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*The Republic of Objects: Prolegomena to an  
Object-Oriented Reading of A Tour on the  
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**Abstract**

This article has two purposes. First, it attempted to introduce ‘flat ontology’ and ‘withdrawal’, two of many concepts of object-oriented ontology (OOO), as effective intellectual devices to dissect a literary text, especially in order to investigate the complexity of contacts between/among various existences on a horizontal surface. Second, it examined how the narrator of *A Tour on the Prairies*, one of the underappreciated texts of Washington Irving, gradually begins to doubt the naive human/nonhuman binary and broadens his horizons through an encounter with another object, wild bees in this case. In conclusion, it demonstrated that, when read from an object-oriented outlook, this text proved to offer a rich world in which every single object acts and exists on its own right, and thus to entice its readers to rethink humans’ position within the ‘republic of objects’.

**Keywords:** *Literary Criticism, American Literature, Washington Irving, A Tour on the Prairies, Object-Oriented Ontology.*

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## *Introduction*

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,  
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy. (Shakespeare,  
2006, p. 225)

When one judges from an array of accounts in the current publications (Gilmore, 1994; Jones, 2011; Sullivan, 2012), it would not be wide of the mark for her or him to pronounce that Washington Irving has been habitually associated with *The Sketch Book*, a collection of thirty-four vignettes, or with a number of famous short stories contained in the work such as “Rip van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow”; literary scholarship concerning the writer has also concentrated on the masterpiece in the main (Pollard, 2007; Wyman, 2010). This, of course, does not mean that the other works have been altogether neglected by academics in the literary studies; admittedly, as has been repeatedly pointed out, a handful of his earlier pieces, among which *A History of New York* is relatively familiar, have drawn a fair amount of attention (Sonday, 1993; Wood, 2005; McGann, 2012).

Notwithstanding, it is difficult to gainsay that the works which Irving produced at the later stages of his career have not received condign consideration heretofore. This might be on account of the fact that the principal portion of these productions is composed of less romantic and seemingly nonfictional travel writings and biographies, rather than imaginary stories, which, though understandably, are more typical texts for literary criticism (McCarter, 1939; Robillard, 2016). But indeed, on slightly closer inspection, one will realize that they are similarly exquisite narrative texts which are worthy of more earnest criticism in terms of their world-presenting capacity, meta-cultural competence, and philosophical profundity.

*A Tour on the Prairies* is definitely one of such hitherto unappreciated but writerly texts. Being the first of Irving's three texts which portray diverse scenes in the extensive western regions of the still young United States, this text purports to be a record of its narrator's journey with a band of frontiersmen cruising on horseback. The route of their trek lies through the territory which he dubs the Far West. We now know the region as Oklahoma. There the narrator encounters a vast variety of objects, most of which are alien to him. Among them are Native American people, undomesticated animals, insects, plants and forests, and inanimate things like turbulent rivers and boundless prairies. When bearing this peculiarity in mind, one would think it somewhat odd that surprisingly little scholarship has been dedicated to the text from the perspective of the 'nonhuman turn', though Linda Steele's exceptional study pays attention to geographical characteristics of the prairies and their influences upon both the narrator and his language. Her conclusion that "the frontier is not a place, but the prairie is" gave me an inspiration for this study (Steele, 2004, p. 101).

As is becoming widespread in multiple disciplines these days, the 'nonhuman turn' is a broad term which Richard Grusin (2015), who is the chief editor of the book entitled *The Nonhuman Turn*, defined as follows:

Intended as a macroscopic concept, the nonhuman turn is meant to account for the simultaneous or overlapping emergence of a number of different theoretical or critical 'turns'—for example, the ontological, network, neurological, affective, digital, ecological, or evolutionary.... Each of these different elements of the nonhuman turn derives from theoretical movements that argue (in one way or another) against human exceptionalism.... (pp. ix-x)

In short, it is a label which can be affixed to a varied assortment of approaches which commonly attempt to decenter the conventional human subject in the hope of incorporating more positively other kinds of existence such as animals, plants, and inanimate matters into a discussion. As has been rightly pointed out, it has likewise produced movements in literary studies in the shape of “ecocriticism and the study of literature and science” (Kaakinen, 2018, para. 3).

Presuming that such a thinking should provide some beneficial lens through which one can identify hitherto unobserved facets of *A Tour*, the author of this paper recurs specifically to two ideas of a theory which belongs to the general category in analyzing the text: ‘flat ontology’ and ‘withdrawal’ advanced by theorists of object-oriented ontology (OOO).

