best reasons to admire OOO is its stunning rhetoric" ("Here Comes Everything" 168), concludes Morton, since it recognizes and *reproduces* the way all objects translate one another: "object-oriented rhetoric becomes the way objects obscure themselves in fold upon fold of mysterious robes, caverns, and fortresses of solitude and octopus ink" (*Realist Magic* 213). Objects, in the terminology of OOO, ineluctably *withdraw* from one another, so that no object ever comes into immediate contact (physical or otherwise) with any other object. Instead, objects (of which human beings are merely one unprivileged example) can only ever *translate* one another, and always with a certain degree of inadequacy. They are simultaneously withdrawn from access and yet manifest, or, as Bennett summarizes it in a critical response to Harman and Morton: "objects are *coy*[.] (. . .) Objects play hide-and-seek" ("Systems and Things" 225, original emphasis).

This appears particularly true (or perhaps just particularly pertinent) when it comes to Morton's hyperobjects: "Contemplate global warming, a hyperobject that you can't directly

see or touch—it's withdrawn. It affects all weather on Earth yet it's not reducible to particular manifestations such as sunshine or rain. Instruments such as computers processing terabytes per second can see global warming—not human eyes" ("Here Comes Everything" 167). The promise of an object-oriented approach, as Morton sees it, is that it might ultimately provide its adherents with a new idiom for conceptualizing such hyperobjects, what Morton calls an *object-oriented sublime*: "What speculative realism needs would be a sublime that grants a kind of *intimacy* with real entities (. . .) precisely the kind of intimacy prohibited by Kant" ("Sublime Objects" 216, original emphasis). It is just such an uncanny intimacy with radical alterity (insofar as the withdrawn object always remains fundamentally *other*) that Odradek represents for Morton: the *strange stranger*,[8] as he would phrase it, residing not elsewhere, but rather alongside us in the most intimate of spaces: "we have let him [Odradek] into our home somehow, like mercury and microwaves, like the ultraviolet rays of the Sun. Odradek is what confronts us at the end of the world, not with a shout but with a breathless voice 'like the rustling of fallen leaves'" (*Hyperobjects* 126). It is through this intimacy that Morton attempts to reconcile the competing discourses of the sublime and the uncanny: this encounter, this *rustling* vibration, would not be contact in the strictest sense, but rather a variety of mutual translation that might bring the purported subject into focus as an object and, in turn, recast the object as itself a sort of subject.

In *The Ecological Thought* and elsewhere, Morton acknowledges an animistic urge to such thinking, which he prefers to present *sous rature* as "~~animism~~" (*Ecological Thought* 110; *Hyperobjects* 172) precisely to avoid privileging the human over the nonhuman or even of the living over the inanimate. The point is to approach the desired intimacy between objects without any hierarchies—as Morton notes with what might just be a gentle jab at Bennett's vital materialism, which allows for strategic persistence of anthropological hierarchies: "humans and nonhumans face one another equally matched. (. . .) The feeling is (. . .) of the nonhuman out of control, withdrawn from total human access. We have even stopped calling nonhumans 'materials.' We know very well that they are not just materials-for (human production)" (*Hyperobjects* 172). And yet, even under erasure, the idiom still gets in the way, inevitably intimating the variety of vitalism Morton desires to eschew. As Cole contends: "object-oriented ontology may, as a philosophy, want to decenter the human, but as a language—and perforce as a *way of thinking*—it expands the human into all relations, raising serious political and ethical questions along the way, but never answering them" ("Those Obscure Objects" 323, original emphasis). Human language, it would

[8]This appellation is not limited to hyperobjects. In fact, it is the status of *all* objects as strange strangers that makes the object-oriented sublime so universally applicable. As Morton explains: "The object-oriented sublime (. . .) resides in particularity, not in some distant beyond. And the sublime is generalizable to all objects, insofar as they are all what I've called *strange strangers*, that is, alien to themselves and to one another in an irreducible way" ("Sublime Objects" 216, original emphasis). In this sense, the strange stranger is another manner of naming the irreducible withdrawnness of all things: "*Strange stranger* names an uncanny, radically unpredictable quality of life-forms. Life-forms recede into strangeness the more we think about them, and whenever they encounter one another—the strangeness is irreducible" ("Here Comes Everything" 165, original emphasis).

appear, is simply not set up to account for objects in the way the speculative realist might hope.

This difficulty is apparent already in Morton's choice of pronouns to describe Odradek—an unacknowledged hesitation between *he* and *it* adopted from the text itself. There the narrator refers to Odradek as an *it* (*es*) for the full first half of his account before an unexpected anthropomorphic slippage occurs. The manner in which this slippage takes places is worth discussing in some detail, as it comes at the very moment when the narrator is theorizing as to the purpose of this object Odradek:

> Man wäre versucht zu glauben, dieses Gebilde hätte früher irgendeine *zweckmäßige* Form gehabt und sei es jetzt nur zerbrochen. Dies scheint aber nicht der Fall zu sein; wenigstens findet sich kein Anzeichen dafür; nirgends sind Ansätze oder Bruchstellen zu sehen, die auf etwas Derartiges hinweisen würden; das Ganze *erscheint* zwar sinnlos, aber in *seiner* Art abgeschlossen. (283, my emphasis)

