

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

A Single Day of Solitude: Reading Samantha Harvey's *Orbital* for an Object-Oriented Literary Geography

Philip Howell

University of Cambridge

Abstract: This paper offers a reading of Samantha Harvey's *Orbital* (2023) in support of an 'object-orientated' literary geography. Informed by the wider movement of speculative realism but drawing heavily on Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) I provide a broad outline for a literary geography that recognises space as an emergent property of objects. Space in OOO is defined as the tensions between a 'withdrawn' real object and the 'sensual qualities' involved in the relations that exist with other objects. Focussing on the objects that are texts, the absence of relations is a fundamental theme. This is explored through a reading of *Orbital*: Harvey's novel explores the disconnection and dislocation of life on the International Space Station, this quality being the inevitable concomitant of real objects withdrawing from other objects (including but not limited to human beings). *Orbital*'s narrative accordingly refuses the anthropocentrism inherent in the idea that the world can only be perceived as a correlative of human perception or knowledge. Readers can nevertheless relate to *Orbital* because spatiality is played out in the aesthetic experience of momentarily crossing the gulf between real objects and their sensual qualities. The mediating role of art, including the reading of imaginative literature, is emphasized as a way of alluding to 'real objects' beyond the human, the inherent limitations of consciousness and cognition matched by aesthetic attunement to the otherness of reality. Literary spatiality is thus enacted in both the withdrawal of real objects in literary texts and in their aesthetic allure.

Keywords: speculative realism; object-oriented ontology; literary spatiality; relational literary geography; aesthetics; Samantha Harvey.

Author contact: philip.howell@geog.cam.ac.uk

Introduction

This paper explores what literary geography could look like if we took an object-oriented approach to literature and literary spatiality. *Object-oriented* here refers to a focus on *objects*, which are not to be identified with material things but should be understood instead as any entities that can be considered to exist, whether these be physical or conceptual or even imaginary. There is some literary criticism informed by this current of speculative realism (for instance, Harman 2012a; 2016; Morton 2013a), also known as Object-Oriented Ontology or OOO (pronounced ‘triple-O’). Speculative fiction has proved a particularly fertile field (Harman 2012b; Willems 2017), though more canonical genres such as romanticism (Gottlieb 2016) have also attracted OOO criticism. There are a few examples of direct relevance to literary geography (including, in this journal, Peterle and Rossetto 2023). But speculative realism has commanded limited attention from geographers, as part of a general interest in speculative thinking (Williams and Keating 2022) or in a loose synthesis with assemblage and actor-network theories, new materialism, vital materialism, and other variants of flat ontology and its resolute anti-anthropocentrism (see Baumgartner 2012; Bergmann 2016; Rogers 2018; Rossetto 2019). But there are no very straightforward guidelines, and much that is actively misleading. I will set out here what I believe to be the most productive way forward for literary geographers, focussing on OOO’s definition of space as the *rift* between real objects and their perceived qualities. By way of example, I provide a reading of Samantha Harvey’s 2024 Booker Prize winning novel *Orbital*. On the one hand, I see Harvey theatricalising the ‘infinity of gaps or vacuums between objects’ (Bryant 2011: 364). But on the other, I suggest that Harvey’s work attests to the ‘allure’ of objects, the pull of art being a special case of OOO’s distinctive spatial ontology. Harvey’s novel gives us ‘the legitimate feeling of being on foreign territory – of being entirely elsewhere’ (Meillassoux 2009: 7); it attunes us to ‘starry landscapes haunted by poets and mad scientists’ (Harman 2011a: 21), wholly outside of purely human concerns.

In a World of Objects

OOO has its origins in ‘speculative realism’ (see Brassier et al. 2007), a loose movement united mostly in opposition to what Quentin Meillassoux termed ‘correlationism’. This is the conviction that for knowledge to exist, the world must be understood as consistent with our mental constructs; this is, in Graham Harman’s alternative phrasing, the philosophy of human access, access to reality apparently being possible only through human mediation. Adherents of correlationism (for Meillassoux, this means almost every serious thinker since Kant) end up asserting, in stronger or weaker flavours of anti-realism, that the world cannot meaningfully be said to exist outside human consciousness and language. For correlationists, we cannot think ourselves outside of thought: as Meillassoux (2009: 7) puts it, ‘the space of exteriority is merely the space of what faces us, or what exists only as a power of reciprocal relation’. Speculative realists, in rather different ways, refuse to accept this epistemological impasse. Arguably the most prominent challenge has come in the form of ‘object-oriented ontology’, OOO. ‘Objects’ are not to be confused with material phenomena, and it is part of the strange

appeal of OOO that the term includes things like black holes and blast furnaces, fictional characters and fantastical creatures, even (as I will go on to explain) relations between objects. It is important to note at the outset that OOO comes in different forms too, but I suggest here that Levi Bryant and Graham Harman are most representative of this argument, with Ian Bogost and Timothy Morton as prominent later adherents. I draw on all four, and some others, though this paper is heavily dependent on Harman's corpus. I should just as quickly add that the subsequent exposition and elaboration may not match Harman's views, nor others' interpretations of his work.

Harman's route out of the correlationist cul-de-sac is particularly effective because of his refusal to privilege the human, whether we refer to mind, society, culture, language, discourse, ideology, or anything with a similar solipsistic spin. Objects are simply independent of human beings. They precede as well as exceed the attention of other objects (including but never limited to human beings). In OOO language, objects 'withdraw'. They are not bound to human consciousness, but they also exceed encounters with all other objects. What seems like the specifically *epistemic* problem of the human mind's access to reality (the vaunted subject-object relation) is for Harman a universal *ontological* condition (that is, every single object-object relation). Interaction *is* possible, but an object's real nature is never fully perceived or exhausted by whatever communications they have with other objects (again, human or otherwise). *External* or 'foreign' relations (Bryant 2011: 90 speaks of 'exo-relations') are thus secondary phenomena. The argument depends however on recognising that objects have a distinctive *internal* structure. These 'domestic' relations (for Bryant, 'endo-relations') must exist because (a) objects cannot be confused with their accidental qualities, and (b) the real and the perceived are quite different things. The argument is derivative from Harman's reading of Heidegger's discussion of the ready-at-hand and the present-at-hand, which gives us the distinction between the real object and its sensual qualities, while the distinction between the sensual object and its real qualities comes from Husserl's elaboration of intentionality: but for our purposes we can skip to OOO's discovery of the 'quadruple object' (Harman 2011b; 2017). This is composed of the real object and its real qualities, plus a perceived or 'sensual' object and its perceived (or 'sensual') qualities. There are four primary axes connecting the four fundamental elements, *Real Object* (RO), *Real Qualities* (RQ), *Sensual Object* (SO), and *Sensual Qualities* (SQ). Radically simplifying a familiar OOO diagram but adding an opaque fill to indicate the withdrawn and ultimately inaccessible facets of reality, we can picture the multiplicity of every object as in Figure 1.