More specifically, the foremost argument of this essay is that, viewed from the perspective informed by the object-oriented ontology, the text proves to present an abundant universe in which every single object, whether it be a human, an animal, an insect, a plant, or inorganic matter, stands, moves, and withdraws on the flat surface, and thus to invite its readers to reappraise and be critical about the naïve anthropocentrism which often goes unquestioned.

With this purpose in mind, the author of this article will address himself to analyzing the two chapters in which the narrator confronts the community, or rather “republic” of wild bees in his words. At the outset of the sequence, the narrator has doubtless put them down as nothing more than suppliers of honey acquired by men, but later, given a moment in which he can weigh up both the bees and the humans flatly, he perceives that the bees possess a plethora of dormant properties, that the distinction between them is not as obvious as had been assumed, and that a subjective reduction to one quality

sometimes results in untruth. In this way, this paper propounds, this text induces us to rethink humanity's position within the republic of objects.

### *Theoretical Foundations: Flat Ontology and Withdrawal*

Before moving on to the main discussion, it seems appropriate to brief here the analytical framework introduced just above in relation to the argument of this essay.

The reading of this article derived inspiration from two of several ideas promoted by object-oriented ontology: 'flat ontology' and 'withdrawal'. After having been initiated by Graham Harman and then refined by himself and other figures, OOO has already developed its unique system of thought, and influenced diverse disciplines. One of the theorists, Ian Bogost (2009) succinctly defined it as follows:

Ontology is the philosophical study of existence. Object-oriented ontology...puts things at the center of this study.... Nothing has special status... everything exists equally.... In contemporary thought, things are usually taken either as the aggregation of ever smaller bits...or as constructions of human behavior and society.... OOO steers a path between the two, drawing attention to things at all scales.... (para. 9)

Simply put, it suggests a "flat ontology" (Morton, 2011, p. 165) as a new *weltanschauung*, trying to even out all hierarchical relations between/among 'objects'; an object "means any reality that is irreducible to its parts" (Marques Florencio, 2014, p. 108). Hence, they include "humans, natural and cultural entities, language, nonhuman beings, cosmic bodies, as well as subatomic particles which, in their entanglements, constitute 'Being'" (Iovino and Opperman, 2012, p. 79); meanwhile, 'withdrawal' is the concept substantiating the validity of the

radical contention. By interpreting Heidegger's tool analysis in a respectably creative but by no means illogical manner, Harman demonstrates that every entity always exceeds what is then present, retains hardly expected latent talents, and is never to be reduced to any list of traits, parts, or relations; consequently, the more one attempts to grasp an object completely, the more it retires away, namely withdraws (Harman, 2002; Harman, 2005).

Besides its simplicity, there may seem little difference between OOO and other critical modes endeavoring to decenter the human such as ANT, NM, and ecocriticism. But its most salient trait is that it categorically enjoins us to regard the status of each object as utterly equal, or 'flat', and an object as remaining autonomous and independent from each other. With this outlook, one can avoid pitfalls into which other nonhuman approaches might fall: excessively favoring the nonhuman and devaluing the human, or overemphasizing relations between/among objects rather than the objects themselves.

In reading literature, the perspective enables one to analyze every item with more impartial mindset, and at times to perceive the liberal worldview of a text through which its readers can have an opportunity to expand their cognitive scope. The author of this essay would like to conclude this section by adding that his reading, which focused on the bees in order to unveil the unique outlook of *A Tour*, was indebted to these concepts, and that the usage of the terms like 'flat' and 'object' in this article are based on them.

### *Objects Withdrawing: Bees never Reducible*

In this section, the author of this paper is going to demonstrate how the text allures its readers to see their world from a fresh, object-oriented angle. Here the sequence which consists of

chapters eight and nine of the text, which are titled “The Honey Camp” and “A Bee Hunt” respectively, is to be investigated chiefly.

In this episode, readers see the narrator, who initially embraces the human subject/nonhuman object binary without questioning its naivety, gradually change and enlarge his horizons through an encounter and experience with another object, that is, a horde of wild bees. Faced with a chance of observing the ravaging men and the smashed republic of the insects upon even ground, he notices that human’s apparent mastery over the bees in no way grasps their inexhaustible substance. In spite of the repeated attempts to comprehend them by dint of anthropomorphic portrayals, he does not succeed in reducing them to a single readable thing until the end.

By this way, the text intimates that many apparently plain objects which surround us and often come across as present at hand and accessible are at no time simple, and that, in point of fact, a subject never reaches an object in the sense of exhaustively comprehending all of its qualities, with the object remaining independent and withdrawing.