An accident of the idiom—"seiner" could be "its" or "his"—attributes an implied gender to this object: in the German language the possessive pronoun can appear gendered even on occasions such as this one where it is not (or at least not necessarily). Kafka, as always, takes the idiomatic literally, at face value, henceforth referring to Odradek as *er* (*he*). By the same token, if Morton desires to see Odradek (qua hyperobject) as *sublime*, here one must admit that, in more strictly Kantian terms, it/he is at best *beautiful*—explicitly exemplary of what Kant calls *purposiveness without purpose* (*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*): one sees hints, imagines remnants, of "irgendeine[r] zweckmäßige[n] Form" where none exists. This pivot of "in *seiner* Art" thus definitively refocuses the *Hausvater*'s account: as soon as the question of Odradek's use-value is raised—or, perhaps more tellingly, *dismissed*—he, rather than it, becomes a subject rather than an object. Or, to borrow once again from Morton's terminology, the nonhuman is no longer reduced to mere *material*.

The questions posed thus change as well. Suddenly, the narrator appears less interested in the etymological uncertainties and physical descriptions of the name and object Odradek and more concerned with his (for Odradek is now a *he*) more "human" qualities: his odd animation, his speech (or silence), and, most significantly, the already-mentioned and absolutely central question of mortality. And this is the point that concerns us here. I would not wish to overemphasize the importance of Franz Kafka to the development of Morton's concept; *Hyperobjects* merely evokes Odradek in passing, following a strand of associative thinking that unwinds like Odradek's variegated threads, over a single page, from Heidegger to Levinas to Kafka and then onward. The puzzling spool-like figure serves a purely illustrative function here, as is evident from the passages Morton chooses to cite: the physical description of the object, the comparison of its voice to *rustling*, and, perhaps most importantly, the narrator's painful realization that Odradek will quite likely outlive him. Morton's sole contention in his treatment of this text is that "Kafka's Odradek resembles the hyperobject" (*Hyperobjects* 125) inasmuch as it/he troubles our attunement to mortality through unsettling contact with an "object" that may well survive our own extinction, or, as Morton phrases it: "Odradek is what confronts us at the end of the world" (*Hyperobjects* 126). The phraseology

is richly ambivalent: the idea of *the end of the world* implies, on the one hand, apocalyptic ecological catastrophe, but on the other, and more hopefully, it signifies an overcoming of the notion of the "world" (like those of "ecology," "Nature," or the "environment") as a stable, monolithic concept. As Morton has it in his introduction to *Hyperobjects*: "Hyperobjects are directly responsible for what I call the end of the world, rendering both denialism and apocalyptic environmentalism obsolete" (125). And this, precisely, is the promise of Odradek's apparent immortality: his utter, undying *objectivity* subverts our understanding of a "world" in the sense of an environment surrounding *us*.

Moreover, it implies an ethical program sensitive to *all* objects—without hierarchical preference for those that are most humanlike. For Heidegger, of course, it is an understanding of mortality that distinguishes humanity: animals cannot die, but rather only perish; objects cannot even manage that.[9] It is with a sharp-edged send-up of this paradigm that Morton introduces his interpretation of Kafka:

> Without a world, there are simply a number of unique beings (farmers, dogs, irises, pencils, LEDs, and so on) to whom I owe an obligation through the simple fact that existence is coexistence. I don't have to run through my worlding checklist to ensure that the nonhuman in question counts as something I could care for. 'If you answered mostly (A), then you have a world. If you answered mostly (B), then you are poor in world (German, *weltarm*). If you answered mostly (C), then you have no world whatsoever.' What remains without a world is intimacy. (. . .) The other is fully here, before I am (. . .) the other has paws and sharp surfaces, the other is decorated with leaves, the other shines with starlight. (*Hyperobjects* 125)

As an object at or after the end of the world, Odradek would liberate us from such categorical thinking, allowing us to develop an ethic sensitive to all entities, without distinction. Hence the universalizing tendencies of OOO.

This is not to say that Morton does not also have his checklists. In addition to the withdrawnness common to all objects, hyperobjects, by definition, must display the characteristics alluded to above: *viscosity, non-locality, interobjectivity, temporal undulation*, and *phasing*. Although he does not mention it, Odradek, like the withdrawn but manifest objects of OOO, plays his own clever games of hide-and-seek: "Er hält sich abwechselnd auf dem Dachboden, im Treppenhaus, auf den Gängen, im Flur auf. Manchmal ist er monatelang

[9]Miller also quickly rehearses a Heideggerean approach in his reading of Odradek: "For Heidegger, an essential feature of *Daseins* is that they can foresee their death, as, according to him, animals cannot. *Sein zum Tode*, being toward death, is therefore what *Daseins* are. (. . .) The principle of reason or *Satz vom Grund* that this strange little text radically puts in question presumes that anything with a rational meaning has that meaning because its activity is goal-oriented. Its meaning can be defined in terms of its goal or purpose, its *Zweck* or *Ziel*. Odradek has no goal and therefore his (its) activity does not wear him out until he (it) dies, as even a machine, however cleverly made ultimately wears out. Only a technological construction without goal, purpose, or meaning can be immortal. (. . .) The *Hausvater*'s most haunting worry is that Odradek will outlive him" ("Ecotechnics" 87).

