APPROACH

SPECULATE (verb)
spec·u·late | \ ' spe-kyə-,lāt \
speculated; speculating

intransitive verb
1a: to meditate on or ponder a subject: **REFLECT**
1b: to review something idly or casually and often inconclusively
2: to assume a business risk in hope of gain *especially*: to buy or sell in expectation of profiting from market fluctuations

transitive verb
1: to take to be true on the basis of insufficient evidence: THEORIZE
2: to be curious or doubtful about: **WONDER**

From Latin *speculatus*, past participle of *speculari* to spy out, examine, from *specula* lookout post, from *specere* to look, look at—more at SPY

Speculative Fiction

A Definition

Of course I ought to define it first, explain what it might consist in, list the elements that constitute it, say who its partisans or actors are, give names, titles, and dates. I should probably strive to delimit it, circumscribe it, draft its contours, test its seams, try its resilience, assay its impact, maybe appraise its value—in a word, I should somehow start proving that it exists and that its existence vouches for me, in turn, to make it an object of study and analysis, if only to ensure that beneath the label "speculative fiction," there is matter enough. Matter for what or to what effect would be a secondary question, if not a superfluous one. Indeed, I should begin by positing it, if not patenting it, for authentication's sake; I should begin by placing it within safe, clearly delineated bounds. Such an initial gesture appears to be the indispensable premise to the elaboration of any critical discourse—a discourse that is derivative by nature, that is transitive by definition, and whose very existence can be validated only by the link it establishes with the object it appropriates, the raw material from which it takes its cue.

Then, and only then, could I raise this other question like a veil: Can I approach speculative fiction? Does it let itself be approached? Read? Commented upon? If so, from what vantage?

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What I propose to do, however, as I am now tentatively approaching it, or trying to, is not to presume the existence of "speculative fiction" per se but, rather, to *speculate* it. For the rapport I am trying to establish may not be a mimetic one; not one, that is, through which my critical gesture would be aiming to

represent the texts it purports to grasp, would be aiming to seize their image as reflected in my own discourse, no matter how fragmentary or distorted this image might be—and my discourse consequently. In fact, the very issues of reference and referentiality seem to be at stake here, questioned by what, in such fiction, pertains to the properly speculative. As defined in these pages, then, all discourse is or becomes speculative as soon as it ceases to refer to anything known or knowable, to anything given, fixed, and stable, as soon as it relinquishes all claims to certainty, to any form of authority that it challenges and undermines in the process of its own utterance. The speculative thus strives to come into being while paradoxically aiming at self-erasure in the same gesture, avoiding all closure. This would be language that, speculating, journeys along all too short a circuit, turns back upon itself not so much to grasp as to eradicate its own reflection—to obliterate it, to abstract it, to absolve it.

And yet.

Can discourse as such, and literary fiction in particular, whatever its shape and genre, thus easily short-circuit all reference, given that its very material, language, is by essence defined by referentiality? No matter its object, its contents and theme, a text is *text* insofar as it refers, mirrors, symbolizes, reflects, or distorts, insofar as it somehow connects, coheres, and engages with a world. The latter may be assembled from scratch, entirely made up, wholly illusory, yet for all that, it isn't free-floating nor *unrelated* altogether; it remains inseparable from, or tied to, the constructedness of its language, some referents lying behind or beyond the words that give birth to the text upon the page and make it happen there. It *means* something. *Has* to.

However, as I view it—from afar then, by necessity—or rather as I *speculate* it, "speculative fiction" would impossibly endeavor to break free from and bypass the mimetic or referential hold. The writing that shapes such fiction would thus in one way or another turn against the language mechanisms that bring it into putative existence. Eventually such speculative texts might be traversed by a counterforce or current, a contrary or antagonistic flow that brushes up against them and folds them back upon themselves, rewinding them as it were, discontinuing them—unanchoring them.

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"Speculative fiction," as defined in this book, has very little to do with the fictions of anticipation that the phrase is often associated with as a subgenre or branch of science fiction.[1] The point may not be to project or question the possibility of a (future, distant, utopian, or dystopian) world, or hypothesize about the ramifications and offshoots of the present, so much as to muddle, confuse,

fade out the contours of the known world—to abstract it from the very heart of representation.[2]

Hence, sometimes, those texts may try to discard the narrative modalities I as reader am accustomed to in favor of abstraction, for lack of a better word. Is this a novel? one may ask. No—*This Is Not a Novel* claims David Markson. Generic labels might indeed waver as the fictional contents of such works themselves ~~each~~ become an object of speculation: "story," "frame," "characters," "timeline," "plot," "linearity," "consecution," "causality," "verisimilitude," and all such elements constitutive of a fictional, narrative world, one that would mimic and question the real one in some way, may tend to dissolve into a specific regime of writing that would no longer strive to connect the dots, order events, or round up psychologies, that would no longer try to explicate or embody them into a larger coherent unit—a "story," a "world"—but would instead list them, file them, space them out, or story them up or down, spatially, in the course of the text's unfolding and enfolding along the page. As such, narrative proper, being now and again disrupted, would yield to other modalities more akin to forms of iteration; as though, as I am immersing in it, the text were to retreat, pull back, withdraw and distance itself in ways reminiscent of what Graham Harman says of objects in general. The better perhaps to start anew. And again. Thus at times the page's layout comes undone, is shattered, visually fragmented and spaced out, rendered somewhat loose—the paragraph no longer offering a visual, consistent unit.[3] As though what mattered were not what the text had to say so much as what it achieved on the page, the process of its own coming unbound, its own retraction, its slow withdrawal along a simple column or backbone of text that makes all its blanks visible, all its disruptions, all its disjunctions. Narrative thus becomes a virtual presence, a mere possibility, to be found in its gaps, absences, spacings—in its flowings out once the story-as-story's plug has been pulled (see Fig. 1).

Such speculative texts might thus run on leakages, drainages, outpourings beyond the felt limits of language. Yet these texts, or these fictional attempts, should not be seen as tentative sallies outside language itself in search of different representational tools; for the point may not be to bore holes at the outskirts of language, to deflate language and escape from it as one would relinquish a lover to look elsewhere and try to flirt with new and different (whether visual, computational, performative, or hypermedia) modes. Quite the opposite perhaps; the point might indeed be to try to go deeper to the very heart of language, not so much in the hope of finding a way out of it as an attempt to rediscover it, or its *languageness*, for what it is rather than what it does, to unbury, from under a reified, functional, debased language, a poetic infra-language