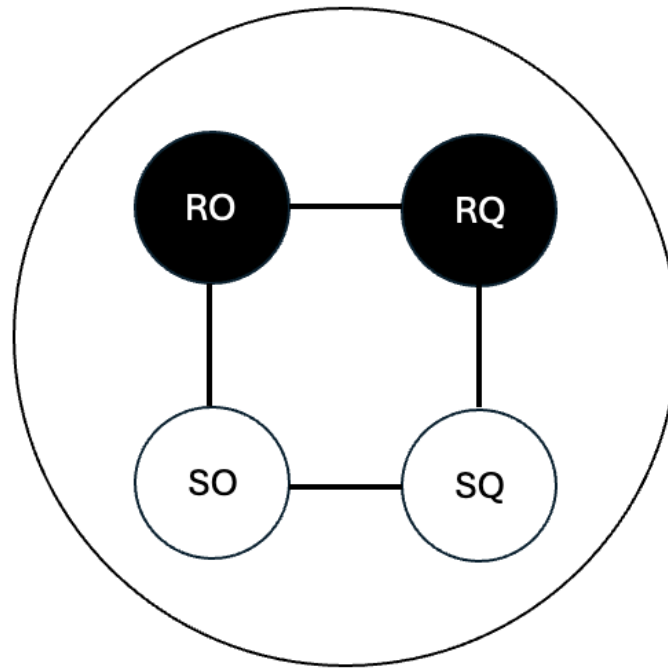


Figure 1. The quadruple object (simplified, shading added).

It is intriguing for geographers that Harman defines *space* as the *tension between a real object and its sensual qualities* (this is the untraced diagonal between RO and SQ in Figure 1). Harman's gambit here is to accept that there is a rift between human and world (the classic epistemological concern that preoccupies modern thought) but insisting that this is no different in kind from the withdrawal of any object from any other. This is therefore a rift in reality – *between objects*, as we might say. But there is a second rift, this time *within each object*, between an object and its qualities and between the real and the sensual (though, since the sensual object and its qualities exist because of other objects, there is strictly speaking only the single rift). Importantly, we are led to think of the nature of objects as self-othering (Bryant 2011: 112) with space emerging from the nature of objects, rather than objects merely inhabiting space or being merely the product of (spatial) relations. For Bryant (2011), objects 'nest' within objects, so that each object is a crowd, though the verb 'nesting' is misleading, since in the 'strange mereology' of object-oriented theory (198), parts exist outside of or beyond the whole and the whole exists independently of its parts. Spatiality is best understood as topological rather than geometric. As Bryant (120) helpfully puts it, objects have 'a topological plasticity that is nonetheless absolutely individual and concrete'.

In this world of withdrawn objects, how do objects connect or relate to each other at all? The answer for Harman is that they only partially do so, and that for most of their existence they do not: as he bluntly asserts, 'most things do not affect each other in the least' (Harman 2019: xi). To speak with books in mind, we might reasonably suppose that many texts find few readers, and surely very few, perhaps vanishingly few, change us in genuinely

meaningful ways, despite the frequent arguments to the contrary. One of the important early lessons for literary geographers might be that we do not have to think of objects like books only through their relations with readers (for which, see Anderson 2014; Anderson and Saunders 2015; Hones 2024; Thurgill 2021). We do not have to privilege external or foreign relations, and certainly not to the exclusion of all else. What something *does*, does not define what it *is*. Speaking specifically about literature, Harman is characteristically caustic about what he consistently terms *relationism*, the now rather familiar privileging of becoming over being, and what something does over what something is:

‘Everything is connected’ is one of those methods that has long since entered its decadence, and must be abandoned. What is more interesting is why *certain* things are connected rather than others. We must be fully aware of nonconnections in any consideration of cultural influence on literature. (Harman 2012a: 201, emphasis in original).

There are several problems with these relationist (*not* relational) arguments. The less serious include the fact that by black boxing relations, as if nothing more needs to be said, we make relations the *explanans* rather than the *explanandum* (Harman 2019: 138). But we also paradoxically risk downgrading the significance of relations, by implying that all relations are of more or less equal significance. Most importantly, though, it is hard to see how such webs or networks or entanglements *change*: the rhetoric and ideology of relationism struggle with causation, for ‘when everything changes, nothing does’ (Harman 2011a: 300).

Harman argues in fact that *only* by acknowledging the sovereign existence of objects can we theorise change adequately. That said, change and causation only happen in OOO by way of mediation rather than through direct contact. Harman calls this ‘vicarious causation’ and presents it, strikingly, as an essentially *aesthetic* encounter between objects. The argument is that one object acts on another object only through the partial and temporary connection between sensual object and sensual object, sensual qualities and sensual qualities, a phenomenon Harman characterises by the term *allure*. We have again the autonomy of objects: ‘Allure alludes to entities as they are, quite apart from any relations with or effects upon other entities in the world’ (Harman 2012a: 187). But at the same time the idea of allure registers the gravitational pull of the withdrawn object, an ‘aesthetic’ form of action at a distance (Shavero 2014: 147-48). Allure allows *limited* communication across the void, acting then as ‘a bridge to the real’ (Harman 2019: 134), but this touch without touching does not collapse objects into one another or dissolve them into their relations. Instead, Harman claims, *every relation produces a new, hybrid object*. This is hard to conceive, but if we think of human relationships, we straightforwardly appreciate that every such relationship is more than the sum of its parts. As Bryant (2011: 283) notes, ‘the romantic relationship is composed not of two objects, but of three objects. Here you have the two people involved in the relationship, as well as the amorous relationship itself. The amorous relationship is an object independent of the two persons in the amorous relationship’.

