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The Silence of the Concepts (in Meillassoux's *After Finitude* and Gottlob Frege)

The confidence that truth can be found
through thinking is the inevitable precondition for
all investigating. (Hermann Lotze)

The call for the conference on which the present volume is based invites reflection on poetic critique – on criticism that would also be poetic. Citing Schlegel, it advances the notion that such critique might also be art, that criticism would add its own art to the work of art. Without wishing to disavow this possibility, a book project I have just finished suggests that the relation between criticism and art is a two-way street: not only may criticism be poetic, roughly in Schlegel's sense, but, as Schlegel himself already suggested, literature, including poetry, would already be critical – by which I intend that literature, too, would have a subject matter, be about something, and strive for insight, understanding, or truth, albeit not always on the assertoric terms that usually frame these accomplishments.¹

To be clear, so changing the equation and reinflecting our conception of what literature and criticism are would not entail that literature ceases to be fanciful and becomes a sequence of veiled assertions or statements; nor, however, has this ever really been true of interpretation, criticism, or thinking. In fact, “the silence of the concepts” names a new view concerning what happens when we read or write any text. On this account, the understanding of what we say, our expressions' meaningfulness and references, comes to pass in an operation that unfolds across time, taking in stretches of discourse necessarily larger than the word and even the isolated sentence. Such an event of understanding is not graspable in terms of any pre-existing frameworks – givens, such as words, language, signifiers, forms, generic rules. Instead, what is at issue in writing and speech – what they have to say, and what they talk about, as well as how they say it – would recur to a single, everywhere identical operation, occupying a heretofore neglected middle ground: a region greater than the word or single sentence, yet smaller than those formations thought to combine discourse and its objects *en bloc*, such as, on some views, genres, or Wittgenstein's language games. To be sure, open-ended habits or practices, informed by what I call traditionalities or historicities, would still shape our expectations when

¹ For this project, see my *A New Philosophy of Discourse: Language Unbound* (Kates 2020). Moreover, see Yi-Ping Ong's “Poetic Criticism and the Work of Fiction: Goethe, Joyce, and Coetzee” in this volume for a nice exploration of the possibility indicated by Schlegel of literary works commenting on (or “critiquing”) other works.

approaching different sorts of discourse, or “talk!,” as I term it.² Confronting shopping lists, for instance, different uses are anticipated than when regarding the periodic table. Nevertheless, nothing fundamental or structural separates any of these instances; hybrids or variants are always possible, specimens such as “shopping lists of the stars” – shopping lists not thrown away, but preserved, like the periodic table – or Ben Lerner’s novel, *10:04*, which is also an exercise in art criticism.

In the present essay, this middle ground will be fleshed out, and what is at stake in it indicated, by using Quentin Meillassoux’s work as springboard and provocation. Meillassoux’s speculative realism, and other recent initiatives with which it is often allied (such as Graham Harman’s, Bruno Latour’s or Karen Barad’s) share a concern that animates the present work, while being marked by a major difference in how that concern is addressed. An anxiety about science, which may also take the form of a fascination with it, arguably motivates these programs. The resurgence of humanistic (*geisteswissenschaftliche*) practices afforded by the New Criticism, structuralism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction in the post-WWII era having collapsed, what this moment had held at bay – namely, the apparently unparalleled power and authority of modern scientific discourse with its power to reshape existence – now returns to the fore.

The approach I am mapping here, to be clear, also entails the rejection of godlike structures of knowledge, arguably pushing still further that ontological flattening that marks Action Network Theory (ANT) or Barad’s work, as well as surface reading, though seemingly not Meillassoux’s endeavor.³ The denial of scientific discourse’s exceptionality, however, by no means discredits its claims to truth, which, often, though not always, are compelling when examined in their specificity. Truth’s purview is instead broadened and diversified. Truth, on my account, pertains to all talk!, to all discourse, including criticism and literature, as well as political theory, law and, at moments, philosophy. Every discourse, as discourse, speaks, comments, describes, articulates, or in some other manner latches on to something other than itself and articulates something concerning it, albeit on different terms and often with respect to different types of subject matters.