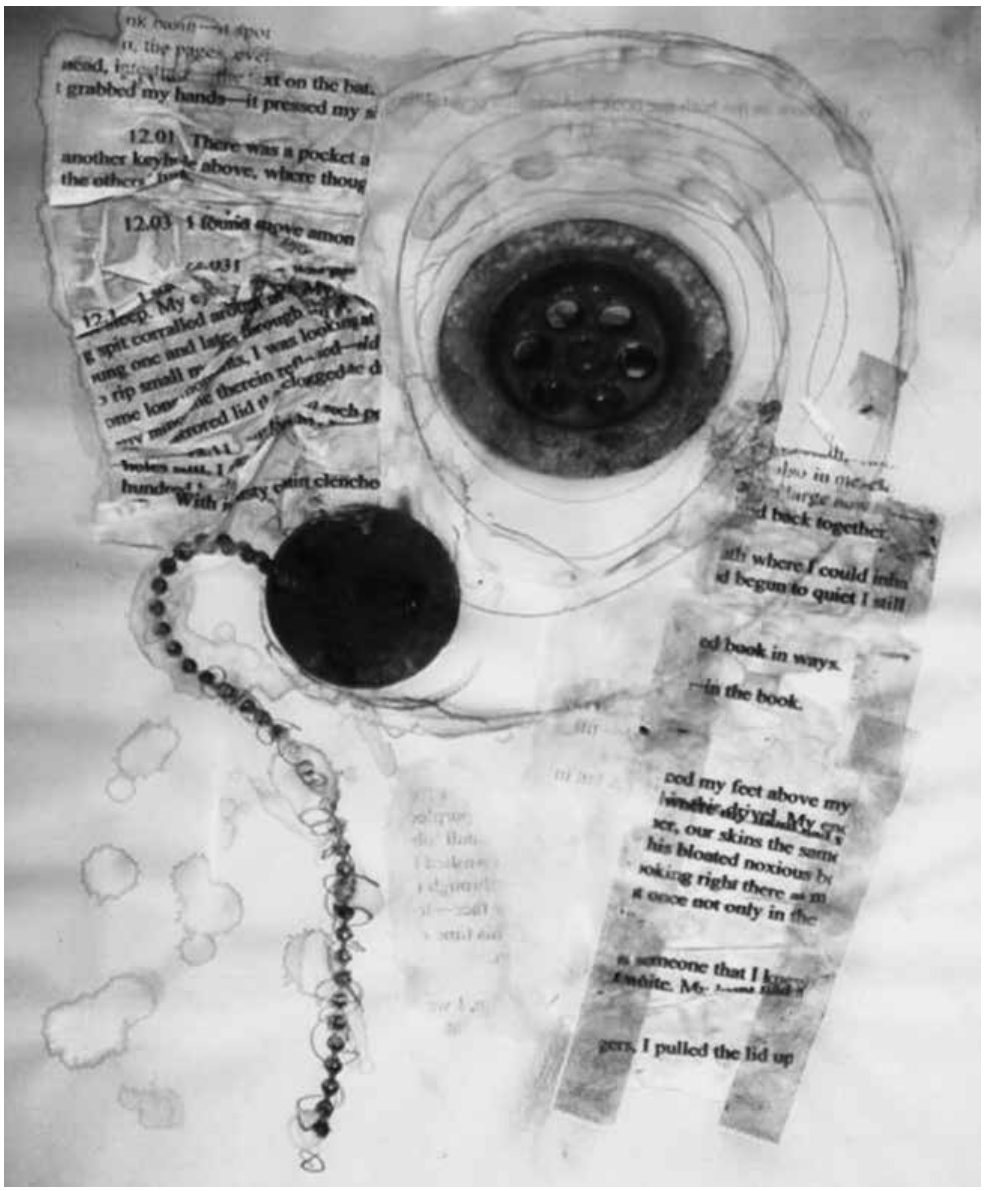

Figure 1. Blake Butler, *Ever* (50)

maybe; or maybe not, maybe something else—a language within language, like a garment's lining, an excavated, gouged, topsy-turvy language. What would its consistence be? Does this even make sense? I actually don't know nor do I pretend to vouchsafe for the existence of that which I am describing in these lines apart from a purely theoretical and rhetorical standpoint. Unless, precisely, this is all that matters: rhetoric pure and simple, freewheeling and emptied-out language that grasps at nothing but itself, its own texture and experience—an *experimentum linguae* of sorts, as defined by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben

in the preface to his *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*; an experience "in which what is experienced is language itself" (4) and "in which the limits of language are to be found not outside language, in the direction of its referent, but in an experience of language as such, in its pure self-reference" (5).

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The question recurs: Does speculative fiction let itself be approached? Does it offer itself up for reads? In other words, can I properly speaking read those texts that run along and according to such short(-)circuits? Whose sole image, whose only reflection, would immediately fold back upon itself and shortly be distorted in the process of a language rendered unto some form of self-referentiality or autotelism? If such books, as suggested by Blake Butler's *Ever*, "read themselves aloud" (67) in what can only be a frantic and unyielding feedback loop, what befalls the reader whom, so doing, they somehow bypass or pass by? What happens to the link, to the relationship in which reading consists, formerly materialized by a so-called reading contract?

Could it be that in place of said reading contract—according to which terms of agreement between reader and text were tacitly set—the grounds for disagreement have been paved? For division and dissonance? Is something like an "objective witness," as called forth by Ben Marcus at the outset of *The Age of Wire and String*, anything but a contradiction in terms? Could one imagine something along the lines of dissent as a possible way of approaching those texts? For "what if," asked Lyotard about the equivocalness of the most ordinary language, "what if the stakes of thought (?) concerned differend rather than consensus?" (*The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, 84).

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In short: "speculative fiction" resists, tries my patience, persists beyond my grasp. Unable to read the putative texts that make up its bulk, I watch them act as screening devices while remaining at an unbridgeable distance from them, a stranger of sorts; a questing, questioning shadow hovering over them, probing them for meaning, waging an interpretive war against them so as to wring something out of them at least, some profit, some gain, some victory, whether pleasure, knowledge, or understanding. *Something*. So I read them, after all, and read at all costs—in a word, I *speculate*. Count on them to yield at last. Yet in that sense, "how can a commentary not be a persecution of what is commented upon? . . . a prescription provided with a content, a sense, to which the work is held, as a hostage is held for the observance of a promise?" (Lyotard, 114).

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As I view it, as I read it by *not* reading it, in short as I speculate it, "speculative fiction" might pertain to a form of misunderstanding or miscalculation; the improbable encounter of a reader who no longer exists and a text that as yet, and as such, cannot be. It might be there, in this hiatus, that speculation truly takes place; at the heart of this hesitancy, this radical suspension of meaning—as both possibility and dissolution.

Something along the lines of a paradox could thus be pervading it. It could be that "speculative fiction" offers itself up as an interdiction, turning the act of reading into some transgression, some kind of voyeurism that irrevocably destroys the object of its gaze if, as per Marcus, "The outer gaze alters the inner thing . . . By looking at an object we destroy it with our desire . . . For accurate vision to occur the thing must be trained to see itself, or otherwise perish in blindness, flawed" (*AWS*, 3–4).

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"Speculative fiction" dodges, it withstands critical assaults. If anything, it turns down my every move, it counters each of my gambits. It's fiction with a vengeance, all the way down to the language that makes it up and that it in turn fashions, undermining its grounds, mimicking its mechanisms, its arbitrariness, its contingency too, sometimes pushing as far as absurdity, sometimes as far as illegibility.

It's not just a question of contents, then, but of language, too. In some cases, syntax unfolds along problematic lines that make the narrative stutter. It has to start again, reiterate a number of instances or sequences riddled with errors, glitches, repetitions, punctures that appear as so many markers of textual contingency. The writing wavers on the page. Unless narrative itself, supposedly weaving the continuity that gives it shape and momentum from one page to the next, is the very thing that dissolves in my hands—into new configurations, quasi random textual layouts that appear tabular rather than linear, spatial rather than temporal. The text may thus appear to have been "storied" along diverse planes that relay it into multiple shifting networks, rendering all grasp untenable, fleeting at best.

If meaning is not absent altogether—for can it truly be?—it crops up on the page in all its contingency and arbitrariness. At stake here might be what, in a different context, Brian Massumi in his *Parables for the Virtual* refers to as the text's "quotient of openness," which he conceives of as the actualizing of the text's virtualities in the act of reading comprised as circulation or navigation through the text. It's quite relevant, albeit misleading, that in order to theorize this "quotient of openness," Massumi evokes literary hypertexts, that is, a

literature that promotes an aesthetic of linkage. However, what befalls all those (hyper)links when the writing gets rid of them in order to couch itself back on the page, to enclose itself back into the book, without, though, reneging on the aesthetic of the literary hypertext but pursuing its undermining of linearity and narrative straightforwardness? This "quotient of openness," it seems, has not been compromised by this return to print—quite the contrary.

Perhaps.

At its most radical, "speculative fiction" would link up words, placing them alongside the syntagmatic axis of the sentence without, though, directing it toward a more and more predictable end. Albeit "infinitely catalyzable" (Barthes 1975, 50), the unfolding sentence would remain indefinitely open onto its paradigmatic axis as each new word is added; no longer oriented toward an end that would make it susceptible to yielding meaning or closure, the speculative sentence would participate instead in a regime of mutation, of transformation, generation, iteration, even perhaps simulation. The speculative sentence is thus one that simulates, or speculates, itself. Yet there would be no guarantee, ever, of any profit whatsoever or return on investment. The sentence moves on, links up words—or unlinks them rather the more it opens itself up. Meaning might still be there somewhere, though in bad shape sometimes. Words themselves become somewhat speculative, no longer or not only indexes to some signified meaning lying beyond or outside them in the direction of a world, no matter how fictive and artificial it might be, whose stability would be warranted by the very mechanisms of language. A rose is a rose and a heart is a heart. Until they're not.