nicht zu sehen; da ist er wohl in andere Häuser übersiedelt; doch kehrt er dann unweigerlich wieder in unser Haus zurück" (283). Pushing the terminology a bit, one might say Odradek is what Morton (somewhat strangely) designates as *viscous*, by which he means sticky—Odradek just seems to hang around as stubbornly as rats or cockroaches. Odradek is also, in a weird way, *nonlocal*: when asked where he resides, Odradek responds with his lungless, rustling laugh: "Unbestimmter Wohnsitz" (283). Taking a few playful liberties, one could further seek out correspondences between Odradek's behavior and the remaining aspects of the hyperobject theorized by Morton: Odradek exhibits *interobjectivity* in that he/it is a *mesh* of different elements (flat, star-shaped spool; various threads and knots and bits and bobs; a queer metal crossbar); accordingly, then, Odradek is also *phased*, which means he/it is complete unto himself/itself ("in seiner Art abgeschlossen") but impossible to perceive as a whole, making him/it "invisible to humans for stretches of a time" (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 1); but, most important, as I have been arguing, is Odradek's unique *temporality*, which is not to human scale. Morton does *not* quote from the passages discussed above, although they would seem to reinforce his reading, nor does he map these correspondences to the attributes of hyperobjects. In the context of the present article, then, Morton's fleeting allusion to Odradek is interesting not because it is afforded an important place in the theorization of the hyperobject, but rather because the easy introduction of Odradek into the book seems to insinuate that the comparison would be self-evident—that Odradek, despite its diminutive stature, resembles the hyperobject, it is implied, goes almost without saying.

In short, Odradek has been instrumentalized—has disappeared into an illustrative function and become what Morton, summarizing Harman on Heidegger, might call "a translation of an object into a *vorhanden* parody of itself" (*Realist Magic* 88). And this, again, somewhat surprisingly, raises the issue of his immortality, since for Kafka's *Hausvater*, mortality and utility are explicitly linked: "Kann *er* denn sterben? *Alles*, was stirbt, hat vorher eine Art *Ziel*, eine Art *Tätigkeit* gehabt und daran hat *es* sich zerrieben; das trifft bei Odradek nicht zu" (284, my emphasis). The narrator momentarily reverts to presenting Odradek as a neuter object (*Alles, es*): through some paradoxical chiasmus, precisely *because* he has no purpose, Odradek can neither be an object (not only is he lacking *irgendeine zweckmäßige Form*, but he is also *sinnlos*, not a means to any end) nor can it truly be a subject (it cannot die because he has no *Ziel* or *Tätigkeit*). This same paradoxical ambivalence applies to Morton's so-called "~~animism~~": once anthropomorphized, Odradek will be reduced again to an *object*, since, for OOO, humans are merely objects among others.

Regarded critically, this unexpected reversal highlights the epistemological and ethical limitations of object-oriented ontology. As Morton concludes his brief interpretation of Odradek: "Things appear in their disturbing *weakness* and *lameness*, technical terms describing the human attunement to hyperobjects" (*Hyperobjects* 126). These "technical" terms, as I have noted, in fact form the ethical core of Morton's study: the new epistemology called for and engendered by our inevitable encounter with hyperobjects. And yet, curiously and crucially, the first, and most important, of these reactions remains unmentioned in Morton's reading of Kafka's Odradek: *hypocrisy*, or our fresh awareness of the impossibility of a position outside of discourse—the most explicitly postmodern aspect of our attunement to the hyperobject and what Lyotard might call the death of metanarratives. The omission

of this term—otherwise, the crux of Morton's thinking on the era of the hyperobject, on the era of the Anthropocene—is quite telling. What Morton's unquestioned instrumentalization of the fundamentally un-instrumentalizable object Odradek reveals is that his thinking, for all its attempts to undermine essentialism, ultimately reinforces it: Odradek is indeed that thing "over there" on the other side of the Kantian divide between phenomena and noumena. Odradek, the hyperobject, shorthand for a new epistemology, has itself become a metalanguage.

2. Odradek as Vital Material

If OOO proper is all about establishing the impenetrable boundaries between inexorably withdrawn objects, Jane Bennett's *vital materialism* is much more interested in occasions where these edges begin to blur. The aim of her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010) therefore resembles object-oriented ontology in its attempt to overcome anthropocentrism, but its methodology is much different. Like Morton, Bennett attempts to correct and to improve on the environmentalist understanding of an ecosystem that *surrounds* us, but from which we are, on some ontological plane, ultimately distinct:

> If environmentalists are selves who live on earth, vital materialists are selves who live as earth, who are more alert to the capacities and limitations (. . .) of the various materials they are. If environmentalism leads to the call for the protection and wise management of an ecosystem that surrounds us, a vital materialism suggests that the task is to engage more strategically with a trenchant materiality that is us as it vies with us in agentic assemblages (*Vibrant Matter* 111)

The task of vital materialism, then, is to recognize not how we interact with but are, in fact, *composed* of other objects—foodstuffs, for instance, or contagions—or what Bennett calls the "'alien' quality of our own flesh": "it is thus not enough to say that we are 'embodied.' We are, rather, an array of bodies, many different kinds of them in a nested set of microbiomes" (*Vibrant Matter* 112–13). This recognition, then, in turn, entails a different kind of ethic:

> For the vital materialist (. . .) the starting point of ethics is less the acceptance of the impossibility of 'reconcilement' and more the recognition of human participation in a shared, vital materiality. We *are* vital materiality and we are surrounded by it, though we do not always see it that way. The ethical task at hand here is to cultivate the ability to discern nonhuman vitality, to become perceptually open to it. (*Vibrant Matter* 14)

And here is where Odradek comes in—as an odd "object" that can render us more sensitive to the gray zone between the organic and the inert, more attuned to the vitality of matter:

> Vital materialists (. . .) try to linger in those moments during which they find themselves fascinated by objects, taking them as clues to the material vitality that

> they share with them. This sense of strange and incomplete commonality with the out-side may induce vital materialists to treat nonhumans—animals, plants, earth, even artifacts and commodities—more carefully, more strategically, more ecologically. But how to develop this capacity for naiveté? (*Vibrant Matter* 17–18)

Like Morton's, Bennett's is a program of estrangement committed to a kind of *Verfremdungseffekt* because "[i]n the space created by this estrangement, a *vital materiality* can start to take shape. Or, rather, it can take shape again, for a version of this idea already found expression in childhood experiences of a world populated by animate things rather than passive objects" (2010A, vii, original emphasis). The aim, in a manner that might please Žižek, is to become more *naïve*, more childlike. Of course, Odradek's mischievous and puerile nature also encourages such naiveté—a temptation toward domestication to which the narrator of Kafka's text himself succumbs: "Natürlich stellt man an ihn keine schwierigen Fragen, sondern behandelt ihn—schon seine Winzigkeit verführt dazu—wie ein Kind" (283). One is *verführt*: seduced, misled. To treat Odradek as a child or to take a childlike approach to him means to subscribe to a convenient fiction, to practice a careful course of what Bennett refers to as a strategic anthropomorphization. Where this approach differs from the "~~animism~~" advocated by Morton is that it does not seek to dismiss hierarchical thinking entirely—allowing for the persistence of self-serving subjectivity even as it attempts to be more sensitive to "objects" and more ecologically minded.

Still, the similarities can be deceiving. In an essay written to accompany an exhibition at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, Bennett even elects to cite Morton, if only in passing, referring to Odradek as a hyperobject:

> Franz Kafka's Odradek is one of many barely detectable shapes that inhabit the Earth with us. These shapes largely exceed, underwhelm, or otherwise elide our notice: they are too vague or sharp, or too fast or slow, and their murmurings are too smooth or intermittent for the human sensorium. They are real, but not always fully actual. They exist as 'hyper-objects' [*sic*] whose inhuman tempos or sizes make it hard to think them, or as 'literary figures' with lives beyond their texts, or as ancestors who keep a line open to the present, or as deep-sea and deep-space creatures, or as a host of even less detectable virtualities awaiting the right habitat to come forward. These forms are almost too different from us to matter: almost, because now and then encounters happen and we receive hints of their presence. They flit over and around the edges of our perception, 'like the rustling of fallen leaves' [.] (. . .) They haunt 'our' world. ("The Shapes of Odradek" 16–17)

Odradek's rustle reveals the presence of a parallel dimension, a virtual potential not (yet) fully actualized in our perceptual realm. The hyperobject, in this interpretation, is, like Odradek, a literary figure existing somewhere on the fringes between fiction and reality. The cohabitation Bennett envisions is, therefore, not dissimilar to what Morton might dub an *intimacy* with objects: "Consider Odradek, then, as an emissary from a coterminous world, as one who

brings garbled news of (preter)natural life forms with whom we share materials and living space" ("The Shapes of Odradek" 17). But as an emissary Odradek would ultimately be less of an object than a kind of subject in disguise—and it is precisely the status of the *object* that constitutes the chief point of contention between Bennett's vital materialism and the variety of object-oriented ontology favored by Morton.

After all, even while advocating intimacy, OOO nevertheless insists that all objects are, on the most fundamental level, at a remove—withdrawn. As Bennett notes, object-oriented ontologists' "claim about the withdrawal of the object operates with the force of a litany, and I take this rhetorical tic to indicate something about the ethical impetus behind their position" ("Systems and Things" 230): namely, an objection to the arrogance of anthropocentric pretenses to the *knowability* of things. ("I, too," continues Bennett, "share the desire to cultivate theoretical modesty. But object-oriented philosophy has no monopoly on the means to this end" ["Systems and Things" 230].) But if, for OOO, this limitation is the function of the object itself—of its fundamentally withdrawn nature—for Bennett, the failing lies entirely with us: "Human perception has its necessary limits and edges, and Odradek is, for us, one such edge-dweller" ("The Shapes of Odradek" 21). Odradek's uncanny qualities are not due to some coquettish game of metaphysical peekaboo, but rather to our own inability properly to perceive them. In fact, for Bennett, "objects" simply do not exist:

> 'Objects' appear as such because their becoming proceeds at a speed or a level below the threshold of human discernment. It is hard indeed to keep one's mind wrapped around a materiality that is not reducible to extension in space, difficult to dwell with the notion of an incorporeality or a differential of intensities. This is because to live, humans need to interpret the world reductively as a series of fixed objects, a need reflected in the rhetorical role assigned to the word *material*. As a noun or adjective *material* denotes some stable or rock-bottom reality. (*Vibrant Matter* 58, original emphasis)