To propose that all discourse touches on the world and may be capable of insight necessitates that all talk!, every discourse, has reference points, topics, and subjects, concerning which it tenders such apprehensions. In respect to this possibility, the present project registers its most significant difference from the ones previously mentioned, although this difference, too, varies in degree. The above-named endeavors, especially when it comes to theorizing their matters of concern, but also more generally, devalue, even while incorporating, a hermeneutic dimension. Their own discourse, both in respect to how they present their subject matter, as well as how

² I prefer the neologism “talk!” to “discourse,” since the latter is too associated with the program of expanding language’s rule-bound character to language in use, as in “discourse theory” or John Searle’s version of speech-act theory.

³ On such “flattening” as a general trend in the contemporary humanities, see Bennett 2010, 254.

that matter takes shape, recurs to a relatively straightforward style of theorizing and argumentation, of which Meillassoux offers perhaps the most extreme example. In contrast to some phases of poststructuralism, the hermeneutic and the theoretical moment come asunder in these works.

By contrast, in the present undertaking, because this middle ground's operation entails the appurtenance of even a single sentence to others in implicit series, it retains *both* insight into some subject matter *and* a hermeneutic axis. The interpretative register, implicitly everywhere at work, but explicitly so in humanistic contexts, is foregrounded in the present instance, though this by no means cancels these or the present undertakings' ability to refer and to render insights or truths. Indeed, in every instance, along with our expressions or related stretches of talk!, ultimately something non-verbal, different from talk!, remains up for grabs, which can come to the fore on different terms than talk! or discourse, in part because terms themselves here are never fixed once and for all nor function in isolation. Instead, both what talk! says and the disclosure of those non-talk!-matters it engages take shape as events, along a continuum of familiarity and novelty, with some topics and some expressions – for example, in certain contexts, “pass the salt” – being more readily parsed than others, such as the first chapter of *Das Kapital*. Yet, all instances remain eventful, both in their production and their reception; their expression and understanding take place on occasions and in contexts and are never preprogrammed nor signify autonomously.

Nevertheless, at this moment, “in walks Quentin,” as jazz aficionados might put it, since for Meillassoux and many of his readers any retention of a hermeneutic dimension will seem a version of his great bugbear, “correlationism,” the term with which his thinking today is most often associated, albeit for his attack on it. Accordingly, for the remainder of the present discussion what I propose to do is to sketch Meillassoux's positioning in *After Finitude*, with one eye on the thinking of Gottlob Frege, to clarify correlationism both in my own work and in Meillassoux's. So proceeding, I will set out the middle ground here in question, contrasting it with Meillassoux's way of working, while also exemplifying this region's operation in practice. The consequences of this middle ground for literary studies then will be briefly discussed by way of conclusion.

1 The Middle Ground's Lower Bound

The middle ground here conceived operates neither on the great scale of genres nor the more minute one of words. The former, genres and other such totalities that would at once prescribe what talk! says, and the objects it talks about, such as Foucault's *epistemes* or Niklas Luhmann's systems, instantiate the *upper* reach of this middle region. Words, concepts, signs, and other subsentential units, furnish the middle ground's *lower* bound. Neither of these, I am about to suggest, function as their proponents imagine; neither close on themselves and neither can be effectively

traced nor affirmed, as supplying conditions for expression, understanding, and insight. Revealing Meillassoux's thought's limits in light of Frege, and then Frege's theory's own shortcomings, exhibits why this is so, and thus how this middle ground actually takes shape, as well as ultimately how this middle ground avoids correlationism, by dint of the real's role in it. The real as here understood, in turn, grants leeway for literature, criticism, and the other humanities to consort with truth on their own terms.

Why the lower bounds of this middle zone lack closure, and thus why words or signs as such effectively play no role in literary or any other expression and their understanding, may be grasped by examining correlationism itself – the term, or word, or sign “correlationism” – and its fate in Meillassoux's own thinking. As we are about to see, one striking paradox or irony in Meillassoux's writing is that while his specific arguments, of which there are many in *After Finitude*, conform to Aristotle's older syllogistic logic of subject and predicate, Meillassoux's presentation as a whole deviates markedly from this format. His is not an extended deductive exposition even in the very loose style of Kant's first *Critique*. Instead, Meillassoux's aims repeatedly alter, and, with that, what each of his terms say or mean changes, especially “correlationism.” What befalls “correlationism,” upon its introduction in *After Finitude*, thus itself, perhaps unintentionally, exhibits this middle ground's functioning.