What happens, then, in such circumstances, to the act of reading? What does reading amount to if such texts freewheel and slip through my fingers? What can still be the purpose of venturing a critique, assumedly defined by the grasping of some sense or an attempt at interpretation, if sense is battered?

Critique Speculative

Like the narrator of Butler's novella, no doubt I too, then, should endeavor to "read without reading" (*Ever*, 37), to resist the urge to make all those texts converge toward some meaning, some sense, that would act as their unifying core. One possibility in that respect might be—pure speculation on my part—to look for modes of reading that would no longer be *optic* but *haptic* instead; that is to say, modes of reading focused on sensation or senses rather than signification or meaning. Says Lev Manovich in *The Language of New Media*: "Haptic perception isolates the object in the field as a discrete entity, whereas optic perception unifies objects in a spatial continuum" (253–54). Haptic reading

would thus target the text for what and as it is—to wit, fully detached, quite unrelated to anything but itself. A *text-in-itself* as it were, on condition that such a thing exists, independent of any relation whatsoever I or anyone else might establish with it while reading, or of any account I may give of it in my attempt at critical rendition.

Eventually, what is taking shape here may be the *absolute* character of such fiction in the etymological sense of the word, as recalled by French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux in his book *After Finitude*—"a being whose severance (the original meaning of *absolutus*) and whose separateness from thought is such that it presents itself to us as non-relative to us, and hence as capable of existing whether we exist or not" (Meillassoux 2008, 28).

Maybe that is how speculative fiction thwarts all tentative approaches in the end; unless it does just that, merely let itself be approached from afar, all the while frustrating my efforts to grab, grasp, appropriate it, to cross over and take hold of it, to ever lay claim to it. The very act of reading, from then on, thus given over to its own contingency, the hypothetical—maybe hypocritical[4]—outcome of an encounter that may not take place at the heart of a language rendered alien unto itself, opaque and toxic, moving along multiple, brittle, unsteady lines. Always on the verge of collapse—on the edge of severance.

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Despite all its inherent contradiction, this book purports to be a work of criticism. That is, it aims to provide a critical investigation into specific works of experimental fiction—works that at the risk of an initial misunderstanding I'd wish to label "speculative." For if in the critical literature there exists such a genre as *speculative fiction* already, often defined in relation, or in opposition, to science fiction,[5] the works I in turn target as bearing on the speculative in these pages have not much in common with the staples of the genre, or else, only incidentally so, when they happen to meddle with genre fiction. Some of them indeed overtly flirt with so-called science-fictional or speculative scenarios about possible futures and alternate realities, dystopias and uchronias, apocalyptic ends-of-the-world and what might come next.

As I define it, however, "speculative fiction" goes beyond mere generic issues and considerations of content. More often than not, the works that interest me are experimental ones, maybe conceptual ones in some cases. They may not have specific, distinctive features beyond that. They certainly do not form a genre of their own. They're sometimes radically different from one another, both in content and shape. Some are published by mainstream venues, others by small, independent presses. Yet what they do have in common, at least as I

read them, what thus makes them properly *speculative* in my understanding of the word, is their conspicuous challenge to readerly expectations, their blatant questioning of their relation to reading—what I view as a potential attempt at thwarting critical interpretation, at willy-nilly eluding the reader's grasp.

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By nature or definition, the discourse that is taking shape in these pages ought to be, in its critical dimension, endowed with a certain amount of authoritativeness, the latter required or implied by the very notion of critique. Critical discourse,[6] in other words, is a *knowing* discourse, an analytical discourse that sheds light upon, clarifies, and explicates other texts whose complexity it has formerly and/or formally mastered. Yet as this book's title suggests, the discourse that permeates it eschews such initial mastery or comprehension. This book, I suggested, may as such be a contradiction, the sign or product of my own bafflement, the testimony to the abstruseness of its object—what I doggedly call "speculative fiction."

Forced by the impenetrability of its subject to forgo its own intrinsic expertise or mastery, my discourse in turn cannot help but tilt toward the speculative, then. Speculation, as the Latin origin of the word suggests, indeed appears as a form of observation and examination whose truth value or result is problematic: among the various definitions found in the dictionary by Merriam-Webster are words like "inconclusively," "insufficient evidence," or "doubtful." If one takes into account the economic or monetary connotations of the word, along with the reflexivity also inscribed in its etymology, "speculation" seems an apt enough concept to refer to criticism itself as a specific form of reflexive discourse in search of its own validation.

Therefore the "speculative fiction" of the subtitle is inevitably both object and subject of these pages; what they wonder about, what they discuss, as well as what they are, what they do. To put it differently, this book in turn is bound to remain speculative—"inconclusive" at best, if not downright "doubtful."

To some degree, this book too is bound to remain a fiction of sorts—a book that cannot do otherwise than somehow speculate and fictionalize in its own turn and terms. Yes, speculating fiction.

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Perhaps another way of addressing speculative fiction would be to emphasize its absoluteness. It is not uncommon to come across disparaging declarations about anything "experimental," that is, about anything that resists immediate apprehension whether in literature or in art more generally. One may recall,

for instance, how postmodernist fiction and self-reflexive works were at times viewed negatively as narcissistic or self-centered. I submit this tentatively for now, but this may be not unlike the concept of "self-enjoyment" that Steven Shaviro derives from his reading of Alfred North Whitehead: "Self-enjoyment is 'absolute' in that it unfolds entirely in itself and for itself, without conditions" (Shaviro, 14). It may well be the case with speculative fiction; for it too seems to withdraw from my grasp. It's in that sense that it could be said to be somehow "absolute"—"unbound, set free, released from all relation" (Shaviro, 14).

However, spurred by the project's inherent contradiction, these pages unavoidably belie the fact that in the end I do engage these works; that between me and them something does happen, albeit in the recognition that what happens does not happen as it should, that is, as I thought it would; that while what I get is not what I bargained for perhaps, an exchange or interaction may have taken place all the same, along lines that from the start were biased against me and my ingrained postulates.

Reading such texts, then, letting them baffle me or letting myself be puzzled somehow forces the realization that the usual paradigms may be shifting, that something is changing the way one apprehends fictional works or is modifying the way fictional works approach the world at large. That what such works might have to tell about this world no longer passes through their mimetic rendition of it; that, in short, their very inoperability is itself trenchant. And that what it tells is precisely this: there is no such thing as *knowledge* of the text. The text's "truth"—a dubious concept if there is one—remains intractable. All I can do, then, and again, is *speculate*.

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Maybe that's what these texts make me do, indeed—speculate—as they somehow keep me at bay (*specula*), condemning me for better or worse to merely look at them (*specere*), examine them, perhaps, but at a distance, from beyond a problematic divide (*speculari*).

The texts I have in mind are those that, try as I might, leave me in the lurch; I read, or try to, reread, or try to, but to not much avail. As one eloquent reviewer puts it about one of them: "I gotta say, it's a complicated and fractured read. I had a couple of '*what-the-fuck-am-I-reading*?' moments."[7]

Often referred to as experimental, these texts indeed often venture off the beaten narrative tracks, sometimes throw the dice, take the bet, dare their readers and graze the limits of readability. Sometimes they do offer themselves up for reads. They tell stories, albeit bizarre ones; ones that do not abide by the usual, if stale, conventions of mimetic realism; ones that leave things unexplained,

open to indecisive, inconclusive interpretation—to speculation. In that sense, "speculative fiction" is not so much a question of genre or of kind as it is of degree or of manner. I repeat myself, but *as such* "speculative fiction" may not even exist or might well be just a way for me to save up critical appearances.

