ONTO-CARTOGRAPHY, OR ONTO-NOSTALGIA
notes on Levi Bryant's ONTO-CARTOGRAPHY by Terence Blake

1) POST-MONIST THOUGHT vs "HARD AND CONVINCING " REALISM

During the post-structuralist period (Deleuze, Lyotard, Serres, but also Feyerabend and Rorty) it was widely thought that monism had been thoroughly refuted and discredited. However, recent developments in the last decade have shown that the refutations were insufficient, as the discredit of monism began to fade and a new form of monist ontology, in both scientistic and nonscientistic variants, came to light and began to spread.

Post-structuralism was seen as insufficient to prevent the rise of these new forms of monism, loosely grouped together under the rubric of "speculative realism". The post-structuralists' positive valuation of "speculation" as conceptual investigation and experimentation was considered by some to be in danger of founding a new idealism, called by some "constructivism" and by others "correlationism", enshrining the omnipotence of language, society, or individual and/or collective thought to the detriment of empirical reality.

Certain thinkers saw themselves as invested with the mission of reinstating "realism" and subordinating the free play of metaphysical speculation to the hard and convincing real state of affairs. "Hard and convincing" realism represents a return to a grasp on reality by turning post-structuralist critique against itself. A key figure in this monist regression was Alain Badiou, who tried to synthesize both pluralism and monism under the aegis of an ontological realism allied to an adulterated scientism.

The conceptual situation became pathological under Badiousian regenting, and it was only a matter of time before a strange new malady appeared, or an old malady in mutated form. Given the regressive nature of its gaze, and its reinvention of an ontological turn already accomplished by its post-structuralist predecessors, one baptise this malady with the name "onto-nostalgia". On this blog, and in separate published and soon to be published articles, I have examined close up two forms of this malady: Graham Harman's non-scientistic OOO and Levi Bryant's scientistic renaturalisation of OOO, machine oriented ontology.

2) WITHDRAWAL: SYMPTOM OF THE CONCEPTUAL PATHOLOGY OF OOO

Graham Harman introduced the pathological notion of withdrawal to reconfine speculative realism (without the scare-quotes or capital letters) inside the monist prison, arguing that this imprisonment was necessary to permit us to escape the constructivist nightmare. "Withdrawal", whether strong (as in Harman's invisible, untouchable, unknowable objects) or weak (as in Bryant's renaturalisation of it into an incoherent physicalist notion of partial causality), replunges us into the problematic of access that structuralism (Althusserian and Popperian) had for a time dismantled, freeing speculation from the subject/object aporia.

The critique of "correlationism" (Meillassoux), of "philosophies of access" (Harman), or of "anthropocentrism" (Bryant) serves to falsify the history of philosophy by painting the subject/object problematic all over the very movements that overcame it. Only in this way could their own regressive contributions be presented as new, i.e. on a fake background that eliminated from view all their more sophisticated rivals, that had preceded them and already denounced and refuted their elucubrations (only under other names).

The by now classic "withdrawal" ontology is in fact an abstract meta-ontology and is by its very nature incompatible with more concrete ontologies. There is no place for a regional ontology in Harman's metaphysics unless it is asserted as belonging to the realm of illusion, of "phantoms and simulacra" as Harman calls it in BELLS AND WHISTLES. Thus Harman's OOP must necessarily critique Bryant's machine metaphysics as reductionist: machine metaphysics is not an independent " ontology in Harman's terms, but is only one possible instantiation of Harman's meta-ontology). That

is to say that machine metaphysics is an impure, because empirically contaminated, instantiation of pure OOO, and so necessarily in conflict with it, and necessarily criticised as being reductionist, despite its being at a higher level of generality than a simple regional ontology. This conceptual incompatibility between the two systems (Harman's OOP and Bryant's MOO) is irresolvable as long as one retains Harman's notion of absolute withdrawal. "Withdrawal" as Harman uses it does not consist in the simple generalisation of Heidegger's concept of the same name- it constitutes its absolutisation. But absolute withdrawal doubles up not just objects (into real and sensual) but also properties and relations. This produces too much ontological clutter, and and leaves no room for other entities, including scientific ones, except as useful fictons ("shams" or "simulacra", in Harman's terminology). Further, the real objects, properties, and relations de-temporalise the world, whereas Levi Bryant's machines, powers and capacities comport a temporal aspect. This seems to be behind the unwillingness constantly manifested by Bryant, but also by many others, to take on Harman's full-blown fourfold ontology.

The way out of these unacceptable consequences of Harman's withdrawal thesis (unreality of all known objects whether common sense or scientific, unreality of time) can only lie in dropping the notion of absolute withdrawal. However, a philosophical price must be paid for that conceptual move. The price is the recognition that Harman is talking past himself i.e. that Harman as meta-metaphysician (ontology of withdrawal) is talking past himself as metaphysician (ontology of emergent autonomous objects) and vice versa. A higher price is paid in the generalization of Harman's bifurcation of Nature into real and apparent objects, extending this bifurcation of nature into every single interaction. These are the aporias that Bryant confronts in his struggle to redefine OOO as an ontology of emergence rather than a meta-ontology of withdrawal.

3) PLEA FOR MORE EMPIRICISM

Instead of simply decreeing a priori, by semantic stipulation, that everything is an object (or a unit, or a machine), shouldn't one approach this as an empirical question? Such a far-reaching claim should be given enough testable content to be susceptible of scientific investigation. Can one have a democracy of immanence outside the transcendent fiats, so as to respect the empirical specificities of the world? We need more empirical research and less semantic stipulation.

If one takes out all the standardised polemics containing caricatures of Continental philosophy or of "epistemology", if one removes all the subjunctive evocations of what one "might" say or "would" look at, of what "perhaps" is to be found, there remains precious little in Bryant's texts. His examples are mere conceptual possibilities, subjunctive confirmations of lexical posits. Similarly, if one removes all the illegitimate examples in Harman's text (there can be no concrete examples in his OOP) we are left with an ontological delirium about objects in a metaphysical parallel universe.

Bryant is unable to live up to the goals of his own project, and his texts are a dissatisfying mixture of conceptual incoherence, critiques of nonexistent adversaries, confusion between stipulative definitions and concrete theses about the world, wordy abstract ramblings combined with banal yet underdeveloped "possible" examples to give the appearance of a concreteness that may come (subjunctively) and that never does.

This last is my principal objection to Bryant's metaphysics: not the conceptual confusion (anyone can make a mistake), not the intellectual timidity, not the absence of dialogue with anything other than straw man adversaries. The big problem is that Bryan't onto-cartography is just empty word-magic masquerading as involvement with concrete things.