That logic, essentially Aristotle's, to which Meillassoux has recourse, is likely familiar to most. For it, words or terms and their definition are key. This logic's unit, more specifically, is the syllogism, such things as: “All women are mortal; Cleopatra is a woman; Cleopatra is mortal.” The crucial moment in this figure of the syllogism, called Barbara – there are others – is the *second* clause, where the grammatical subject Cleopatra turns out to have a property and fall under a predicate, treated universally in the first: here, “being a woman.” This second step, the so-called “minor premise,” lets the other property and predicate in question, mortality, be transferred on to Cleopatra, thereby arriving at the assertion expressed in the conclusion: “Cleopatra is mortal.”

In Aristotelian logic, consequently, terms and their definitions are decisive. What women are; their definition; whether being mortal is part of it; who or what Cleopatra is – all must be clear and previously known for this or any instance of syllogistic reasoning to operate.

Meillassoux, who also proceeds syllogistically or, as it is sometimes put, deductively, early on in *After Finitude* offers the following definition of correlationism. Correlationism consists in the claim that “we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term apart from the other” (Meillassoux 2008, 5). Correlationists assert no being without thinking, no thinking without being. Shortly, at what more this definition aims will become clearer. At the moment, it can be noted that this formulation arguably is already controversial, since it appears to be a version of Parmenides' famous saying about thinking and being,

voein and einai, being the same, *to auto*. Yet Meillassoux deems correlationism a specifically modern development.⁴

Meillassoux, in any case, almost immediately transforms this notion in a manner that, though not in line with Aristotle's template, is at least not excluded by Frege's. Frege's logic, it must be underscored, is not syllogistic but propositional. For Frege, the *statement* or assertion – the judgment, not the term – is the unit of expression and of whatever truth it may access. Hence, early on in his career, Frege counseled against seeking definitions and advised instead to look toward the use of words in statements, where alone what the words express may be grasped. This injunction, “never to ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a proposition,” came to be known as Frege's context principle (Frege 1980, x).

Owing to Frege's context principle, concepts, terms, and words begin to slough off their grammatical, but also their ontological and categorial, identities. Concepts are neither properties nor predicates; they cannot be identified with any single word, nor can they even be defined directly or grasped as such. Concepts are essentially incomplete or unsaturated portions of statements and may be identified only by way of their extension: the different objects to which any given concept applies or that the concept “takes.”

Frege, more specifically, came to understand concepts as functions, which perform operations on arguments, the objects that fill them in. Their definition by way of their extensions entails that the concept or function, as, for example, expressed by “...is a horse” is identified thanks to all the different instances when “x is a horse” turns out to be true: “Secretariat is a horse,” “Bucephalus is a horse,” and on so on. Yet, even the workaround just employed is not really satisfactory; a different concept, for Frege, would be expressed in the lyrics from the old TV show *Mr. Ed*, which seems to possess the same verbal schema: “a horse is a horse...of course of course.” Here “...is a horse,” despite possessing what seem to be the same words and format, expresses a *different concept* owing to the different work it performs in the context of the present sentence, namely, that of expressing an identity.

Frege's scheme, it should be noted, harbors the profound possibility that there can be both speech and truth about a given subject matter – “Secretariat is a horse” – without that subject matter, or the terms that capture this truth, being transparent or known in any final way. Talk! in this respect operates in precise contrast to

⁴ Moreover, as so expressed, it actually does not apply to Kant's program in his first *Critique*, though this is Meillassoux's primary instance of this failing (Meillassoux 2008, 4, among others). What Kant calls transcendental knowledge, that is, knowledge of the conditions of genuine empirical knowledge, is itself *a priori*. Hence, for Kant there *can* be knowledge on the part of thinking or reason of *itself*, apart from knowledge of what is. This misprision of Kant, it should be noted, is in line with Meillassoux's understanding of Kant's categories as factual, here later discussed, and his assignment to Kant of what he calls Hume's problem. Kant's categories, though indeed otherwise unexplained, for this same reason cannot be “factual,” being *a priori*.

its presentation in Aristotle's logic. For Frege, one can say, "heat is found in bodies," without really knowing what heat is or what a body is, how the two interact, or the precise notions these words purport to express. This fact, as well as the concepts' inability to be directly named, are two ways in which concepts prove to be *silent* in Frege's treatment. Others will emerge, albeit not always in a manner Frege himself would have expected.