Let me try to picture how this works in Figure 2, noting again that here I am going out on a limb in trying to present this non-intuitive model of causality:

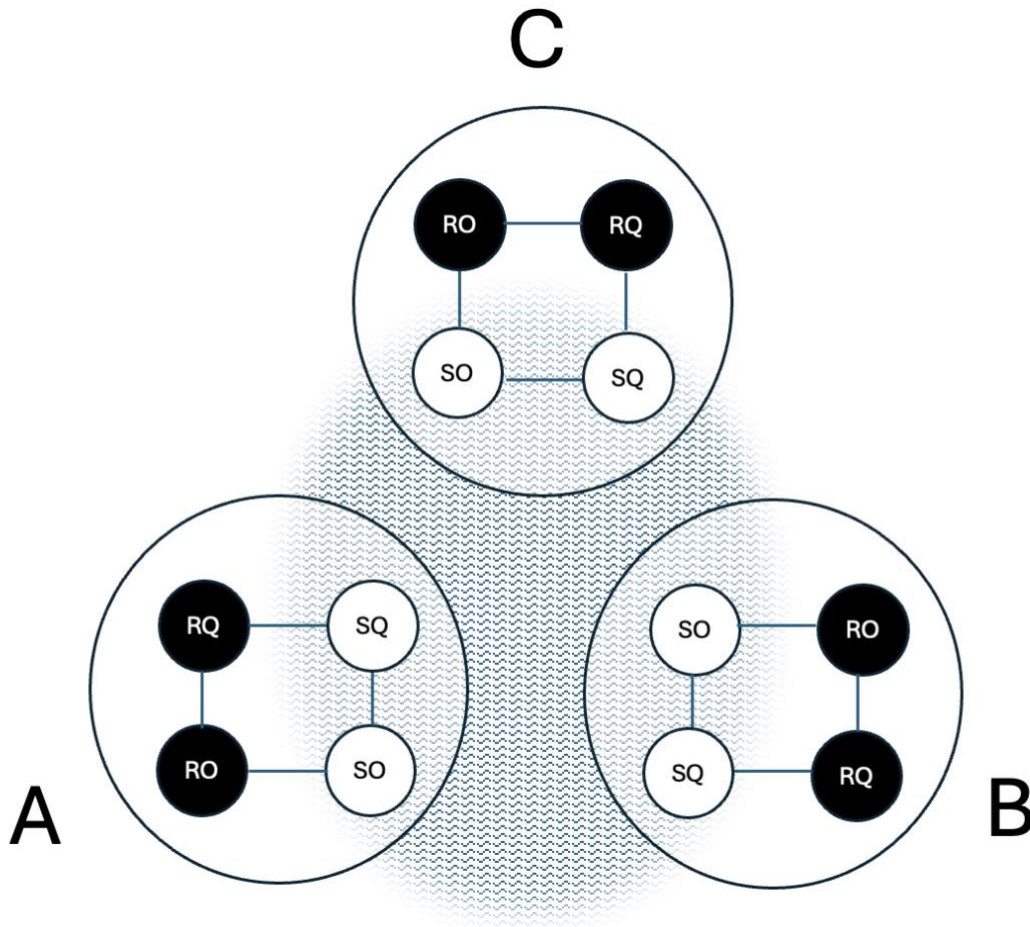


Figure 2. Vicarious causation (speculative).

In Figure 2, when object A and object B communicate with each other, their separate realities *never meet*. I am drawing particularly here on Harman's emphasis on *contiguity* ("The various sensual objects in an intention lie *side by side*, not affecting one another. Only sometimes do they fuse or mix' (Harman 2007: 199, emphasis added), though I have taken the liberty of rotating the objects so that their 'sensual' sides are aligned with each other. One object can only ever interact with a very partial aspect of another, so partial indeed as to be something of a caricature. In Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, for instance, to revisit human relationships, we know (and so do the characters, mostly, most of the time) that *Cleopatra's* love-object 'Antony' is a ludicrously overblown image of a world-bestrident hero, and *Antony's* 'Cleopatra' an equally unreal portrait of a fearless and peerless queen. The characters themselves, as *objects*, exist apart and even perhaps *off stage*, 'somehow always elsewhere, in a site divorced from all relations' (Harman 2005: 81), locked away in 'nature's infinite book of secrecy' (act I, scene ii). Characters communicate – the play is a great theatricalization of allure,

after all – but they do so only in the ‘ubiquitous ether of qualities through which these objects interact’ (76; see also Bryant 2011: 92), something that I have tried to indicate with the fuzzy signal wave shading in Figure 2. The result of Antony and Cleopatra’s union, as with any romantic relationship, is of course the new object C. To themselves, and to the court, and to their enemies in Rome, Antony and Cleopatra become Antony-and-Cleopatra (or ‘Tony-and-Cleo’ if you prefer the *Carry On* version to the bard). We might think of their great moments together on stage as a ‘particular kind of mediation, which allows beings to subsist together in a shared reality, a common place, while preserving their independence, their inconsistency, their resistance, their mutual otherness’ (Chin 2022: 45), these words perfectly fitting the dreamworld of playful mutual delusion that Antony and Cleopatra in their proximity and prolixity *perform*.