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"I always find myself deployed amidst a specific geography of objects, each of them withdrawing from view into a dark primal integrity that neither our theories nor our practices can ever fully exhaust," writes Graham Harman as he reframes, in what he calls "tool-analysis," Heidegger's *Vorhandenheit* and *Zuhandenheit* concepts (Harman 2010, 51). As Heidegger famously put it, it is only when a thing becomes unusable or broken that one notices it in all its conspicuous objective presence. Expanding on this, Harman chooses to refer to objects in general as "tool-beings," explaining that

> to refer to an object as a "tool-being" is not to say that it is brutally exploited as means to an end, but only that it is torn apart by the universal duel between the silent execution of an object's reality and the glistening aura of its tangible surface. In short, the tool isn't "used"; it is. (Harman 2010, 97–98)

I wonder myself if, by frustrating reading expectations, speculative fiction might not similarly be challenging my basic assumptions of what fiction is and what it does, and if, concomitantly, it may not also be questioning and undermining the way I as reader and critic relate to it. Does the text have to mean anything, to be *used* in relation to something or someone? Or is it just that it just *is*? Might this not be the only possible understanding to be derived from speculative fiction? That it *is*? So that, in the end, issues of what, when, how, or why could very well be irrelevant.

Speculative Fiction: Its Resistance

What these pages posit, in short, what lies at the heart of this book, is indeed the problematic nature of the relationship that unites this text to the texts it strives and in part fails to comment upon; those various American works of fiction that I claim not to understand.

If I were to sum up the book's argument, then, it could be this: speculative fiction, as defined in these pages, is a specific regime of fictional discourse that eludes understanding; it is experimental fiction at times aggressively directed against readerly expectations—of plot, character consistency, realism or verisimilitude, logic, sense, and readability. Such fiction baffles reason, foils

interpretation, thwarts the meaning-making process, tears it apart, opacifies language, resists or frustrates conventional narrative moves—and, in the process, may challenge what fiction is and what it does.

Hence, the failure that I am now trying to articulate is not only or necessarily mine as I read those texts: failure may be scripted at their core. It could be part of their (un)operating mode, of their (dys)functional strategies. Their peculiar way of withdrawing behind the screen of their very own fiction. The fiction of themselves.

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Speculative fiction besets and resists readerly intervention, it frustrates every customary move I seem to make in order to grasp it. It exists, if it does, only negatively—or in absentia. In the lacunae of the discourse that attempts to seize and gauge it.

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As broadly defined here, speculative fiction may somehow be seen as "flawed" texts; texts that do not abide by the usual standards of conventional fiction. They may well seem "broken," and much like Heidegger's equipment or tools, they as such suddenly appear in all their obtuse conspicuousness—they're *there*, but I no longer know what to do with them, how to *use* them. As Robbe-Grillet pointed out, "A new form will always seem more or less an absence of any form at all, since it is unconsciously judged by reference to the consecrated forms" (Robbe-Grillet, 17). That might be part of the problem actually—this impossibility of viewing the work independently of all reference, the ingrained incapacity to read it for what it *is*, rather than for what it could possibly mean or be likened to. Yet, as Robbe-Grillet argued back in the late 1950s, in words that somehow anticipated or, if not, at least echo with Harman's "object-oriented ontology," "the world is neither significant nor absurd. It is, quite simply" (Robbe-Grillet, 19). Despite its refusal to make sense, despite its rebuff of interpretation, despite its apparent disengagement from conventional mimeticism, speculative fiction may be yet another name for *realism*—a realism no longer and not so much defined in mimetic terms, or by its putative correspondence or correlation to the world outside, but rather a form of realism more in line with that elaborated by Anna Kornbluh in *The Order of Forms*, as "a mode of production instead of a mode of reflection," as formal constructivism, texts that "build fiercely, soundly, cohesively, firmly—but without correlate" (Kornbluh, 41). This absence of correlate paves the way for the speculative, which may not be understood in opposition to the real.

Insofar as what I identify as speculative texts appear to, if not make impossible, at least disrupt narrative, speculative fiction could be seen as an intensification of what Quentin Meillassoux calls "extro-science fiction" (*fiction des mondes hors-science*).

> By extro-science worlds we mean worlds where, *in principle, experimental science is impossible* and not unknown *in fact*. Extro-science fiction thus defines a particular regime of the imaginary in which structured—or rather destructured—worlds are conceived in such a way that experimental science cannot deploy its theories or constitute its objects within them. The guiding question of extro-science fiction is: what should a world be, what should a world resemble, so that it is in principle inaccessible to a scientific knowledge, so that it cannot be established as the object of a natural science? (Meillassoux 2015, 5–6)

This, for Meillassoux—who aims to solve Hume's famous metaphysical problem about the so-called necessity of the laws of nature—concerns a properly ontological problem rather than a merely epistemological one. Hume's problem indeed bears on the stability of physical laws—why do they appear stable and immutable when "neither experience nor logic can give us such an assurance" (Meillassoux 2015, 9)?—and not on the limitations or "nature of scientific knowledge" per se (Meillassoux 2015, 15). Meillassoux thus imagines "extro-science fiction" as a genre of fiction that would be apt to represent worlds in which, in principle, it is impossible to vouch for—calculate, predict, deduce, infer, or, in a word, *comprehend*—anything but the necessity of pure, absolute contingency.

Because, as I view it, speculative fiction does just that, namely, elude understanding and rationalization, it could be seen as a theoretical variant of extro-science fiction. What is at stake, though, is not so much an epistemological or hermeneutic problem, one that pertains to my own incapacity as of yet to meet them on their own grounds, as an ontological one, one that is inseparable from the very materiality of those texts *as such*.

However, Meillassoux acknowledges the paucity of extro-science-fictional texts, whose sole representative he can think of would be René Barjavel's novel *Ravage*. Meillassoux accounts for this scarcity by explaining that contrary to science fiction, which "appears to permit the construction of a storyline, of a narration that is certainly fanciful but coherent . . . in extro-science fiction, on the other hand, it seems that no order of any sort can be constituted and, therefore,

no story can be told" (Meillassoux 2015, 23). Meillassoux however contests this view, for according to him it doesn't follow that such a world would necessarily be incoherent and detrimental to narrative.

Extro-science fiction, as defined by the philosopher, may be part of what I choose to refer to as speculative fiction instead. The difference, if there is one, is that speculative fiction is not limited to mere questions of content and narrative. It doesn't have to *represent* "extro-science worlds" or their equivalents, worlds in which science is impossible, in which laws are unstable and contingent, in order to *be* speculative. True, speculative fiction does at times venture into extro-science worlds or possible versions thereof, but its speculative aspect does not rely on representation only but is, more often than not, woven directly into its very fabric, into its language and materiality; it instantiates or embodies a radical shift or break away from habitual ways of ordering, approaching, understanding "the world"—a world that appears to be more and more estranged from itself, an obtuse, *alien* world, "an exotic world of utterly incomprehensible objects" (Bogost, 34). Objects that speculative fiction somehow addresses for what they are.

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Speculative fiction, in a way, would be fiction that resists the reader; fiction that does not *work,* or at least not according to preconceived notions of how fiction used to work. One of the best definitions one could possibly give would be this, perhaps: speculative fiction is fiction that recedes from the reader's grasp, is fiction that shies away from reading, that won't be read or understood. Fiction, maybe, that has an obtrusive will of its own, refusing all interpretations, or explanations, or justifications, or rationalizations. That withdraws behind diverse forms of opacification. Something I cannot read, not addressed to me, that does away with me.

Somehow (?).

Speculative Tools

Yet how does one read fiction that supposedly can't be read? Fiction that won't be approached? How can anyone navigate those speculative, contrary currents running through a stream of contemporary American fiction? Thanks to what tools?