Hence, when approached from a Fregean perspective, rather than Meillassoux's *definition* of correlationism being decisive, what Meillassoux *does with this term* in other sentences and parts of his discourse is of primary importance. Moreover, this is fortunate, since Meillassoux's exposition, as already remarked, rings a rather dizzying set of changes on his leading notion. Meillassoux initially highlights correlationism's abandonment of *realism*, of the ability to grasp things, indeed nature, in itself, without filters of any sort – in the wild, so to speak. To be against correlationism, consequently, is to insist that knowledge grasps nature raw, if not necessarily red in tooth and claw.⁵ Through a series of steps, Meillassoux's program, however, morphs quite considerably. It turns into the project that his text's subtitle presents: the affirmation or establishment of "the necessity of contingency." Meillassoux's crusade against correlationism culminates in the imputation to nature of a radical and unprecedented style of contingency or chance (yet one somehow still *necessary*) that Meillassoux in part employs set theory to sketch, here being inspired by Alain Badiou.

Neither such contingency nor its necessity, of course, on their face immediately answer to what correlationism as first defined aims at: a radical realism, or nature in the wild, which Meillassoux exemplifies by what he ironically refers to as the "arche-fossil" (Meillassoux 2008, 10).⁶ The problem, however, of which Meillassoux himself is aware, is that, as so conceived, his embrace of nature as non-correlated, as in the wild, yet as still known, runs the risk of returning us to that natural light or sovereign reason said to hold sway in the early moderns, such as Descartes, as well as their predecessors.⁷ With nature in the wild, being itself absolute, as Meillassoux has it,

5 Meillassoux speaks of "a great outdoors" that he fears contemporary philosophy has lost in respect to nature (Meillassoux 2008, 17). Christian Thorne also cites this remark in his "Outward Bound: On Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude*" (Thorne 2012, 274). Thorne's concerns and mine at times overlap, though, of course, he makes no reference to Frege nor does he move toward that middle ground ultimately here set forth.

6 The existence of the fossil, according to Meillassoux, embodies a time before human being and before thought (Meillassoux 2008, 14); thereby, the fossil, by his lights, directly refutes the correlationist affirmation of thinking and being's mutual dependence, although neither Kant, who gave an early account of planetary genesis, nor any other philosopher Meillassoux cites, actually doubts the existence of a pre-human past.

7 In fact, Meillassoux initially illustrates the difference between the correlationist and non-correlationist standpoints in terms of Descartes' separation of so-called secondary from primary qualities. The difference between secondary qualities, like taste and color, and primary ones, like extension and shape – the latter being mathematizable, the former not – for Meillassoux exhibits the difference

yet also an object of knowledge, the knower and her knowledge themselves must possess a similarly absolute status. (This problem, by the way, seems to me to affect almost all of the new materialisms insofar as they appeal to metaphysics.) Hence, in Meillassoux's case, the terms on which he initially set forth his project will change; in the place of that initial and ultimately "naïve realism" in respect to nature that he first depicts, Meillassoux, correspondingly, next affirms a *contingency* that invests nature as an object of scientific knowledge (Meillassoux 2008, 27).

As suggested above, a fundamental anxiety about science and its achievements may, then, subtend Meillassoux's program in *After Finitude*, though this worry takes the form of restoring science's absolute authority at almost any cost. Indeed, the high price Meillassoux's endeavor pays may already be plain, since the conundrum he faces initially appears insoluble on the terms that he takes up. Meillassoux, to be clear, will try to *reason* his way out of this impasse, to find in argument, and thus *in reason itself*, a flight from reason's hegemony. Only in this manner can he hope to maintain some approximation of *realism* alongside knowledge in the modern scientific style of laws expressed in mathematical formalisms, without making the capacity for knowing itself absolute.

To balance what would otherwise mark a return to reason's traditional sovereignty and presumption to know the in-itself, Meillassoux, accordingly, asserts a different absolute on the side of *the object*: a supposed absolute randomness, a radical chance or contingency, somehow also still necessary, and also still purportedly compatible with modern scientific knowing.⁸ At this moment, moreover, in the service of this first detour or transformation of his project, Meillassoux's Aristotelianism returns full throttle, bringing a number of fairly obvious fallacies in its wake, some of which would be recognized in Aristotle's idiom, though they are much clearer in Frege's. Indeed, to square this circle, to accomplish his embrace of an absolute, wild, object that nevertheless does not reinstate a sovereign reason, Meillassoux turns again to Kant, formerly the poster child for correlationism, now in a positive vein. Meillassoux himself avows a version of Kant's transcendental turn, launched against the early modern vantage point, despite its correlationist tendencies. Specifically, Meillassoux embraces what he calls, anachronistically, and arguably wrongly, a "facticity" that Kant's twelve categories in the first *Critique* purportedly exemplify (Meillassoux 2008, 53–54).