Figure 2 can stand in just as well for Harman’s discussion of *metaphor*, which gives us a further example of relationality as *aesthetic* contact (see Bogost 2012: 61-84; Shaviri 2014: 138), and a further link to the literary besides. Informed by Ortega y Gasset and his famous example – ‘a cypress is the ghost of a dead flame’ – Harman argues that metaphor operates in the same way as all forms of causality. *Successful* metaphors allow readers to *approach* the hidden depths of the real objects that are invoked. To put it another way, reversing the emphasis, metaphors permit the momentary ‘intrusion of an alien presence’ (Peterle and Rossetto 2023: 55), resulting in novel forms of sensing or understanding. For Harman a successful metaphor like Ortega’s works by creating a new object, *cypress-flame*, the cypress being the real object to which the sensual qualities of flame are grafted. But he goes further, by insisting that a mediating real object is needed, and this can only be the *reader*. We as readers *live* the hybrid cypress-flame, granting it a new and autonomous existence. If we accept this analysis of metaphor, we can argue that thinking about the way literature works offers something that the *literal* language of science cannot provide: partial and limited access to the otherness of objects. Objects engender new realities, but they do so only through an aesthetic relation.

We might bear being reminded that ‘allure’ is the basis for all communication between objects and has no special place for human beings and their cultural productions. But Harman’s (2019) discussion of art suggests that there is one field where human beings *are* privileged. Where the objects that are *artworks* are concerned, Harman insists that the mediating object can only be a human observer, spectator, or listener – or, as in the above discussion, *reader*. In art, writes Harman (2020: 173), ‘beholder and artwork fuse jointly into a third and higher object’. There is some room for confusion here, as Harman also writes that the artwork is ‘a compound entity made of work and beholder’ (Harman 2019: 8), but let us simply say that object A, the artwork, and object B, the human being who *responds*, become the third object. In his discussion of art, Harman draws heavily on the deeply unfashionable formalist art criticism of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, with support for the focus on the autonomy of artworks themselves. Praise for formalism is tempered by Harman’s championing of theatricality, however, which is anathema to Fried but taken by Harman as a marker of not merely absorption but the fusion of artwork and observer. It is enough to note here that this is the only defensible version of anthropocentrism in all of Harman’s work: the artwork needs a human beholder to exist as an object (Harman 2019: 44).

We might think that OOO gives us here a more-or-less direct route to literature: text plus reader produces the text-reader hybrid. Harman's focus on pictorial and plastic art perhaps hampers him where other kinds of art are concerned, however, and an object-oriented literary criticism is frustratingly difficult to pin down. In the most extended discussion, for instance, the literary critic Grant Hamilton recommends merely a kind of modestly enhanced reader-response criticism. Despite acknowledging the relevance of the New Criticism and its concerns with the interiority of the text, Hamilton cautions against its 'untimely rediscovery', seeing in it merely 'the same failure of previous generations to fully grasp the text itself' (Hamilton 2015: 117, 65), these last words glaringly at odds with the most basic of OOO propositions. Hamilton also emphasises in a straightforwardly relationist manner the 'endless transformation' (2015: 78) of text and world, and the same goes for the relations between texts and readers ((2015: 99). Hamilton's focus on the text object's external relations goes on to advertise a literary criticism which is disappointingly conventional: 'every reading machine is embedded in the swell of collective ideas that inform the attitudes of a particular culture – morality, ethics, politics, and gender being just some of the obvious collective position through which we think' (Hamilton 2015: 114). It is hard to see the challenge of speculative ontology here.

So, what should a literary criticism taking OOO seriously actually offer, and what might this mean for *literary geography*? I am not particularly keen on programmatic statements, but as a first principle, we should start by recognising the text as an autonomous object. Even the reader-response critic Wolfgang Iser (1978: 24) accepts that 'fictional texts constitute their own objects'. Rather than shackle speculative realism to the worst aspects of relationism, we might follow the formalists at least part way in rejecting any lingering literalism: the idea that we can account for a work like a literary text simply by paraphrasing it. As Radić (2025) notes, 'A work of art is not important because it symbolizes something but because, through its presence, materiality, texture, duration, and all its hidden layers, it creates its own reality'. And Hamilton puts it, before diluting his measure of OOO to its end-point: '*Any theory of literature or literary criticism that is inflected with the concerns of object-oriented philosophy must focus literary attention back towards the literary work as an object-in-itself*' (Hamilton 2015: 53, emphasis in original).

We can also agree that texts do communicate and form relations with other objects, most obviously with readers. But OOO would argue that external relations are secondary, occasional, partial sometimes to superficiality, and never come close to exhausting a text's unfathomable depths. Harman's privileging of the consumer of art is likely to be unhelpful here, however, since whilst beholders may well be thought of as 'an active performer of the missing object' (Harman 2019: 136), necessary if not sufficient, literature feels rather less needful of the reader's attentions. As with the proponents of relational literary geography, Harman stresses the creation of the 'text-reader hybrid' (71), but I would suggest that texts do not, at least in principle, need readers at all. The objects that are texts can exist without any reader save the author or the implied reader, as was famously the case for all but ten of Emily Dickinson's poems during her lifetime, or Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters* for most of his. The same is true for any unread draft of any unread work. We do not have to agree with Dickinson that publication is merely 'the Auction/Of the Mind of Man', but a work's availability for

purchase is in this sense an accidental quality of the literary object. At the risk of repetition, relations are simply not necessary for an object like a literary work to exist.

Finally, and this is the point that I really want to emphasise, we can as literary geographers pay close attention to the text's *internal* relations. This is not just a plea for close reading, which despite the relational turn still makes up most literary geography scholarship. Nor should we see literary work as either withdrawn or relational objects – as Rossetto (2019) points out, they are *both*. But OOO gives us creative licence to go back to the uncontainable multiplicity of texts themselves, since 'By excluding the outside of art, we emphasize the multiplicity of its interior' (Harman 2019: 177, emphasis in original). As Bryant (2011: 14) puts it, 'every object is also a crowd of objects'. This 'realism of multitude' (Bogost 2012: 58) is of special relevance for literary geographers, because this internal multiplicity underwrites OOO's spatial ontology. Recalling that for OOO space is the gap between the real object and its sensual qualities, we can for instance stress the play of relation and non-relation that results: 'Space is neither an empty container where events unfold, nor a system of relations between things, but the tension between relation and non-relation in things' (Harman 2022: 299). Space is in OOO *both* the distance between real objects and their sensual qualities, *and* the pull or 'allure' that allows objects momentarily to close this rift. Harman elsewhere terms this 'beauty': 'By art I mean the construction of entities reliably equipped to produce beauty, meaning an explicit tension between hidden real objects and their palpable sensual qualities' (Harman 2019: xii). However unfashionable, beauty is still a perfect term for at least one of the vocations of art and imaginative literature: creative work *alludes* to the gap between real objects and their perceived qualities, and thus to space itself. As Harman puts it, 'objects spatially removed from us are both *absolutely* distant (since they are not directly together melted with us), but also near to us insofar as they *inscribe* their distance in directly accessible fashion' (Harman 2012c: 239, emphasis in original)