In the course of my previous attempts throughout the years, when I first started grappling with some contemporary experimental fiction, my attention was drawn to a recent trend in continental philosophy that emerged in 2007 and that goes by the name or brand of "speculative realism." Under the label are

to be found philosophers and philosophies that follow different orientations but whose starting point is roughly the same: the desire to step out of what Quentin Meillassoux termed "the correlationist circle" and thus go beyond its diverse implications for understanding reality without falling prey to a form of "naïve realism" or "a commonsense middle-aged realism of objective atoms and billiard balls located outside the human mind."[8] Because "speculative realism" is far from presenting a unified front, it's virtually impossible to summarize its tenets and nuances.[9] Plus, I'm no philosopher myself and do not intend to take sides in current debates, nor do I aim to judge the philosophical validity of the diverse theses propounded by the speculative realists or materialists or neovitalists or object-oriented ontologists or alien phenomenologists or whatever-other-isms "speculative realism" has since 2007 divided into. What I propose to do, however, is to use it as a possible navigational tool to try to come to terms with what, following "speculative realism," I chose to call "speculative fiction." So doing, my intention was not to suggest that all works potentially matching the appellation "speculative fiction" would or could serve as illustrations of the ideas diversely put forward by speculative realists. Some might, others wouldn't. Speculative realism—at any rate some of its main arguments—simply helped me understand why it seemed that all these works I was striving to read and comment on somehow foiled each of my endeavors, or at least left me with the impression that such was the case.

Summarily stated, "speculative realism"—I stick to that label for convenience's sake but could indifferently use "OOO" (object-oriented ontology) or any other designation, for that matter—aims to contest Kant's supposedly unsurpassable idealism, which posited that it was impossible to have access to any object *in itself*. This impasse is what Quentin Meillassoux describes as "correlationism":

> Correlationism consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another. Not only does it become necessary to insist that we never grasp an object "in itself," in isolation from its relation to the subject, but it also becomes necessary to maintain that we can never grasp a subject that would not always-already be related to an object. (Meillassoux 2008, 5)

I've often felt, contemplating the works I'm dealing with, that they eventually demanded that as a reader I considered them for themselves, *in themselves*—as objects, pure objects, or "tool-beings" in Graham Harman's terminology. That, somehow, they were forcing me to read them or, minimally, to

view them from outside a version of the "correlationist circle" that Meillassoux describes. Is this even possible, though, one may wonder. To read the text independently of the "correlation" that unites it to the reader, me to it? To read the text as though I *was not*.[10] Put differently, can a text exist without there being a reader (real or constructed) to voice it or give it some sort of presence or actuality? Can a text achieve an independent, autonomous life of its own? Can a novel, then, as one such text proclaims, *read itself*? Can it thus radically expel any form of (reading) subjectivity out of itself? Or are all such questions utterly devoid of meaning? That might possibly be the case. Yet a text is an object just like any other, after all, and as such has a share in the object's withdrawn ontology—a point made by Harman in his essay "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer" when he rejects the new critics' tendency, embodied in Cleanth Brooks's conception of the poem, to view literature "as a special case." This, for Harman, amounts to "taxonomic fallacy, which consists in the assumption that any ontological distinction must be embodied in specific *kinds* of entities" (Harman, 189). A poem may well be autonomous and resist all attempts at literalization, yet for all that, it is no different than any other type of discourse, nor any real object. The poem is thus *no* special case. What could be true of a tree, the sun, or a speck of dust could, for that very reason, also be true of any text, and vice versa. In theory.

So this, in the end, is the fiction that I propose to read and/or write—a speculative fiction that posits the existence of texts that *withdraw* (Harman's concept) from all relations. Texts that, perhaps, tell the story of their own unreadability; that make, as I read them, their own "tale[s] [themselves] progressively impossible" (Meillassoux 2015, 57).

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Speculative realism comes in handy for diverse reasons, one of them being that it challenges all forms of anthropocentrism. One orientation taken by speculative realism precisely consists of thinking a world of "objects" or "things"—even *hyperobjects* in Timothy Morton's case; that is, a world rid of all human bias, in which everyday objects, concrete as well as abstract, infinitesimal or massive, occupy no less privileged a position in the universe at large than do human beings: "my being is not everything it's cracked up to be," says Morton—"or rather . . . the being of a paper cup is as profound as mine" (*HO*, 17).[11]

As such, speculative realism is finely attuned to fictional scenarios that would envisage the disappearance of humanity or that would rigorously displace the narrative viewpoint in trying to render it as "objective" as possible by removing, as much as can be done, any subjective slant. Now, whether or not

such story lines belong to fiction exclusively or already inform reality in part or as a whole remains debatable in the face of ecological catastrophe, global terror, a worldwide pandemic, and/or nuclear apocalypse. However, as defined in these pages, speculative fiction relishes these types of scenario insofar as they force us to adopt a non-correlationist perspective on the world, concomitantly placing the reader in the uncomfortable position that consists in thinking (of) something that radically does away with the very possibility of thinking it. Thinking the end of the world in any literal sense, for instance, can be achieved only if one thinks the end of their thinking in the same breath and process, given that the end of the world, if complete, implies the end of all thought.[12] This is perhaps as radical as it gets, but such is, at least theoretically, what the "absolute" placed at the heart of speculation entails—the very possibility of "access[ing] *an absolute*, i.e. a being whose *severance* (the original meaning of *absolutus*) and whose separateness from thought is such that it presents itself to us as non-relative to us, and hence as capable of existing whether we exist or not" (Meillassoux 2008, 28). Hence my contention here that a truly apocalyptic novel, say, is one that demands to be read in and for its absolute separateness from the act of reading as such.

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Beyond mere theoretical or philosophical concerns, speculative realism is also interested in the question of aesthetics, which in itself allows for a tentative dialogue between philosophical speculation and experimental fiction. Harman, Shaviro, and Morton, for instance, all place aesthetics at the heart of both philosophy and the real. For Harman, "metaphysics may be a branch of aesthetics, and causation merely a form of beauty" (Harman 2010, 139). A claim seconded by Steven Shaviro whose reading of Whitehead as a possible counterpoint to speculative realism makes him reach the conclusion that "speculative philosophy has an irreducibly aesthetic dimension; it requires new, bold inventions rather than pacifying resolutions" (Shaviro, 43). Morton agrees, who similarly views causality in terms of aesthetics since "if things are intrinsically withdrawn, irreducible to their perception or relations or uses,[13] they can only affect each other in a strange region out in front of them, a region of traces and footprints: the aesthetic dimension" (*RM*, 17–18).

For those reasons, like other philosophers before them, speculative realists often resort to literary works if not to prove their points, then at least to articulate them. Meillassoux's interest in science fiction and the way it can be twisted or "decomposed" so as to offer the speculative experience of pure contingency and thus "explore the truth of a worldless existence" (Meillassoux 2015, 57)

finds other developments in *The Number and the Siren*, his book on Mallarmé, which can be read as a performative demonstration of "the necessity of contingency," as first expounded in *After Finitude*. Further, as Harman himself points out, if the views diversely propounded by speculative realists may at times appear discordant, "all of [them] turned out independently to have been admirers of Lovecraft," whose "weird fiction sets the stage for an entire philosophical genre" (Harman 2018). If Harman notably devotes a book to Lovecraft,[14] Eugene Thacker similarly gathers, in his *Horror of Philosophy* series,[15] all sorts of literary examples from romantic, gothic, horror, or "weird" literature.[16]

Such focus on aesthetic issues renders speculative realism, in its broad spectrum, a potentially useful tool for approaching works of speculative fiction as defined in these pages, that is, works that somehow "withdraw" as one tries to approach them, that resist interpretation, whose connections more often than not dissolve beyond conventional categories, and whose intrinsic logic appears flimsy, in some cases even challenging narrativity as it depicts strange and uncanny worlds.

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I realize that I've chosen to refer to speculative realism—broadly defined and in deliberate ignorance of possible objections, as well as of its inner conflicts—as a "tool" that would help me navigate speculative waters. However, my point in doing so is not to use its main arguments or concepts instrumentally in order to translate them to the study of contemporary American fiction. If I've elected speculative realism as a prospective "method" for approaching speculative fiction, for reasons in part exposed above, it's also because it appeared that at the heart of speculative realism there existed specific modalities that were notably open to *fiction* itself.