Meillassoux thus returns to Kant, but also to Kant's successors, to mount his argument for radical contingency. Meillassoux would follow both Kant and those ab-

between an anthropomorphized and correlationist access to nature, and that tapping into wild nature, nature in itself, that he wants to defend (Meillassoux 2008, 3).

⁸ It should be noted that Meillassoux himself by his lights never fully accomplishes this task; he never explains how the mathematization of nature and his new contingency are related, why knowledge of such a radically contingent nature should take the form of mathematically expressed laws. After posing this problem at the end of his penultimate chapter (Meillassoux 2008, 111), he recurs to it again on the last page of his work, asserting that it is an issue yet to be resolved (124).

solutists who followed after Kant, the idealists. Like them, Meillassoux will raise an aspect of Kant's thinking to the absolute; Meillassoux's own absolute, however, bears on the object, not the subject. Meillassoux chooses to absolutize the so-called "facticity" of Kant's categories, a facticity which he claims withstands the idealist turn. Facticity, on Meillassoux's view, harbors an otherness, an absolute "absence of reason," one which he assigns, not like Kant, to the understanding, but to its objects (Meillassoux 2008, 53).⁹ Fixing on the seemingly unmotivated status of Kant's categories, to which Hegel and the other idealists of course also attended, Meillassoux's aim at this moment, accordingly, becomes to "convert facticity into the real property whereby everything and every world is without reason, and is thereby capable of actually becoming otherwise without reason" (53). In this way, Meillassoux would substitute for the realism earlier sought, now lost sight of in all but name, a novel and entirely speculative, yet somehow still necessary, contingency.

Whatever else may be said about this new aim, where Meillassoux's own discourse only momentarily rests, *reason by itself* clearly is presented as accessing such a radically contingent nature ultimately *devoid of reason*; a world so determined can appear in no actual science, nor even, as we shall soon see, in any actual object. Meillassoux's stance at this moment is in fact still more contorted than it may seem, in that what results from this imputation to nature of a version of a radical facticity, yielding what he himself at one point labels "chaos," even in this form must remain consistent with modern science and its findings (Meillassoux 2008, 63). Accordingly, Meillassoux conjures not only a non-correlationist real, now such solely insofar as it is absolutely contingent; moreover, this absolutely contingent real, this chaos is also non-contradictory, and thus still knowable by modern knowledge.

To square this seeming circle, then, Meillassoux argues both syllogistically and counterfactually, thereby allowing for the fate of concepts, terms, and words in his own exposition to be grasped, and, with that, the sketch of this middle ground's lower bounds to be completed. In particular, Meillassoux claims that were a being *inconsistent* in itself, a contradictory nature, to exist, such a being would be *incapable* of change, and, since unchangeable, it would not be contingent or random. Hence, his chaos, his purportedly wild nature, since it must be alterable, subject to change, must also be consistent, *non-contradictory*. Accordingly, nature can, indeed must both be a chaos *and* consistent, thereby remaining available to scientific inquiry.

The sophistry of this argument, which Meillassoux himself seems to acknowledge at one moment, is perhaps not blindingly self-evident, only owing to its syllogistic form; this form and its implications, in any case, are here finally more of inter-

⁹ "Thought, far from experiencing its intrinsic limits through facticity, experiences rather its knowledge of the absolute through facticity," he writes (Meillassoux 2008, 52).

est than the sophistry as such.¹⁰ As regards the latter, however, it may be quickly noted that it is axiomatic in both Aristotle's and Frege's logic that any and every consequence follows from a contradictory premise (or condition); all outcomes are possible, none prohibited. Thus were nature in contradiction with itself, as Meillassoux posits, it follows that nature so determined could as well not change as that it could. Both consequences are similarly and equally entailed; Meillassoux's argumentation, accordingly, by no means establishes his chaos' necessary consistency.¹¹

More importantly, however, is why the type of logic Meillassoux employs may somewhat mask this fallacy. For Frege, rather than being a predicate or a property of some being, existence is always a second-order concept or function. To say something exists is to affirm that some first-order concept possesses at least one object that a given concept ranges over – that the lower order concept in question yields the value true in at least one statement in which it is used. For example, to say a horse exists, for Frege, is to claim that there is at least one true judgement that something, Secretariat or Bucephalus, is a horse. If this is so, that a horse exists is true. On Frege's template, then, before reasoning can occur about what follows from a *contradictory* nature, it would have to be determined whether in the first place there is such a nature, or indeed any contradictory objects, anything answering to “x is a contradictory being.”