Dark Objects in Space

How on earth can we link literature to this 'strange but refreshing geography of objects' (Harman 2011b: 77)? One way might be to leave Earth, or at least to park ourselves a certain distance from it: around 2000km in Low Earth Orbit. The plot of Samantha Harvey's *Orbital* tracks the astronauts on board the International Space Station (ISS) as they complete 16 orbits, travelling at about 28,000 km/h, with a sunrise and sunset every 90 minutes or so of this single day. The novel opens with 'the feeling that we don't know which end is up yet' (Morton 2013a: 155), which is as disorienting to the reader as well as to the astronauts. We know *where* these astronauts are in their precise orbital trajectory (Figure 3), and approximately *when*, in this day in early October in a recent year. But in the ISS's 'crisscrossing mesh of spacetime fluctuations' (Morton 2013b: 65), the fixity of time and space is all awry: we are oriented to objects rather than to a priori forms of intuition. Coordinated Universal Time becomes for the astronauts, for instance, 'a day of five continents and of autumn and spring, glaciers and deserts, wildernesses and warzones' (Harvey 2023: 5; all subsequent unattributed references are from *Orbital*). We appreciate immediately then that space and time are emergent properties of the

object world. Immersed in this strange periodicity of stationary orbit, we have only the feeling of being suspended: ‘moving while standing still, ... stasis in movement’ (Morton 2013a: 154).

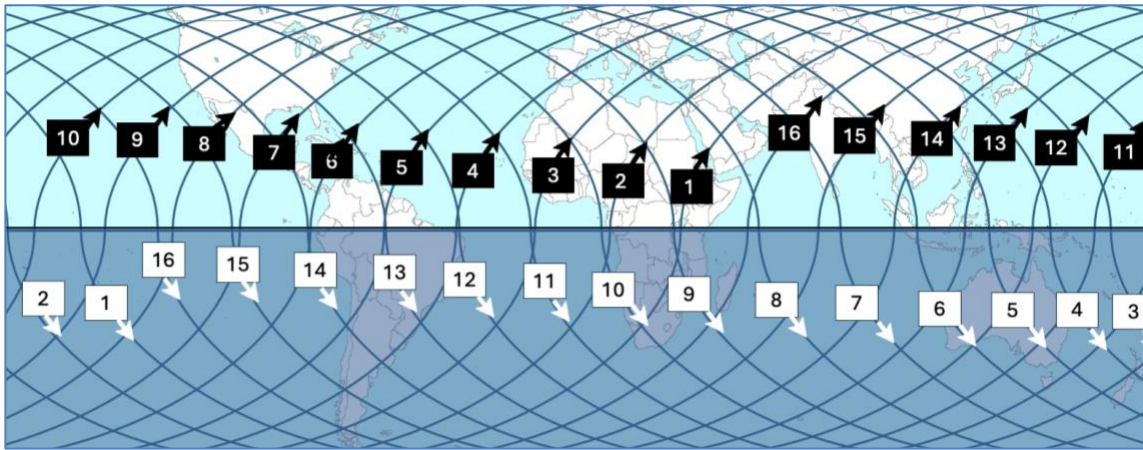


Figure 3. 16 orbits of the International Space Station, northern hemisphere in daylight. Adapted from Harvey (2023).

On the space station we have the six astronauts – or four astronauts and two cosmonauts. In an affective assemblage, Anton functions as the spaceship’s heart, Nell its breath, Pietro its mind, dextrous Roman its hands, the committed Christian Shaun its soul, and the atheist Chie the ship’s conscience: ‘they agree that it’s idiotic, this metaphor. Nonsensical. But unshakeable all the same. There’s something about hurtling in low earth orbit that makes them think this way, as a unit, where the unit itself, their sprawling ship, becomes alive and part of them’ (19). The emphasis is more on disconnection than machinic functionality or organic unity, however. The astronauts have only fitful connections in the ‘height-sick homesick drug of space’ (102). ‘They’re all somewhat solitary and contained,’ thinks Chie, ‘she more than any of them’ (99), given that her mother’s death has just been communicated to her. The other astronauts are, in their different ways, equally adrift. Nell is married, but living in Ireland, a country she hardly knows, her husband acknowledging their disconnection, ‘Your mind full of acronyms and mine full of sheep ailments. Both of us equally unknown’ (85). Anton, his marriage failing, looks down on the Earth, each sight coming to him ‘as a winching open of the heart’ (92). Shaun has the consolation of his evangelical faith, Pietro a poignant connection with a family in the Philippines, and Roman his national pride and drive for exploration, though he too resorts to broken conversations with ham radio enthusiasts on Earth, sporadic words forced through the low orbit static (‘Zdraste?’).

As a setting, the ISS qualifies as a kind of ‘nonsite’, ‘a realm of starkly inhuman activity and radical antisociality’ (Alworth 2016: 155). The space station is a crowd of objects, but the lack of connection means that it is a whole that is far less than the sum of its parts (Morton 2021: 14):

Don't encroach, is their unspoken rule. Little enough space and privacy as it is, all of them stuck here together in each other's pockets breathing each other's overused air for months on end. Don't cross the rubicon into one another's internal lives. (18)

The space station is irreducible to its components, including the individuals who make up its crew; and the individual astronauts are at the same time irreducible to the relations that they have with each other, with the ship, or with the objects in the world outside them. Some of these objects, such as the developing typhoon which will wreak havoc on part of the world below, can only be observed from a distance, or in the case of the ominous crack in the alloy shell of the space station, are completely unperceived save for a barely noticeable drop in pressure in the Russian module. All these objects *exist*, but their inmost reality is hidden from the astronauts just as their separate natures are hidden from each other as well as from themselves – and from us, since Harvey refuses to spell things out.