The very notion of an object, as the term is understood by OOO, would be, for Bennett, a pathetic fallacy, an anthropological extrapolation of the epistemological limitations of our thinking to the noumenal nature—the "rock-bottom reality"—of things *an sich*. Despite Bennett's diplomatic allusion to the hyperobject, then, her thinking runs counter to the *ontology* of the object-oriented ontology on which Morton's notion of the hyperobject is constructed. Morton insists, and it bears repeating, that hyperobjects "are not just collections, systems, or assemblages of other objects" (*Hyperobjects* 2), and yet, for Bennett, "The aim is to articulate the elusive idea of materiality that is *itself* heterogeneous, itself a differential of intensities, itself a life. In this strange, *vital* materialism, there is no point of pure stillness, no indivisible atom that is not itself aquiver with virtual force" (*Vibrant Matter* 57). In short, there is no static and monastic object, irreducible and fundamentally withdrawn.[10]

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[10]It is worth noting that Bennett does not see her Deleuzian focus on assemblages to be incompatible with OOO: "I find nothing in [this] approach inconsistent with the object-oriented philosopher's claim that things harbor a *differential* between their inside and outside or an irreducible moment of (withdrawn-

Phrased more forcefully: it is our inherent understanding of the essence of things as "objects" that renders essence itself unthinkable, as we force ever-evolving materialities and ephemeral assemblages into stable mental categories that fail to contain them. But this unthinkability does not mean that essence cannot be felt, intuited, perceived in the phenomena we *do* experience: "shapes like Odradek live everywhere on the *surface*, as simulacra do. The netherworld of which Odradek brings obscure news is intensely proximate" ("The Shapes of Odradek" 25, original emphasis). Essence and appearance thus begin to collapse one into the other; this is the implication of "Odradek as emissary from a sensorium immanent to the one in which we normally reside, a companion world, call it occult or uncanny, of weird configurations and speeds, postures and trajectories. These all coexist, maybe subsist or sursist, alongside the objects and temporalities with which we are more at home" ("The Shapes of Odradek" 28). Odradek is the perceptible edge of what cannot be fully perceived—like unseen infrared or ultraviolet rays (what are called impossible, forbidden colors), like ultrasound or low-frequency sound waves inaudible to human ears but still capable of damaging our hearing.

An *object*-oriented thought, to Bennett, fails insofar as it guarantees that such unstable and evolving *materialities* remain invisible and mute to us. But Bennett also must, and does, acknowledge her own *a priori* judgments: namely, her steadfast (if not unquestioned) adherence to ontologies of *becoming*—of which Odradek would be an illustration: "Odradek [. . .] brings to the fore *the becoming of things"* (*Vibrant Matter* 8, my emphasis). And while I am generally far more receptive to Bennett's theory than to Morton's, I must admit that this insistence on perpetual becoming leads her, albeit only temporarily, to a much more grievous misreading of Kafka's text—one that posits an *evolution* and an *instability* in Odradek where there is little evidence of such:

> Odradek is an unstable form [. . .] Odradek's shape-shifting lacks any discernible logic, progression, or even functionality [. . .] Odradek doesn't seem to have a history and neither does it seem to be *on the way* to somewhere or something. Odradek simply hangs around rather than engages in [. . .] self-overcomings or serial becomings. ("The Shapes of Odradek" 24, original emphasis)

Not only is this reading wrongheaded, it is, furthermore, self-contradictory: it begins with the assertion that Odradek is unstable and shape-shifting and then dehistoricizes (denarrativizes) this protean flux before concluding that Odradek (because he lacks both history and telos) merely remains without becoming. Odradek, as a form, is *formless*, on this view—much closer to the Kantian sublime than Morton's object-oriented Odradek. But there is little reason

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from-view) interiority" ("Systems and Things" 227, original emphasis). She is, in fact, quite receptive to the notion of the hyperobject and its "objection (. . .) to even a fractious-assemblage kind of 'holism'" ("Systems and Things" 229). The conflict, as Bennett presents it, comes rather from the side of object-oriented ontology, which "tries to insulate this object-to-object encounter from depictions that *also* locate activity in the relationships themselves or at the systemic level of operation, but I do not think that this parsing attempt succeeds. To be honest, I don't quite see why it is worth the trouble, though it does testify to the purity of commitment to the aloof object" ("Systems and Things" 228).

(merely a temptation) to believe that Odradek evolves in any sense. The relevant passage is the same as earlier, but Bennett, unlike Morton, alludes to it in one of the ellipses above:

> Man wäre versucht zu glauben, dieses Gebilde hätte früher irgendeine zweckmäßige Form gehabt und sei es jetzt nur zerbrochen. Dies scheint aber nicht der Fall zu sein; wenigstens findet sich kein Anzeichen dafür; *nirgends sind Ansätze oder Bruchstellen zu sehen*, die auf etwas Derartiges hinweisen würden; das Ganze *erscheint* zwar sinnlos, aber in seiner Art abgeschlossen (283, my emphasis)

Man wäre versucht: one would be tempted. And one is. But just as any speculation regarding Odradek's apparent aim can occur only as a Kantian counterfactual (purposiveness *without* purpose), attributing to Odradek an evolution is equally problematic in its attempt to categorize the non-categorical. As a matter of *appearance*—of phenomena—Odradek *appears* [*erscheint*] senseless, meaningless, but this does not imply that the object *in itself* is incomplete. The trouble with Odradek is, then, not *ontological* but instead merely the product of *epistemological* uncertainty. While consisting of a bricolage of seemingly senseless and unstable elements—bits of mismatched string trailing behind—Odradek is nonetheless complete and *un*changing: nothing has been added or removed.