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On the fourth day (October 12th) of his journey into the then-rarely-explored districts of the Far West, the narrator and the members of his party, which is mostly composed of boorish rangers of the frontier, are hurrying on their way in order to catch up with a more powerful contingent which departed a couple of days earlier and is to afford them protection against perils in the trackless wilderness. It is of first note that the approach to the detachment is represented symbolically by the discovery of a tree which was evidently hewn down by human hands, with the narrator reporting:

We had not ridden above three or four miles when we came to a large tree which had recently been felled by an axe, for the wild honey contained in the hollow of its trunk, several broken flakes of which still remained. We now felt sure that the camp could not be far distant. (Irving, 1835/2013, p. 28)

Soon after the finding of the fallen tree which contains honeycomb, they are to merge with the preceding group. In the wild encampment of the more robust frontiersmen, the narrator and his party are regaled with a medley of vulgar cuisines, or rather, crude fare including meat broiled on the spits thrust directly into the ground; in the scene, one ought not to disregard the fact that honey is described as the stuff which consummates the feast. Thus the narrator states, “to crown our luxuries, a basin filled with great flakes of delicious honey, the spoils of a plundered bee-tree, was given us by one of the rangers” (Irving, 1835/2013, p. 30).

Although chapter eight is a relatively short one and there is no further remark about honey other than the two excerpts quoted above, one should not overlook the way in which not a single bee, without whom there could be no honey and who very likely should be there or near the spot at least, appears throughout the series of his reports. Here some would watch bees incur a gross demotion. For the narrator and his rough comrades in the encampment, their *raison d'être* is as plain as the nose on a person's face; it is *honey*, not a bee, which is worth of mentioning and procuring. It seems palpable that the narrator is definitely in the shadow of simple anthropocentrism.

It would be natural for one to be inclined to raise skepticism toward the presumption which is founded upon such a small number of quotations. Still, that the reasoning is not strained will be apprehended as soon as one moves onto the next chapter which bears the title “A Bee Hunt” and reads its very first sentence pronouncing, “The beautiful forest in which

we were encamped abounded in bee-trees; that is to say, trees in the decayed trunks of which wild bees had established their hives" (Irving, 1835/2013, p. 30). Albeit the narrator refers to the presence of wild bees in this sentence, it is fairly easy to recognize that what counts more for him is *honey* which is acquired through pillaging of beehives in bee-trees, which humans hack down simply for the sake of gratifying their appetite.

After entertaining himself by reflecting on desultory subjects like the correlation between bees and civilization, and the resemblance of the western landscape to the mythical Promised Land in the Bible for a while, the narrator recounts an experience in which he himself accompanied a band of uncouth rangers in quest of a bee-tree, of course, ultimately for securing honey. By having a bee which had fallen into the snare set by the men shepherd them, they presently locate an oak tree inside which a generous quantity of honey must be hoarded. Before the further discussion of the text, the author of this paper would like to again point out that heretofore the narrator has understood the bees in a unilateral, human-centered manner, reducing them to one function as mere suppliers of honey, whereas many other latent aspects of them have never engrossed his attention.

Following the discovery of the apt target, two of the bee-hunters begin to exert themselves eagerly with their axes to cut down the oak tree, while other men are waiting on tiptoe, harboring anticipation for the coveted prize soon to be captured and devoured. In the meantime, the narrator, while maintaining some distance from the scene lest the imminent collapse of the felled tree should smite at him, is furnished a serendipitous opportunity to contemplate both the doomed community of the insects and the humans who will beget calamitous woes to them in a single view from a somewhat detached position, both

physically and psychologically. This incident is of crucial consequence in that it precipitates at once a substantial alteration of the tone with which the narrator represents the bees and irrevocable reorientation of his outlook.

To be specific, the narrator, fortuitously sighting the two objects on an even plane, becomes aware that the honey bees can by no means be comprehensible only by the hierarchical relation which had been thitherto *prima facie*, nor be reducible to one quality as mere sources of honey, but are in actuality as complex, elusive, and replete with a diversity of attributes as humans are. Then he commences laboring to (re)approach the wild bees which are abruptly manifesting themselves into his consciousness; he is to take assiduous pains in describing the bees by comparing their characters with those of humans which he assumes are well-known to him. In the course of the string of comparative portrayals, he comes across one similitude between them after another. He delineates the subsequent sight as follows:

The jarring blows of the axe seemed to have no effect in alarming or disturbing this most industrious community. They continued to ply at their usual occupations, some arriving full freighted into port, others sallying forth on new expeditions, *like so many merchantmen in a money-making metropolis, little suspicious of impending bankruptcy and downfall*. Even a loud crack which announced the disrupture of the trunk, failed to divert their attention from the intense pursuit of gain; at length down came the tree with a tremendous crash, bursting open from end to end, and displaying all the hoarded treasures of the commonwealth. (Irving, 1835/2013, pp. 31-32; emphasis added)

It must not be left unnoticed that at this point the narrator, as was pointed out just previously, begins to represent the bees not as a prerequisite for honey ravened by humans. The tack he

adopts is to depict their conduct in language mixed with metaphor and simile which likens them to men, that is to say, anthropomorphism. This suggests not only that the narrator should begin to notice that the bees share not a few traits with humans, but also that the boundaries between the two kinds of existence are now blurring in his mind.