This point may be easier to grasp if we look at some of the darker objects on which *Orbital* trains our attention. Three of these objects are consistently theatricalised: Space, the Earth, and humanity or humankind. Take *Space* (as capitalised, meaning roughly the zone above and beyond and encompassing the Earth). The 'liquid, luminous swirl' (Morton 2021: 8) of Space escapes our ability to comprehend it. It is what Morton calls a 'hyperobject': vast, but not infinite, and accessible only by way of its parts or regions or slices at any one time (Morton 2013b: 74). Space is radically non-locatable, since we can point a telescope to the heavens, but we cannot point to the real object that is Space. It is simultaneously place and no-place (Morton 2021: 59). Correlationists would insist that this means that we have no position of exteriority and are closed in on ourselves as a result:

on the one hand, correlationism readily insists upon the fact that consciousness, like language, enjoys an originary connection to a radical exteriority (exemplified by phenomenological consciousness transcending or as Sartre puts it "exploding" towards the world); yet on the other hand this insistence seems to dissimulate a strange feeling of imprisonment or enclosure within this very exteriority (the "transparent cage") (Meillassoux 2009: 9).

There is claustrophobia, for sure, but *Orbital's* astronauts are fully alive to the '*great outdoors*' (Meillassoux 2009: 7, emphasis in original), staggered as they are by the beauty and mystery of Space. *Wonder* is how all objects orient themselves (Bogost 2012: 124), and the astronauts are no different. The crew have their sensing devices, but their only real recourse, and the narrator's too, is the repeated use of metaphors. For, as Bogost (66) summarises, 'we never understand the alien experience, we only ever reach for it metaphorically'. Nell, reflecting on an accomplished spacewalk with Pietro, realises that merely looking at space cannot compare with the experience of being in your own private spaceship, as if an EVA is equivalent to exiting Plato's cave:

Somehow, Nell thinks, once you've been on a spacewalk, looking at space through a window is never the same. It's like looking through bars at an animal you once ran with. An animal that could have devoured you yet chose instead to let you into the flank-quivering pulse of its exotic wildness. (68)

This is an exemplary attempt to establish an aesthetic connection by allowing the hidden object *itself* to deform the too-easily-taken-for-granted sensual world (Harman 2012b: 238). The sensual object, Space, is broken apart, in a process Harman calls 'fission', preliminary to the real object establishing a mediated connection, the process of 'fusion'. This is what *proximity* means in Harman's object-oriented philosophy, where no direct relationship is ever made or can ever be made. There can only be the *theatrical* substitution of one object for another and the formation of new *hybrid* objects:

She looked down, how could she not? The earth was tumbling beneath her at speed. The naked startling earth. From out there it doesn't have the appearance of a solid thing, its surface is fluid and lustrous. Then she looked at her hands, which were large and spectral white in their gloves, and she saw her fellow astronaut ahead of her, Pietro, gliding out against profound darkness, the spectrometer they planned to install floating beside him, and he was a bird released to an unimagined freedom. (68)

We can think secondly of the real and sensual object that is the Earth, which only becomes visible *from Space*, in the 'strange parallax effect in which more of a suitably massive object is revealed as one goes farther away from it' (Morton 2013b: 51). And of course, it is revealed only partially, since we only see half the planet at a time. As in Nell's observation above, the planet's dynamic sensuous qualities do not prevent us from recognising the Earth as an object, but this cannot be mistaken for the real object that 'sings with light as if from its core' (36). Once more, the only possible approach to the Earth as a real object is *aesthetic*, via metaphor. In Roman's (or perhaps the narrator's) stab at describing the Earth, we cycle characteristically through a series of analogies that *allude* to the indescribable otherness of the real object and its real qualities:

There's the first dumbfounding view of earth, a hunk of tourmaline, no a cantaloupe, an eye, lilac orange almond mauve white magenta bruised textured shellac-ed splendour. (79).

We approach the Earth not despite but *because* of this excessive confusion of juxtaposed qualities and the increasingly stuttering and ungrammatical metaphors – the gap between the world and our descriptions marking one more instance of the inseparability of relation and non-relation, the rift between objects and their qualities. We (and every other object) need to break apart the sensuous object before we can attempt a flyby of the real object.

Thirdly, and this is most important for our purposes here, there is the strange object that is humanity or humankind. The sense of humanity's *oneness* is easy to reduce to a concept,

whether lauded as an ideal or deprecated as an empty slogan. Cazajous-Augé's reading of *Orbital*, in the positive register, places the emphasis for instance on 'humanity's ethical responsibility' (2025: 105), though by allotting the novel the purpose of 'bridg[ing] the gap of disconnection many feel toward the universe' (113), we are quickly returned to the correlationist corral. Humanity *does* exist, but it is an object hidden from each individual human and every other withdrawn object. Like the Earth from space, humanity is literally a dark object half the time: 'From the space station's distance mankind is a creature that comes out only at night. Mankind is the light of cities and the illuminated filament of roads. By day, it's gone. It hides in plain sight' (14). Humanity here 'hide(s) out in the open, under the spotlight' (Morton 2013a: 55). And the same is true under the microscope, for we also have the research that Anton is working on in the Russian lab, using stem cells sourced from people of different ages, backgrounds, races and ethnicities. As Anton remarks to Roman, 'in these dishes is humanity' (28). This is a figure of speech, of course. As Levine (2015) notes in her argument for the revival of interest in literary forms, wholes do not have to be conceived as bounded, and humanity as a *multitude* cannot be conceived as contained in the petri dishes and sample tubes. Once more, every object is a crowd. Nevertheless, the samples are a precious cargo, more precious indeed than the particular specimens of humanity that make up the current crew (26). The implications are not lost on the astronauts:

what they find is that they are small, no, nothing. They nurture a bunch of cells in vitro which they can see only under a microscope and they know that their being alive in this moment depends on cells just like these in their own puny pulsing hearts. (26-7)