Instead, Odradek's indeterminacy is closer to the materiality of quantum mechanics: Odradek is neither wave nor particle until obliged to be so by our observation. Bennett implies as much when she contends:

> Odradek is indeterminate between organic and inorganic: neither quite spool nor child, its rolling down the stairs is neither a falling nor a jumping, and its sonority neither quite a laugh nor a 'rustling of fallen leaves.' Even when Odradek leans toward the inanimate, when, for example, he is mute and 'as wooden as his appearance,' there remains a certain vibratory hum to Odradek. A certain endurance. (. . .) Odradek is likely to survive us all ("The Shapes of Odradek" 24)

Odradek is not withdrawn in any way: Odradek is fully available to us, merely not fully *interpretable*, not to be ascribed to preconceived categories. Odradek is, in fact, *too fully* available—exceeding all established binaries with a hitherto unknown, imperceptible or even inconceivable third option: neither one nor the other, neither he nor it, subject nor object, actual nor purely virtual: "Wooden yet lively, verbal yet vegetal, alive yet inert, Odradek is ontologically multiple" (*Vibrant Matter* 8). And while this multiplicity or in-betweenness is the *essence* of Bennett's understanding of *becoming*, it is also the greatest objection I will raise against it: for it, too, upholds and perpetuates precisely the types of ontological binaries that Odradek so persistently undermines—ushering back in temporarily abandoned notions of essence and appearance, for instance, or, more fundamentally, deciding between (static)

being on the one hand and becoming on the other.[11] But Odradek, again, is neither: his loose threads trail behind him *as if* he were unraveling, and yet there are no signs of any breaks or fractures.

It is instead because Odradek exceeds such anthropological understanding that it/he communicates to human ears some hum of what exists beyond our apperception and our epistemological limitations; in short, Odradek's enduring, timeless rustle compels us to imagine the unimaginable, to conceive of what survives us as individuals, or even as a species: "Earth might well harbor life-shapes long after the human species, at least as we currently can conceive it, is extinct. I am not sure what the implications of this idea are for contemporary life" ("The Shapes of Odradek" 28). Odradek, like Bennett's vital materialism itself, may well make possible new perspectives, but their precise ethical implications remain to be developed. In all events, this thinking once again makes clear the painful irony of the *name* we have given to our era: "to live in the age of the Anthropocene is, despite the hubris of that descriptor, to live with the thought of extinction. And to encounter Odradek is to experience that a little more sharply" ("The Shapes of Odradek" 17). We have elected to define our era as the age of the human, and yet the Anthropocene, despite this designation, means coming to terms with what is *not* human—with what will survive us. Speaking of these survivors as *materialities* rather than as *objects* will not change that.

3. Odradek as Ecotechnological

Hillis Miller does not dabble in ontologies. This does not necessarily entail any cheap "postmodern" wholesale dismissal of the very possibility of extratextual reality full stop, but the work of deconstruction operates, after all, to engender skepticism toward the kind of transcendental signifiers that aspire to point to a position elsewhere, outside of, behind, or beyond language. And in this sense, the variety of deconstructive thinking practiced by Miller is an important—and gratefully acknowledged—precursor to Morton's notion of *hypocrisy*, perpetually aware of the tenuousness of its own propositions. "It is not," writes Arkady Plotnitsky, summarizing the metaphysical thinking of Miller, Derrida and de Man, "that nothing exists except what is found on [the] surface, but these other things cannot be assigned 'depth' any more than anything else, such as 'thing-ness' or 'otherness' for example" (225). Deconstruction therefore gestures toward the same overcoming of "ecology" advocated by Morton, if it would, ultimately, take issue with the emphasis on thingness (with the *ontology*) inherent to OOO.[12] Instead, Plotnitsky argues, we ought to refigure the word ontology as "a particular,

[11] This is not to claim that it is possible to reject all forms of dualism, but rather merely to acknowledge that prejudice. Along similar lines, Bennett worries that her essence on becoming might be too anthropological—an objection that is raised elsewhere by Morton: "Morton succeeds in making me think twice about my own attraction to ontologies of becoming when he points out that they are biased toward the peculiar rhythms and scale of the human body" ("Systems and Things" 229).

[12] As Clark, responding to Miller's Odradek essay, among many others, summarizes the problems posed to ecocriticsm by a deconstructive approach to textuality in a recent article on "The Deconstructive Turn in Environmental Criticism": "One can no longer take the opposition of 'culture' on the one side and 'nature' on the other and then argue about the point or line of their differentiation. One questions the

if possibly unknowable or even unconceivable, mode of existence rather than the fact of the existence of something" (224). More clearly than in Morton or Bennett, then, for Miller the problem of Odradek becomes one of *thinkability* rather than of *reality* of things *an sich*.