The next paragraph which describes the bemused bees who suddenly find themselves bereft of their country and the rangers rushing to the felled tree to consume the yearned treasure proves to be likewise meaningful, because it confirms that the cognitive oscillation on the part of the narrator is not transient or mercurial one which often can supervene upon some facile pity. He writes:

One of the hunters immediately ran up with a wisp of lighted hay as a defence against the bees. The latter, however, made no attack and sought no revenge; they seemed stupefied by the catastrophe and unsuspecting of its cause, and remained crawling and buzzing about the ruins without offering us any molestation. Every one of the party now fell to, with spoon and hunting-knife, to scoop out the flakes of honey-comb with which the hollow trunk was stored... Such of the combs as were entire were placed in camp kettles to be conveyed to the encampment; those which had been shivered in the fall were devoured upon the spot. Every stark bee-hunter was to be seen with a rich morsel in his hand, dripping about his fingers, and disappearing as rapidly as a cream tart before the holiday appetite of a schoolboy. (Irving, 1835/2013, p. 32)

It should be difficult for one ignore the stark contrast which the two forms of life make to one another. In this scene, 'buggier' and more 'beastly' are evidently the rangers, to wit human beings, whose scientific name is ironically *Homo Sapiens*, which means "wise man" in Latin. On the other hand, the bees,

albeit of course partly out of discomfiture, cut a serene figure. In the face of this inversion, the narrator is not able to join the “every one” for depredating the demolished commonwealth and continues to narrate the occasion unfolding before him, probably knowing that he would have also been in the plunder as a member of the marauders, if one or two conditions had been different slightly. In the following account, one can descry the magnitude of the impact which the realization engendered in him:

Nor was it the bee-hunters alone that profited by the downfall of this industrious community; *as if the bees would carry through the similitude of their habits with those of laborious and gainful man, I beheld numbers from rival hives, arriving on eager wing, to enrich themselves with the ruins of their neighbors. These busied themselves as eagerly and cheerfully as so many wreckers on an Indiaman that has been driven on shore; plunging into the cells of the broken honey-combs, banqueting greedily on the spoil, and then winging their way full-freighted to their homes. As to the poor proprietors of the ruin, they seemed to have no heart to do any thing, not even to taste the nectar that flowed around them; but crawled backward and forward, in vacant desolation, as I have seen a poor fellow with his hands in his pockets, whistling vacantly and despondingly about the ruins of his house that had been burned.* (Irving, 1835/2013, pp. 32-33; emphasis added)

For the narrator, drawing a distinction between humans and bees is getting harder and harder, not to speak of maintaining the preconceived hierarchy. Actually, well over a quarter of this passage is recounted in either metaphor or simile making an analogy of humans’ conduct to that of bees. Now it should be clear for him that the frame of thinking in which a human is always the subject and every other entity is the thing objectified by the former does not endure in the way it had gone

undisputed theretofore. The narrator maintains this recognition till the end of this chapter, stating:

It is difficult to describe the bewilderment and confusion of the bees of the bankrupt hive who had been absent at the time of the catastrophe, and who arrived from time to time, with full cargoes from abroad. At first, they wheeled about in the air, in the place where the fallen tree had once reared its head, astonished at finding it all a vacuum. At length, as if comprehending their disaster, they settled down in clusters on a dry branch of a neighboring tree, whence they seemed to contemplate the prostrate ruin, and to buzz forth doleful lamentations over the downfall of their republic. It was a scene on which the "melancholy Jacques" might have moralized by the hour. We now abandoned the place, leaving much honey in the hollow of the tree. (Irving, 1835/2013, p. 33)

In this quotation, one will be able to discern both that the narrator is carrying on detecting various features of the bees which come into his cognition, and that the ontological discrimination between the two objects is ever more flattened. Supposedly, if several of those words which directly or characteristically bespeak bees' presence (e.g. hive, buzz, wheel, and honey) are supplanted with some expressions which can be employed to represent both bees and humans, it would not be easy for a person who reads solely this paragraph to accurately determine which of the two is described.