Not so proceeding, Meillassoux instead argues in a manner that effectively renders him the St. Anselm of contemporary philosophy. In both Anselm and Meillassoux, argument proceeds from definitions, and existence is taken as but one possible predicate among others. For Anselm, God by definition exists, since, owing to God's definition as the most perfect being, the predicate existence cannot be denied to him, existing, after all, being more perfect than non-existing.¹² For Meillassoux, similarly, an object the existence of which is assumed to be possible, thanks to its possessing the predicate “contradictory” could not be changeable, and thus must be consistent with scientific knowledge, its actual existence apparently being simply another predicate it may happen to bear or not. The definition alone in both instances yields conclusions about what *must* be the case, any acquaintance with such entities and their genuine being rendered beside the point.

The lower reaches of the middle ground here in question, then, are reached with this brief survey of the logic of subject, predicate, and existence, in Aristotelian log-

¹⁰ “Philosophy is the invention of strange forms of argumentation, necessarily bordering on sophistry,” Meillassoux at one point states, presumably commenting on his own practice (Meillassoux 2008, 76).

¹¹ In syllogistic logic this can be shown through the disjunctive syllogism; in Frege's, through the conditional, where, if the premise is false, the consequent is always true. In the former, if I say “whales are either mammals or fish,” and “if they are fish I will eat them,” if the premise embodies a contradiction (whales are fish and whales are mammals), then both my eating them and not eating them follows.

¹² For a very different view of Anselm, see Levene 2017, especially chapter five.

ical garb, though their instability in Frege himself has yet to be addressed.¹³ Nevertheless, in contrast to Anselm's and Meillassoux's reasoning that begins from terms or names and their meanings, it can now be seen why it matters that Frege approaches concepts through their appearance in entire statements, ultimately giving pride of place to reference or significance (*Bedeutung*), not sense or meaning (*Sinn*) – albeit as becomes clearer below, Frege also, of course, has a doctrine about the latter. Correspondingly, what is, and even what can be said, finally derives from apprehensions of the world – Secretariat is a horse – rather than what is true about the world and our knowledge of such truths deriving from our ideas and notions, as in Meillassoux's treatment of nature or Anselm's speculations on the idea of God. At the lowest level of this middle ground thus stand statements, sentences and the references that in part make up their understanding.

2 The Middle Ground's Upper Bound

Frege's logic thus represents an advance on the Aristotelian one, at least as the latter is employed by Meillassoux; in a Fregean context, the argument Meillassoux makes for the consistency of a radically contingent nature could not be countenanced. Frege himself, however, in his own fashion, attempted to stabilize his logic's lower bound, to fix such references and thus his concepts' identities, through a higher order regimentation of these concepts' objects.¹⁴ By attending to this facet of his project, the limits of the upper reach of this middle ground emerge, and, with them, ultimately the instability of both bounds. Frege's attempt indeed fails; in its wake, it leaves multiple conceptualizations and a promiscuity of references that neither can be fixed once and for all, nor have need of being such in order to operate. Instead, what is being said ("is a horse") ultimately can only be grasped in relation to what is being talked about – Secretariat, this part of a carousel, Mr. Ed – by way of implicit prior histories of talk! and of commerce with things, permitting them, talk! and things, to emerge. Things, talk!, and their history, functioning together, allow all discourse, all talk!, ultimately from poetry to physics, to refer and to mean, with no single aspect ever being stabilized or fixed on its own distinct terms.

¹³ In Aristotle's own thinking, it should be noted, these issues are more complicated, in part owing to his categories, which have a different function than Kant's, and his treatment there and elsewhere of the *upokeimenon* (subject) and the *todi ti* (sometimes translated as the individual), as well as ultimately his handling of the notion of *ousia* (beingness or essence). For the former two, see Aristotle 1962, 15–31.