Nor does this imply, however, that Miller is incapable of recognizing the metaphysical stakes of the texts and authors he examines. In an essay on "Franz Kafka and the Metaphysics of Alienation" from 1991, Miller contends that "The world of Kafka's stories is a world without depth, a world of sheer surface, a world of continual movement (. . .) a universe of pure spectacle. And in such a universe all things are traps which fascinate our attention" (190)—traps in the sense that, precisely because everything would seem to be immediately available on the surface, the reader is quickly *tempted* to find deeper meaning:

> In the end, however, Kafka's universe, for the very reason that it is so completely without depth, comes to seem very deep indeed. For (. . .) the most insignificant detail observed in an inanimate object, precisely because [it] can be given no comforting human meaning, seem[s] to put us in touch immediately with some unfathomable meaning from beyond the human world. The most we can hope is that this meaning has nothing directly to do with us[.] (. . .) But, alas, such is not the case. The conversation *does* concern me. My guilt is being decided, and the moment of my execution set. ("Metaphysics of Alienation" 190, original emphasis)

Odradek is one such snare: an object that can be ascribed "no comforting human meaning" but that therefore appears to put us into an immediate intimacy with the unfathomable, with that which exceeds the realm of human meaning. We feel ourselves implicated in and called upon to interpret *another* meaning: something decidedly nonhuman, often even inhuman. And it is the *human* significance of that which exceeds the anthropological that Miller examines in his recent essay on Odradek and ecological crisis—for global warming *does* concern us: it is our guilt that is being decided and our execution set.

"What makes the reader queasy" about Odradek, so Miller, is a "slight seasickness [. . .] brought about by the way this text resists being read according to [. . .] comforting organic unity models [. . .] so ingrained as to be taken for granted. That is the case in general with ideological prejudices" ("Ecotechnics" 72). But while Miller is probably a more masterful reader of literature than either of the other critics discussed here (more masterful than almost anybody, really), his interpretation of Kafka's text succumbs to—almost gleefully performs—his own ideological prejudices insofar as he discovers in Odradek a procedure akin to deconstruction itself: "a dismantling, I would even dare to say a deconstructuring" ("Ecotechnics" 74). Rather than as an *object* or as *matter*, Miller understands Odradek as a *machine*, "a technological artifact" that

> seems to have no creator. It seems to be self-generated and self-generating. It is certainly not the result of human will and technological know-how. It

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coherence of making any such distinction in the first place, and the anthropocentric fantasy that sustains it" (13).

> is best described as a machine, but as a machine that is unworked, inoperative, or disarticulated, though it goes on and on doing its thing, working away, like the Energizer bunny. It is a *techné* without a technologist or technician. ("Ecotechnics" 88)

Odradek is understood here as a purposeless *procedure*—and one that functions well, if, on this reading, self-destructively. And while Miller does not make the allusion, this paradoxical working-as-unworking of a machine whose function is to break down—to *mal*function—affords one compelling interpretation of Odradek's perplexing rustle. For Roland Barthes, after all,

> Le bruissement, c'est le bruit de ce qui marche bien. Il s'ensuit ce paradoxe : le bruissement dénote un bruit limite, un bruit impossible, le bruit de ce qui fonctionnerait à la perfection n'a pas de bruit ; bruire, c'est faire entendre l'évaporation même du bruit : le ténu, le brouillé, le frémissant sont reçus comme les signes d'une annulation sonore. [. . .] Ce sont donc les machines heureuses qui bruissent (94)

A rustle is an echo of malfunction where none exists: it is an excess or significatory remainder signaling its own impending *Aufhebung* or self-annulment.

Thus the specific *techné* exemplified by Odradek is, on Miller's reading, an *unstructuring* or *destructuring* structure—a virus-like "auto-co-immune" disorder (the neologism is borrowed form Derrida) that Miller uses as a lens for understanding not only global warming but also similarly (self-)destructive contemporary phenomena such as the resistance to healthcare reform in the United States, the worldwide banking crisis, and the war in Afghanistan. The advantage to the technological model for an interpretation of these catastrophes is that it avoids the pitfalls of ingrained ideologies and reductively organic or anthropological models; Miller takes "the word 'Odradek' and the thing 'Odradek' as a way of exemplifying the model of self-destructuring inorganic technological structures I have in mind as a replacement for thinking on the model of the organic" ("Ecotechnics" 87). While not ontologically oriented, the impetus is nonetheless a desire to conceive of the inconceivable and to better come to terms with things as *things* and not merely with things as they are to us as human beings—to fathom what cannot be understood from an anthropological angle, namely: "a mad *techné* that produces machines that do not make sense from the perspective of human needs and wants, or from any other imaginable perspective" ("Ecotechnics" 88).