The entire Earth and its human cargo, from this distance, is but 'a piddling speck at the centre of nothing' (27):

This planet that's been relegated out of the centre and into the sidelines – the thing that goes around rather than is gone around, except for by its knobble of moon. This thing that harbours us humans who polish the ever-larger lenses of our telescopes that tell us how ever-smaller we are. And we stand there gaping. And in time we come to see that not only are we on the sidelines of the universe but that it's of a universe of sidelines, that there is no centre, just a giddy mass of waltzing things, and that perhaps the entirety of our understanding consists of an elaborate and ever-evolving knowledge of our own extraneousness, a bashing away of mankind's ego by the instruments of scientific enquiry until it is, that ego, a shattered edifice that lets light through. (28)

Space, the Earth, humanity: these are dramatized as *real* things, withdrawn and impossibly distant as any object is, but in an aesthetic relation something that fitfully and imperfectly becomes darkly apparent. These objects are *there*, even if no-one sees them, even if they elude the adroitness of someone like Anton. The un-handiness of objects, 'whereby our clutching objects causes them to slip from us' (Morton 2013a: 88) is a measure of the fact that objects

only present themselves to us at best as a kind of abridged translation, at worst as a parodic sample.

Two final points speak to the smallness but not insignificance of the Earth and its human inhabitants, the realisation that ‘It’s not peripheral and it’s not the centre; it’s not everything and it’s not nothing, but it seems much more than something’ (28). The first is the rebuttal to a human-centred universe that comes in the conversation between Shaun and Pietro concerning a postcard of Velazquez’s *Las Meninas*, sent by Shaun’s wife sent to remind him of a vital event in their lives, and which Shaun has carried this with him to space, along with her teasing commentary:

What is the subject of the painting? ... Who is looking at whom? The painter at the king and queen; the king and queen at themselves in a mirror; the viewer at the king and queen in the mirror; the viewer at the painter; the painter at the viewer, the viewer at the princess, the viewer at the ladies-in-waiting? Welcome to the labyrinth of mirrors that is human life. (104, emphasis in original)

Pietro immediately finds an answer to the questions posed so many years ago: ‘It’s the dog. ... To answer your wife’s question, the subject of the painting is the dog’ (103). Baffled, Shaun looks again at the painting, and realises that Pietro is right:

Now he doesn’t see a painter or princess or dwarf or monarch, he sees a portrait of a dog. An animal surrounded by the strangeness of humans, all their odd cuffs and ruffles and silks and posturing, the mirrors and angles and viewpoints; all the ways they’ve tried not to be animals and how comical this is, when he looks at it now. And how the dog is the only thing in the painting that isn’t slightly laughable or trapped within a matrix of vanities. The only thing in the painting that could be called vaguely free. (105)

Las Meninas is – for those familiar with Michel Foucault’s *Les Mots et Les Choses* (translated into English as *The Order of Things*) – the starting point for Foucault’s discussion of the invention of ‘Man’ in the early modern period: the installation of a regime of representation ‘in its pure form’, allowing human beings to be positioned as privileged observers, but only by acknowledging ‘the invisibility of the person seeing’, ‘Man’ or humanity or the human being nothing more than an ‘essential void’. Foucault notices the dog, the plaything of the royal children: ‘the only element in the picture that is neither looking at anything nor moving, because it is not intended ... to be anything more than an object to be seen’ (Foucault 2002a: 15). But he develops an anthropocentric and anti-realist position, one which helpfully historicises the human subject only at the cost of dispensing with the ‘enigmatic treasure of “things” anterior to discourse’ (Foucault 2002b: 52). Reflecting on *Las Meninas* and *Let Mots et Les Chose* as alien objects intruding into *Orbital*, we can, by contrast, emphasise the ‘other logics that organize experience in non-human ways’, recognising that ‘The world contains other worlds’ (Poposki 2024: 14). Velazquez’s dog is surrounded by people, framed by a specular anthropocentric order – but the dog is ‘free’, at least of the vain belief in the distinctiveness of human beings and the correlation of knowledge and reality.

The same point is registered earlier, in Orbit 5, in Anton's reflection on the famous photograph taken on 21 July 1969 by Michael Collins, of the lunar module *Eagle* in transit to the command module *Columbia*. Every single human being is supposedly depicted in this photo, except for the photographer himself. As with *Las Meninas*'s crowded canvas, we appear paradoxically to perceive 'the invisibility of the person seeing', Michael Collins here playing the role of disappearing 'Man'. But the cosmonaut Anton demurs:

What of all the people on the other side of the earth that the camera can't see, and everybody in the southern hemisphere which is in night and gulped up by the darkness of space? Are they in the photograph? In truth, nobody is in that photograph, nobody can be seen. Everybody is invisible – Armstrong and Aldrin inside the lunar module, humankind unseen on a planet that could easily, from this view, be uninhabited. The strongest, most deducible proof of life in the photograph is the photographer himself – his eye at the viewfinder, the warm press of his finger on the shutter release. In that sense, the more enchanting thing about Collins's image is that, in the moment of taking the photograph, he is really the *only* human presence it contains. (43)

As Anton realises, Michael Collins is profoundly alone, bereft of connection to human beings:

Anton tends to his wheat, which grows with a vigour that he sometimes finds touching, sometimes thrilling, sometimes sad, but he's stopped by a staggering blackness. Not the theatrical splendour of a hanging, spinning planet, but the booming silence of everything else, the God knows what. That's what Michael Collins called it as he orbited the dark side of the moon alone – Aldrin, Armstrong, earth and mankind all over there, and over here himself, and God knows what. (54)

Anton the signature realist provides a punctum of sorts, drawing our attention to the encompassing presumptions of human knowledge, weighing them up against the staggering blackness and booming silence of the world of objects, and finding them wanting.