Of course, fiction is not philosophy any more than philosophy is fiction. Yet the very concept of *speculation* might appear as a fruitful site where both philosophy and fiction meet. Fiction, especially when it waxes *experimental*, may indeed thrust toward philosophy by offering singular, speculative thought experiments that undermine both my sense of what fiction or narrative is and does and my understanding of, or difficulty with, what goes by the name of reality.[17]

For despite its apparent predilection for absurdism or irrationality or ontological improbabilities, speculative fiction may not be that abstractly removed from reality, after all. Not only does reality have a notorious tendency of outdoing fiction, but it is also increasingly harder and harder to fathom now that "the end of the world has already occurred" according to Timothy Morton—an end brought about by what he calls "hyperobjects," that is, "things that are

massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (*HO*, 7/1).[18] It results from this that "the hyperobject is not a function of our knowledge" (*HO*, 2). As Morton specifies in *Realist Magic*, there is an uneradicable part of mystery lodged at the core of reality; the word "mystery" itself, says Morton, "suggests a rich and ambiguous range of terms: secret, enclosed, withdrawn, unspeakable." Thus "the realness of things [is] bound up with a certain mystery, in these multiple senses: unspeakability, enclosure, withdrawal, secrecy. . . . Things are *encrypted*. But the difference between standard encryption and the encryption of objects is that this is an unbreakable encryption. 'Nature loves to hide' (Heraclitus)" (*RM*, 17).

Speculative fiction may be just that, in the end: fiction about which there could be nothing to say, after all, whose secret code cannot be broken—or broken only to the extent that it immediately reciphers itself and thus remains undecidable, a point Meillassoux addresses in *The Number and the Siren* when concluding about "the undecidable nature of [the count's] procedure" (208) that is supposed to reveal the secret Number or Meter of Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés*.

And it might be this undecidability, perhaps another name for speculation eventually, that undoes the critical act.

Mapping Speculation

Having said all that, or tried to, I can now venture to draw up an exploratory map of speculative fiction. Of course, given its volatile nature, speculative fiction as such is hard to locate or put down; the map itself remains tentative and in no way exhaustive. On it, a text can appear then disappear to relocate elsewhere, contesting margins, ignoring edges. Others should probably figure on the map but were left out, as yet undiscovered or unexplored. Once placed on the map, though, a text's position can never truly be ascertained. The map itself is a fiction. The map itself speculates—it calls up texts, assesses them; some comply while others resist, erasing the contours of the map, forcing it to fold out differently, to reconsider its outline. For as already explained, speculative fiction as such may not exist, or exists only as a theoretical construct—some texts may not *be* speculative (for the question remains whether or not any one text can *truly* be speculative and as such elude all forms of "correlation") yet appear here or there tinged with the speculative hypothesis, traversed in some of their regions by a speculative current.

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The texts that first sent me down the speculative track were Ben Marcus's early collection *The Age of Wire and String* (1995) and his novel *Notable American*

Women (2002). Marcus's next novel, *The Flame Alphabet* (2012), seemed to break with the peculiar aesthetics of his previous works in favor of a more straightforward narrative, although its premise—a world in which language turns poisonous and where it becomes virtually impossible to ever *relate* (to) anything—is in itself adamantly speculative. Throughout Marcus's fiction, a dystopian streak is clearly perceptible that alienates the world as we know or think we know it, a world turned strange, creepy, uncanny, "weird," in which the relationships between characters appear often contrived and tinged with obtuse technology in which communication and understanding are never granted.

Ben Marcus's work, including his latest collections of stories, *Leaving the Sea* (2014) and *Notes from the Fog* (2018), could thus serve to chart one region of speculative fiction. In its vicinity would be found such texts as Gary Lutz's (now Garielle Lutz) or Jason Schwartz's. In both instances, the worlds described are ones that appear coldly objectified, in which interaction—social, personal, familial, marital—is never a given. The syntactic constructions defamiliarize the environments in which characters are supposed to play their part; paragraphs follow up on one another without any manifest connection, resulting in strange non sequiturs that constantly jam the narrative impetus; words aggregate yet obfuscate meaning. Stories as such appear "in the worst way" (Lutz)—they never really *tell* anything, connect dots, or give access to any information that would add up toward some possible resolution or understanding. They often leave off or disconnect in abrupt, baffling fashion after characters have been acting erratically, if at all, remaining at best bizarre, often undecipherable, unnamed and hard to identify, let alone relate to, when not altogether discarded from the text. In the words of Ben Marcus in his introduction to Jason Schwartz's *A German Picturesque* (1998), words that could easily apply to Gary (now Garielle) Lutz's fiction too, these stories remain "beneath reason and understanding" (*GP*, viii).

The radical strangeness inherent in such fiction can at some point seem to devolve into some form of absurdism or surrealism. Of course, these as such may not be intrinsically speculative; the logic behind surrealism, for instance, appears different, obeys other patterns and rules but is not altogether absent. It's just *other(ed)*. Meaning in itself is not contested so much as displaced or translated. Bona fide surrealistic fiction is thus not truly speculative in the sense the word is used in these pages. However, some speculative works may flirt with surrealism, and the boundary between the two can be thin and not easily located. *Wild Milk* (2018), by Sabrina Orah Mark, might be one such work in which the partition between what could appear as surrealism and as speculation gets blurred. So are Sarah Rose Etter's *The Book of X* (2019) or Alexandra

Kleeman's *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* (2015) or Lucy Corin's collection *One Hundred Apocalypses and Other Apocalypses* (2013), texts that float about the map not far from the Marcus-Lutz-Schwartz province, along perhaps with Renee Gladman's Ravicka series of short novels, consisting in the invention of what could at first sight appear as a uchronia, a radically alien city with its own rules and language.[19]

The positioning of those texts on the map by and by leads to another region that may be charted by Shelley Jackson's body of works, from her collection *The Melancholy of Anatomy* (2002) to her latest novel, *Riddance* (2018). Jackson's work mixes and blurs diverse narrative genres to treat the text as an organic, mysterious body of its own, the grappling of which is never evident.

Materiality is indeed a key feature of Jackson's writing, her texts being inseparable from the media they are couched in/on, whether a book (*Half Life* or *Riddance*), a hypertext (*Patchwork Girl*), the weather ("Snow"), or the human body (the "Skin" project). Because Jackson's work openly questions its materiality, it demands to be read in specific ways, ways that possibly remain to be invented as each text also plots its own withdrawal—either via technological obsolescence (which is the case of the Storyspace hypertext *Patchwork Girl*, for instance) or through the calculated disappearance of its "media" (whether human flesh or snow—or paper too, for that matter). The text that I as reader have open access to thus never truly is what it seems nor coincides with itself—an idea that the novel *Half Life* (2006) toys with—but remains a trompe l'oeil duplicate, an imperfect rendition of another text left or positioned elsewhere, possibly distributed through space and time, at any rate unreachable, elusive, and deceitful.

This region on the map of speculative fiction opens out onto what Katherine Hayles has termed "technotexts"—that is, "literary works that strengthen, foreground, and thematize the connections between themselves as material artifacts and the imaginative realm of verbal/semiotic signifiers they instantiate" (Hayles 2002, 25)—of which Jackson's works can be seen as avatars. In this area of the map would be found works by Mark Doten, Michael Joyce, Joshua Cohen, and Mark Z. Danielewski, different though they are in scope, contents, or style. As Hayles argues, such artifacts demand to be read along the lines of "media-specific analysis" and as such invalidate the usual hermeneutic props. Meaning is not to be discovered *in* the text but rather lies somewhere in the interaction I have (or fail to have) with the objects qua objects I am manipulating. This, of course, is not enough to turn them into speculative artifacts. Speculation registers, however, as soon as the object ceases to function or operate. Which might be said to be the case with Doten's *The Infernal* (2015), for

example, or with Michael Joyce's *Was* (2007), riddled with interferences and constant dis- or re-locations. It may not be a coincidence if, further, Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) or Mark Doten's *The Infernal* both build upon what appears to be an insoluble enigma that cannot fully be rationalized, whether in the form of the unfathomable hallway at the heart of the Navidsons' house in Danielewski's book, or the presence of the "Akkad Boy" at the onset of Doten's novel. In both instances, there would be something akin to what Meillassoux theorizes as "extro-science fiction."