Meanwhile, some will submit a by all means fair-minded and reasonable suspicion whether it can be persuasively argued that the text genuinely presents an object-oriented worldview which fosters a reappraisal of readers' human-centered bigotry, inasmuch as the narrator's efforts to level off the hierarchical relation end in a rather sudden manner, neither squarely communicating the definitive transformation in the mind of the

narrator nor propounding a forceful argument, say, for decentering the human subject.

Nevertheless, this particular modesty which one might regard even as reticence is exactly why this text can be reckoned as object-oriented; in other words, the precise fact that his attempt is interrupted in midstream itself is cogent evidence of his espousal of the object-oriented perspective, because it attests that the narrator should be cognizant that neither bundles of observations nor an accumulation of anthropomorphic metaphors can exhaustively describe a different object which is evermore withdrawing from any analogy, signification, or totalizing unification whatsoever, hence his departure without any concluding remark.

Lastly but not least, readers ought not to slight the closing dialogue between the narrator and one of the rangers as an irrelevant chat, because it is an ingenious and incisive admonition in that it implies without an explicit reference to humans that a subjective reduction of another object may occasionally lead to pernicious and literally destructive hubris. It goes as follows:

“It will all be cleared off by varmint,” said one of the rangers. “What vermin?” asked I. “Oh, bears, and skunks, and racoons, and ‘possums. The bears is [sic] the knowingest varmint for finding out a bee-tree in the world. They’ll gnaw for days together at the trunk till they make a hole big enough to get in their paws, and then they’ll haul out honey, bees and all.” (Irving, 1835/2013, p. 32)

Indeed, their conversation is about several sorts of animals in the wilds, bears *inter alia*, and not about humans at all. But one may experience a sense of *déjà vu* in the portrayals of the bears. The ranger offers a report of the way the huge mammals wreak havoc on the bees and the tree inside which they ensconce

themselves. The bears, who indubitably reduce the bees to sources of honey, present a marked similitude with the men who just committed the same kind of atrocity to the commonwealth of bees. The overt irony is that the person who perpetrated the outrage seems not in the least conscious of the parallel.

One possible and temperate interpretation of the segment will be the one which deems it prods its readers to regard other objects as their equals by means of highlighting similarities between them; yet, more critical would be that it alludes to enormities which an existence that subjectively demotes another entity to a subservient object can beget. Corroborating this explication is, aside from the descriptions already discussed, an account of an encampment which the men have just left. The scale of the devastation which humans can inflict onto different life forms would strike one as far from humane:

[T]he deserted scene of our late bustling encampment had a forlorn and desolate appearance. The surrounding forest had been in many places trampled into a quagmire. Trees felled and partly hewn in pieces, and scattered in huge fragments; tent-poles stripped of their covering; smouldering fires, with great morsels of roasted venison and buffalo meat, standing in wooden spits before them, hacked and slashed by the knives of hungry hunters; while around were strewed the hides, the horns, the antlers, and bones of buffaloes and deer, with uncooked joints, and unplucked turkeys, left behind with that reckless improvidence and wastefulness which young hunters are apt to indulge when in a neighborhood where game abounds. (Irving, 1835/2013, p. 123)

Considering the disposition among them which is articulated above, what fate should have befallen the tree and the republic

after the rangers left can be visualized with ease, that is, a literally complete wreckage.

### *Conclusion*

As might be expected, the narrator dares not share the pleasure of devouring delectable honey with his confreres. One would not have difficulty in fathoming out the reason behind it, when one peruses the text with meticulous attention with a flat, object-oriented mindset. The narrator, albeit with a similar spirit to that of other members at the outset, is driven to reconsider his, or humans' position amongst other existences by degrees through the encounter of another object, bees, and then offers a flat worldview which endows every entity with the same ontological status.

*A Tour on the Prairies*, a long underestimated text as it has been, presents a rich world where diverse individual objects stand, act, and withdraw for themselves, and allures its readers to review its long-held anthropocentric angle and move to an object-oriented worldview.

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However commonplace and quotidian the conclusion of my reading appears to be, it matters little, because a universal message of a classic text *must* be humdrum when enunciated. Although it always exists somewhere in the mind of each person, it seldom enters into our recognition, since comporting oneself according to such an ordinance requires one to relinquish ordinary comforts (e.g. a thinking rooted in the idealistic schema which makes an objectified being obedient to the subject) which simplify one's life—at the cost of other objects. It will not endure; we must reorient our course, reincorporate objects into the agenda of our discussion, and

begin to view our position not as dominating at the top of the ladder of being, but as standing on a flat plane as one object with other objects. *A Tour* gently encourages us to adopt the course.

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