This, though, leads to certain conceptual glitches. Like Bennett, Miller mistakenly attributes to Odradek an evolution or, in this case, more specifically, a *devolution*: Odradek, for Miller, is not "a static assemblage" but rather "in a process of constant dynamic movement" ("Ecotechnics" 74).[13] And while this is indeed a helpful perspective for understanding the political and ecological phenomena described by Miller, it is an interpretation of the text

[13]In an interview published online, Bennett, for her part, proves empathetic to but ultimately differentiates her theory of assemblages from the kind described here: "while I think it's a mistake to allow 'mechanism' to serve as a generalizable or all-purpose model for natural systems (a model that con-

with which I cannot—for reasons already discussed—agree. More troubling, however, is the almost willfully tautological nature of Miller's intellectual endeavor in this essay: Odradek is proffered as the model for both an ecotechnological *object* (the ecotechnological as contemporary phenomenon) and a *subjective* ecotechnological awareness (the ecotechnological as a new way of making meaning, of making sense of the world around us). If there is indeed a destructuring structure to be discovered in Odradek, then it is only in our reaction to the object rather than in the object itself: again, the orientation is epistemological rather than ontological. Odradek (as object) destructures our thinking (our subjectivity), making us momentarily aware of that which we *cannot* think. But the unthinkable remains just that: unthinkable. Dubbing it *ecotechnological*, as Miller does, is ultimately merely a rhetorical move.

Conclusion

It is unfortunately not the case that such rhetorical-conceptual shifts constitute practical solutions to the problem. As Miller, probably the most pessimistic of the three thinkers considered here, readily admits: "Using the technological model as a way of outlining what is happening [. . .] will not keep what is occurring from occurring. Like Odradek, my prime model [. . .] of the inorganic ecotechnological, these unworked machines just keep mindlessly doing their thing" ("Ecotechnics" 99). And yet, if indeed the world is ending, these new models may at least provide a better way of *representing* the impending apocalypse, as Miller continues:

> This alternative paradigm does, however, provide a better *techné* or tool than the organic model for sketching out what is happening as the water rises around us. Unfortunately [. . .] the ecotechnological model does not lead to clear cognition or understanding. At most it invites the sorts of performative action, such as passing laws about carbon emissions, that seem exceedingly unlikely to take place. ("Ecotechnics" 99)

And what is perhaps most disappointing about the three perspectives presented here is that their ethical implications seem similarly limited to the realm of the performative. This is in part because, in each case, the prescribed ethic is an almost identical reiteration of the epistemological paradigm itself. For Miller, as I have just suggested, an ecotechnological awareness (albeit rather futile) is the only appropriate response to the recognition of the ruinously destructuring structures of our ecotechnological era. Morton appears to have trouble moving past the reactions of *hypocrisy, weakness*, and *lameness* by which we recognize the advent of the hyperobject to begin with: his call for non-hierarchical "~~animism~~" is little more than a method to reveal the absence of any possible metalanguage (hypocrisy), the rift between essence and appearance manifested by the withdrawnness of all objects (weakness) and the

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tinues to linger in popular and social scientific imaginations), it would be foolish to deny that many assemblages function with a degree of regularity and repetition characteristic of machines" ("Vibrant Matters: An Interview with Jane Bennett").

fragility of all entities (lameness). Bennett almost certainly provides the most practicable ethic, with her call to reasoned engagement, strategic self-preservation, and considered alternation between attempts at sustainability and enhanced intervention. But even her vital materialism is both a description of the matter under consideration and the prescribed sensitivity to it.

Perhaps, though, the success of such readings is their failure—they succeed conceptually precisely because they point to that which cannot (yet) be adequately conceptualized. This would bear testimony to an aporia that the present essay is equally unable to avoid: such instrumentalizing attempts to establish Odradek's exemplary or iconic status as an emblem of a given (ecocritical) model must inevitably reduce, distill, perhaps even anthropomorphize an object (of observation or of study) that steadfastly resists such easy understanding. This is far from supporting Werner Hamacher's notion that the name Odradek "'bedeutet', daß er nicht bedeutet" (307). Indeed, as is evident from this plethora of contradictory readings, if anything Odradek means *too much*, his/its meaning exceeds language and, by extension, perhaps even thought. As Hamacher continues: "Sein Name heißt, daß er nicht heißt; das er keine andere Sprache hat als die, die 'ohne Sprache' sagt; daß sein Name 'Ohne Name' ist" (315). That Hamacher's passing assertion about the meaninglessness of Kafka is, all told, a relatively common one does not detract from the irony of this position: namely, that such an exuberant and enlightening exegesis as Hamacher's would result, to some degree at least, in an apparent admonition against exegesis.

If Odradek is indeed a trap—a seduction to search for meaning deeper than the meaning we could possibly comprehend—then we are obligated to continue reading not only because we do not, but precisely because we *cannot* understand. Odradek is not an essence but an idiom: present in the stutterings of its own name, in the vibratory rustle of its laughter. Despite the urgency to understand, Odradek's may well be a language it takes many generations to learn. After all, the *Hausvater*'s greatest worry, ultimately, is for his progeny: "Sollte er also einstmals etwa noch vor den Füßen meiner Kinder und Kindeskinder mit nachschleifendem Zwirnsfaden die Treppe hinunterkollern?" (284). With differing degrees of self-awareness, the three readings critiqued here force Odradek—*sublate* Odradek—into the framework of human paradigms that, for all of their purported radicality, predictably and ineluctably fail to transcend an anthropologically oriented approach. But, to speak with Barthes, perhaps such sublation is itself a *rustling*: the echo of old ways of thinking as we slowly but inevitably approach the new.

University of Pennsylvania

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