If Meillassoux acknowledges that true extro-science works are almost impossible to locate, their narratives as narratives impossible to tell, extro-science may however be made manifest by degrees. This leads me to another possible corner on the map where texts revolving around apparently insolvable mysteries are to be found, like Azareen Van der Vliet Oloomi's *Fra Keeler* (2012) or Jane Unrue's *Love Hotel* (2015), a novel that somehow takes the form of the titular hotel, asking readers to move up and down along diverse fringed story lines that come apart on the page in hypertextual fashion. What such formal strategies eventually develop can no longer be patterned on the traditional narrative arc, stretching more or less linearly from beginning to end. Both Van der Vliet Oloomi's and Unrue's novels, despite their obvious differences in shapes, build upon a series of iterations or duplications that challenge sequentiality and, eventually, chronology—that is, the ordering of events without which a story-*as*-story comes loose or undone, falls apart, and does not and cannot cohere. What novels like *Fra Keeler* or *Love Hotel* might as such be doing is indeed isolate fictional lives (Fra Keeler's in Van der Vliet Oloomi's story; the narrator's in Unrue's novel) and "[tighten them] around their own flow in the midst of gaps" (Meillassoux 2015, 57), gaps made all the more apparent by the iterations or doublings surrounding them.

Such iterations gain formal visibility in the work of Blake Butler, whether in *Ever* (2009), *There Is No Year* (2011), or *Sky Saw* (2012). Even when the text appears to play along more conventional narrative lines, as in *Scorch Atlas* (2009), which models itself upon postapocalyptic fiction, or *300,000,000* (2014), which initially feigns to borrow from detective fiction, the stories end up iterating rather than telling proper, indulging in lists and endless rehashings that run counter to the idea one usually has of what literature—and fiction—is and does. "Perhaps," ventures Ian Bogost in *Alien Phenomenology*, "the problem is not with lists but with literature, whose preference for traditional narrative acts as a correlationist amplifier" (40). But beyond that, iteration also implies a purely mechanical operation tending toward the algorithm or the computational, an operation that can leave traces—errors, glitches—on the surface of

texts, pointing to their underlying illegible nature as a reminder that such fictions, eventually, are "not for you," to quote the epigraph of Danielewski's *House of Leaves*.

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This map, so far, works by association and possible family traits, ascribing likenesses between this or that text, whether in "spirit" or "letter." But if speculative fiction were a family of texts, it would almost, by necessity and definition, have to be a dysfunctional one. There is very little in common between, say, Danielewski's maximalist strategy in *House of Leaves* and Jason Schwartz's minimalist fiction; or between Mark Doten's stylized, technological future and Renee Gladman's neat, stripped-down Ravicka. Other works, like David Ohle's or David Markson's, remain definitely apart, bearing virtually no or very little organic resemblance with texts that may form specific neighborhoods on the map.

Another possibility would thus be to rearrange or draw another version of the map, along more thematic and/or generic lines. Because speculation, in the philosophical sense used in these pages, is concerned with ways of bypassing what Quentin Meillassoux has defined as "correlationism," genres or themes that undermine ways of relating may serve as catalysts for speculative scenarios. Among them would be genres whose precepts are intrinsically speculative, that is, genres that depict situations to which it is impossible to relate, that appear in themselves unthinkable insofar as they, as such, presuppose either the nonexistence of thought (this is the "ancestrality" thesis expounded by Meillassoux in *After Finitude*) or its abolition.

One such genre is postapocalyptic fiction—fictions of the end or end-time fictions that compel thought to think through or beyond its own annihilation. Stories about the end of the world abound, and some of them are sometimes referred to as "speculative" in the usual, literary, "what-if?" sense of the word. But to be speculative in the sense I wish to convey in this study, so-called (post) apocalyptic stories somehow have to radicalize the genre, unsettle it so as to include and embody the catastrophe or disaster in their formal layouts or narrative strategies, thus pushing narrative as such over the abyss—exploding it or ending it altogether.

In that regard, though far less sensational than any other stories in the genre,[20] David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988)—in its fragmented, iterative layout, as well as in its narrative paucity—strikes me as overtly speculative in its premises. Along with Markson's novel, Mark Doten's *The Infernal* and *Trump Sky Alpha* (2019), David Ohle's work, comprised of *Motorman* (1972), *In the Age of Sinatra* (2004), *The Pisstown Chaos* (2008), and *The Old Reactor*

(2013), or Blake Butler's *Scorch Atlas* all share similar speculative concerns and fit within the postapocalyptic framework. Others, though less literally postapocalyptic, can be seen as implementing another take on the end-time story: Ben Marcus's *The Flame Alphabet* is one; and so might be, in their own terms, Shelley Jackson's *Half Life*, exploring the consequences of the nuclear age, or Joshua Cohen's *Witz* (2010), telling the story of the mysterious, simultaneous death of all Jews on the planet at the turn of the twenty-first century, with the exception of one.

In some, not to say most, texts revolving around catastrophism and postapocalyptics, the distinction between science fiction and extro-science fiction can often appear blurry. Shelley Jackson's *Half Life*, to quote but one, remains on the surface a science-fictional text to the extent that none of its oddities challenge the very concepts of science and reason. On a purely thematic level then, *Half Life* is *not* speculative. Yet one reason why Meillassoux finds locating extro-science works difficult could be that his vantage remains fixated on the diegetic, mimetic level and never really includes the formal dimension nor the narrative strategies set up by the text. Yet if one focuses on the formal games played by Shelley Jackson in *Half Life*, it becomes possible to pick up a speculative whiff flowing through the text itself, in the way the writing destabilizes reading and interpretation.

To some degree—though that might very well be the point I've been trying to make all along, namely, that speculative fiction *is* a question of degrees—the same applies to David Ohle's work, from *Motorman* on. For on the surface of it, for all its quirkiness, David Ohle's universe can be put away on the sci-fi shelves. Replete with all sorts of strange inventions, creatures, and life-forms, Ohle's texts read in part like dystopian science fiction gone berserk through parody and absurdism. As such, they may not be truly speculative, yet they often resist interpretation through abrupt and grotesque narrative shifts highlighting sheer arbitrariness—whether thematically or formally. This, in turn, makes of Ohle's texts a loose concatenation of anecdotes or episodes rather than a consistent story with beginning, middle, and end. The very fact that each novel by Ohle can be seen as the (discontinuous) sequel to the previous one further reflects this: Ohle's oeuvre is not one, does not constitute a whole so much as a series, an aggregate of parts that never truly cohere, an aspect concordant with the way object-oriented ontology views "objects" as "uncanny," according to Timothy Morton, "compos[ing] an untotalizable nonwhole set that defies holism and reductionism" (*HO*, 116).

Postapocalyptics, in a broad sense, can thus occupy a whole region on the map of speculative fiction as one genre predicated upon a speculative

hypothesis, namely, what Meillassoux called "dia-chronicity" to refer to statements hinging on "a *temporal discrepancy* between thinking and being—thus, not only statements about events occurring prior to the emergence of humans, but also statements about possible events that are *ulterior* to the extinction of the human species" (Meillassoux 2008, 112).

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Along with (post)apocalyptic fiction, in ways not quite unrelated to it, another genre that could almost naturally lead to some form of speculation is dystopian fiction. Because they depict situations that are not the case, though they could be, because they distort social and political realities, dystopias posit a connection to, a resemblance with, the world as we know it and, as such, beg to be related to. But because they often take the form of nightmarish scenarios, or at least bizarre states of affairs, they also question the very relation they want me to establish with them, leading me to view them as untenable, undesirable, not to say *unthinkable*.