Conclusions: A Giddy Mass of Waltzing Things

Orbital exemplifies but also embodies OOO's argument that 'the entire cosmos is a dramatic strife between objects and their relations' (Harman 2019: 20). Perhaps it is better to write that it *enacts* that tension, in the sense of both acting out and putting into practice, perhaps even in the sense of putting a proposal into force. For the stronger argument is that aesthetic work perhaps uniquely attunes us to the 'unbridgeable distance' between objects (Shaviri 2014: 145). This tension between objects and their relations is the matter of space itself, and like Peterle and Rossetto (2023) with McGuire's graphic novel *Here*, or Rossetto (2019) with Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*, I suggest that texts like this disrupt or dislocate the sensual qualities of the experienced world. We (and every other thing) can be momentarily transported by the alien presence of real objects (Morton 2013a: 131), objects that deform the

sensual world and point to a presence beyond the human (Willems 2017), even if this leaves us, like Collins, poignantly aware of our own solitude. But in this aesthetic encounter, we are allowed close enough to other objects to sense their alien-ness, and thus their reality. Novels like this allude to that reality, and literary spatiality is relation as well as non-relation. ‘Relation’ here might indeed best be understood as a *re-lating* or *telling*, something very like the etymology of metaphor as a *carrying-over*. Objects like *Orbital* put us in momentary contact with the ‘rich elsewhere’ (see Brassier et al. 2007: 423), a term that Quentin Meillassoux pejoratively reduces to a rhetorical avoidance of the logical challenges of correlationism, but which OOO-versions of speculative realism embrace as a principled acknowledgement of the alluring autonomy of objects.

Works cited

- Alworth, D. (2016) *Site Reading: Fiction, Art, Social Form*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Anderson, J. (2014) *Page and Place: Ongoing Compositions of Plot*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Anderson, J. and Saunders, A. (2015) ‘Relational Literary Geographies: Co-producing Page and Place.’ *Literary Geographies*, 1(2), 15-19.
- Baumgartner, B.D. (2012) ‘Potentiality of the Present: Exploring Speculative Realism Versus Spatial Theory.’ *Human Geography*, 5(1), 36-41.
- Bergmann, L. (2016) ‘Toward Speculative Data: “Geographic Information” for Situated Knowledges, Vibrant Matter, and Relational Spaces.’ *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 34(6), pp. 971-989.
- Bogost, I. (2012) *Alien Phenomenology, or What it’s Like to be a Thing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Brassier, R., Grant, I.H., Meillassoux, Q. and Harman, G. (2007) ‘Speculative Realism – Ray Brassier – Iain Hamilton Grant – Quentin Meillassoux – Graham Harman.’ *Collapse III*, 306-449.
- Bryant, L.R. (2011) *The Democracy of Objects*. Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press.
- Bryant, L., Srnicek, N. and Harman, G. (eds, 2011) *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*. Melbourne: re.press.
- Cazajous-Augé, C. (2025) ‘The Anthropocene Cosmic Sublime: Viewing the Earth from Space in Samantha Harvey’s “Orbital”.’ *Ecozon@. European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment*, 16(1), pp. 97-115.
- Chin, G. (2022) ‘Magic Realism as Metaphysics: Murakami Haruki and the Resistance of Reality Itself.’ *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*, 49(1-2), pp. 33-52.
- Foucault, M. (2002a) *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (2002b) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Gottlieb, E. (2016) *Romantic Realities: Speculative Realism and British Romanticism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Hamilton, G. (2015) *The World of Failing Machines: Speculative Realism and Literature*. Winchester: Zero Books.
- Harman, G. (2005) *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*. Chicago: Open Court Publishing.

- Harman, G. (2007) 'On Vicarious Causation,' *Collapse II*, pp.187-221. [Online] [Accessed 22 October 2025] <https://community.stjohnscollege.edu/file/chapter/chapter-readings/harmanvicarious-causation.pdf>
- Harman, G. (2011a) 'Response to Shaviro', in Bryant, L., Srnicek, N. and Harman, G. (eds) *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*. Melbourne: re.press, pp. 291-303.
- Harman, G. (2011b) *The Quadruple Object*. Winchester: Zero Books.
- Harman, G. (2012a) 'The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism.' *New Literary History*, 43(2), pp. 183-203.
- Harman, G. (2012b) *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*. Winchester: Zero Books.
- Harman, G. (2016) *Dante's Broken Hammer: The Ethics, Aesthetics, and Metaphysics of Love*. London: Repeater Books.
- Harman, G. (2017) *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*. London: Penguin.
- Harman, G. (2019) *Art and Objects*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Harman, G. (2020) 'Response to Nathan Coombs.' In Ennis, P.J. (ed) *Speculations I*. Santa Barbara: Punctum Press, pp. 145-152.
- Harvey, S. (2023) *Orbital*. London: Vintage.
- Hones, S. (2024) 'Relational Literary Geographies.' In Alexander, N. and Cooper, D. (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Literary Geographies*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 30-39.
- Iser, W. (1978) *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Meillassoux, Q. (2009) *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. New York: Continuum.
- Morton, T. (2013a) *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality*. University of Michigan: Open Humanities Press.
- Morton, T. (2013b) *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Morton, T. (2021) *Spacecraft*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Peterle, G. and Rossetto, T. (2023) 'There is no space, there is no time, there are only objects: the onto-cartography or Richard McGuire's *Here*.' *Literary Geographies*, 9(1), pp. 50-68
- Poposki, Z. (2024) 'Knowing Holbein's Objects: An Object-Oriented-Ontology Analysis of *The Ambassadors*.' *Open Philosophy*, 7(1), 20240032.
- Radić, G. (2025) 'OOO: The Inner Surplus of Meaning.' *Landexine*, 7 April.
- Rogers, D. (2018) 'Assemblage Theory and the Ontological Limitations of Speculative Realism.' *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 8(2), pp. 244-247.
- Rossetto, T. (2019) *Object-Oriented Cartography: Maps as Things*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Shaviro, S. (2014) *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Thurgill, J. (2021) 'Literary Geography and the Spatial Hinge.' *Literary Geographies*, 7(2), pp. 152-156.
- Willems, B. (2017) *Speculative Realism and Science Fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Williams, N, and Keating, T. (eds, 2022) *Speculative Geographies: Ethics, Technologies, Aesthetics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.