In that corner of the map could thus be found early works by Ben Marcus, for instance, *The Age of Wire and String*, *Notable American Women*, and early stories like "The Father Costume" (*Leaving the Sea*). Marcus's first novel, *The Age of Wire and String*, is set in an unspecified "age" and purports to depict, rather than *tell* about, the ways and rules of a mysterious community. Dates and places, when mentioned, tend to obfuscate rather than pin down this enigmatic age, which could quite indifferently be set in the distant past or the distant future. Instead of stories in any due sense, the book is indeed comprised of a series of short, definitional vignettes placed under such headings as "Sleep," "God," "Food," "The House," "Animal," "Weather," "Persons," "The Society." Yet the texts often appear to be cryptically unrelated to the topic they're supposed to exemplify. Their pseudo authoritative, encyclopedic tone, devoid of subjective investment, further estranges their content, making it difficult to relate—which, as exposed in the book's "Argument," might precisely be the point: "Let this rather be the first of many forays into the mysteries, as here disclosed but not destroyed. For it is in these things that we are most lost, as it is in these things alone that we must better be hidden" (*AWS*, 4). Jason Schwartz's *A German Picturesque* and *John the Posthumous* (2013) function in ways similar to Ben Marcus's *The Age of Wire and String*. Overly, although paradoxically descriptive, not to say ekphrastic in the case of *John the Posthumous*, these texts favor indecision and address their reader in ambivalent ways.

Notable American Women follows a more openly dystopian line, as it posits the takeover of a group of radical women dedicated to silence and stillness

under the leadership of one Jane Dark. However, the dystopian streak of the text is counterbalanced, or perhaps strengthened, by the sheer grotesqueness of the situations it gives birth to. Differing in tone, more straightforward in its telling, Alexandra Kleeman's *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* follows in a similar dystopian vein, sketching an inscrutable world almost entirely given over to conformism, advertisement, and mass consumerism. Verging on surrealism, Sarah Rose Etter's *The Book of X*, with its "meat quarries" and bodily aberrations, is another novel that could find its place nearby on the map, along with Shelley Jackson's *The Melancholy of Anatomy*, or, in a different mode, Renee Gladman's series of novels devoted to Ravicka, an imaginary city-state with a shifting geography, a history, and a language all its own.

However, as for postapocalyptic fiction—as well as for any other genre for that matter—dystopian fiction may not be de facto speculative. Speculative fiction, as this book endeavors to define it, remains a borderline construct, an evanescent presence on the (experimental) fringes of literary American fiction. If it speculates, it also has to be speculated in return. Hence, speculative fiction cannot be codified as a genre per se—obeying fixed rules, following preordained patterns. If it can work itself into a specific genre, speculative fiction becomes so only insofar as it unsettles it in the process, opening it up onto some indetermination or, perhaps, some contingent orientations. In short, the genre—though at first recognizable—happens to be alienated from itself as the fiction takes its speculative turn. The genre as such ceases to operate somehow, veers off in unexpected directions. Or is radicalized in fortuitous ways, overlaid with foreign elements that interfere with its smooth, conventional rendition.[21]

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Another region on the map could then be settled by works akin to investigative (rather than detective) fiction. If the link between postapocalyptics and speculative fiction can more or less appear self-evident due to the "dia-chronic" hiatus end-time stories instantiate, the association between mysteries to be investigated and speculation might seem more problematic, if only because as a genre such stories muster up what Barthes, in *S/Z*, defined as "the hermeneutic code" (17), and they thus call upon the reader, solicit, and ask for her interpretation as well as collaboration in the meaning-making process. In other words, this type of fiction does not openly aim to sever the relationship with and withdraw from the reading act. Rather, it eschews the absolutization of the text—in the etymological sense of the absolute recalled by Meillassoux in *After Finitude* (i.e., "severance" or "separateness from thought" [28])—that speculative fiction may strive to propound.

A novel like Blake Butler's *300,000,000* quite explicitly starts as an investigation into the mind, words, and deeds of mass murderer Gretch Nathaniel Gravey. Similarly, Azareen Van der Vliet Oloomi's *Fra Keeler* opens on the narrator's firm intention to investigate Fra Keeler's death—a death that, though apparently caused by lung cancer, "need[s] to be thoroughly investigated" (*FK*, 7). But instead of moving toward their resolution, both enigmas—very different though they are in nature and scope—tend to quite literally thicken around the narrator/investigator, in whose baffled image I as reader/critic have no real choice but to recognize myself: "Of course this is me searching for meaning. Likely there is no meaning but it is my job to persist in the identification of tragedy nailed to nothing, and so I will" (*3HM*, 85).

Such works lean on the speculative precisely to the extent that the mystery lodged at their hearts never really dissipates or *opens* up. As evoked by Morton in his introduction to *Realist Magic*, "*Mysteria* is a neuter plural noun derived from *muein*, to close or shut" (17). To various degrees, such works as Butler's, Van der Vliet Oloomi's, or even Danielewski's *House of Leaves* and Jane Unrue's *Love Hotel*, for that matter, all revolving around an insoluble "mystery," remain impenetrably shut; I can never truly find my way into them. Faced with the task of explaining them, I realize that this is virtually impossible, as the solution to such enigmas keeps receding farther and farther away from my grasp as I read. The mystery withdraws, deepens, leaves me with the paradoxical understanding that, in the words of *Fra Keeler*'s narrator, "to attempt to make sense in regards to all of this is senseless. Rather one must attempt to make senselessness" (*FK*, 70)—an agenda already stated quite explicitly at the outset of Shelley Jackson's *Melancholy of Anatomy*, whose opening story, "Heart"—thus irradiating the whole body of following texts—stages a narrator "trying to understand, by the ways in which, yes, I do *not* understand" (*MA*, 4).

Other texts to be found in this region of the map—which could include Michael Joyce's *Disappearance* or Shelley Jackson's *Riddance*—would thus develop similar frustrating strategies, simultaneously articulating and evaporating a mystery, shaping it while hiding it from view, positing and translating it in the same breath. All such texts would somehow appeal to the hermeneutic code yet at the same time, in the same move, would immediately jam or invalidate it, making it all the harder for me to respond to them on their own terms, since their own terms, it seems, perforce elude me.

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The maps I have been elaborating, if only to give "speculative fiction" some substance, are what they are in the end—maps, representations held at an

unbridgeable distance from the reality they aim to depict, sketches subject to a particular viewpoint. Though they strive to be faithful to their model, they may err here or there, or lose sight of their model's elusive nature. The scale might not be accurate, or some crucial details may have been overlooked, replaced by others utterly foreign to the topography in question. Perhaps such maps are misguiding more than they are helpful. They may lose me and belie their own inadequacy. Faced with the muteness and inscrutability of their model, they make, after all, their own reality. They have to.

For speculative fiction, as here defined and tentatively approached, eventually sighted in the pages that follow through thematic and conceptual lenses, remains hard to locate, difficult to pin down, impossible to grasp. As I've had occasion to say already, it may not even exist *as such*—pure invention on my part. Maybe. A daunting contradiction to get me started. A rhetorical, theoretical, heretical fiction. For can a text, any text, ever pretend to remain that radically inscrutable? That far withdrawn into itself as to bypass meaning and pursue sheer senselessness instead? Perhaps not. Or these lines I'm writing would not, could not be penned down. For they do make sense, after all. Or so I think, or hope. Some discourse has taken shape, arguments have been put forward, concepts forged, examples given, names named and quotes quoted; ideas have started circulating and extending their sway. Of course all of that could be downplayed, contradicted, disproved. For whether I like it or not, I'm still playing by the rules of critical writing. The so-called ~~failure~~ I've been hinting at from the start is not, nor can it be, complete. Behind my various attempts, choosing my own "tools" and drafting my own "maps," I insist on trying to probe and open up these texts' mysteries, to lift their secrets—even if to say at the end of the day that they don't conceal any.

This, then, might be my failure eventually. Not having failed the way I claimed. Meaning is resilient. The telltale sign of my own critical prejudices.

Speculative fiction, in that sense, that is, in yet *another* sense, *is* a fiction; indeed it is.

The fiction of its own impossibility. The fiction of its own contradictions. A bet, a dare. A challenge. Posed. Suspended.

An end. In itself.

For itself.

That is, not for me.

But with me, yet.

Yes. This book *is* a contradiction.