¹⁴ As discussed below, Frege also thought that the senses of sentences or propositions had their inherent stability as senses, or thoughts, as he came to term it. Nevertheless, his attempt to identify concepts by way of their extensions proceeds without calling on this register and thus can be followed out in its own right.

A more profound, because more modern correlationism, it should be noted, underpins Meillassoux's stance in *After Finitude*, in effect identical with that he criticized above, in addition to the more classical correlationism Meillassoux evinces when he reasons his way to his chaotic nature's consistency as just sketched. This second instance of correlationism is critical, since the limits of Frege's thinking appear in it, as well as those of Meillassoux's own. Meillassoux's version of a more modern correlationism ultimately exhibits why no upper bound to discourse or talk! can be maintained, no decisive regimentation of talk! and its subject matters promulgated, now that the fate of the lower, the word or the concept, has begun to appear. Accordingly, its treatment completes the presentation of the middle ground here in question by further depicting the concept's silence.

In the wake of the foregoing, Meillassoux's discussion of nature takes a still more unexpected turn. Not only must that absolute chaos, radically contingent nature, be consistent – non-contradictory enough to be known. Nature must also not *appear* to be *actually changing*, since genuine change would not just damage, but entirely undermine, science's claim to knowledge. Were nature actually to be evident “becoming otherwise without reason,” to use Meillassoux's words, obviously no knowledge of nature in itself would be possible, assuming such a turn of events is even conceivable (Meillassoux 2008, 53). Accordingly, to resolve this tension, after arguing for radical chaos's self-consistency, Meillassoux takes another step along his presentation's careening axis; this twist involves fending off what Meillassoux calls Hume's problem, albeit Hume does not make use of this consideration in the manner Meillassoux indicates, and it has nothing to do with Kant, to whom Meillassoux also imputes it.

What Meillassoux dubs “Hume's problem” asserts that were nature contingent this fact must necessarily have revealed itself within a finite time (Meillassoux 2008, 85). Non-lawfulness would have had to become evident in the course of the nearly innumerable experiences of nature had by human beings, based on a probabilistic calculation. Hence, the argument as stated affirms nature's conformity to law.

The supposition that nature's inconsistency, did it exist, would stand forth, is turned round by Meillassoux, then, to accomplish two goals. First, he uses it to exhibit the character of his own notion of contingency, which will be more radical than any randomness probability can calculate. Secondly, Meillassoux turns to Hume's framework to defuse the worry that nature might actually be encountered *as varying* and thereby elude knowledge. Meillassoux, in engaging with Hume's hypothesis, thus will coin a contingency supposedly so radical that, when assigned to nature, the latter has no need, nor even chance, of appearing as contingent at all.

To capture both characteristics of his absolute, which in every other context would seemingly be in tension, Meillassoux turns to Cantor and set theory. Probability, as Meillassoux points out, insofar as it is quantified, clearly makes reference to a totality of possible instances: one out of a hundred, two out of ten thousand and so on – including in the thought experiment upon which Hume and Kant purportedly rely. Accordingly, Meillassoux appeals to Cantor's theorem, specifically as it yields

a transfinite number as the power set – or number of subsets – of the first order infinity of the rationals. Cantor famously showed that the set of the reals so derived (including numbers such as pi, the decimals of which expand without repeating) consists in a higher-order infinity than the infinity of the integers, one that he deemed “transfinite.” Meillassoux suggests that the randomness of nature would be of this second, uncountable, non-totalizable order.¹⁵ Nature’s contingency thus corresponds not to any possible count, not even the first order *infinite* of the integers, but to the next infinity up, a transfinite infinity, on the order of the real numbers, themselves intrinsically uncountable.

With contingency conceived in this fashion, as answering to the transfinite, it then becomes thoroughly possible, in effect necessary, that the randomness applicable to nature would never appear. Numerous, paradoxical results, after all, can be derived from the transfinite, such as the ability to construct from a single sphere two spheres of the exact same size with nothing missing from either.¹⁶ Natural events for Meillassoux would be similarly transfinitely random, and thus would have nothing missing from their consistent appearances. Their randomness, conceived in terms of the transfinite, would not appear even within the sum of things and events belonging to the knowable spatio-temporal known universe, since the latter is at most countably infinite like the rationals.

Now the most important feature of Meillassoux’s argument, in the present context, is that his entire construction hinges on an historical divergence between set theory and Frege’s project, in which the limits of Frege’s project, as well as set theory’s, make themselves felt. That difference also lets Meillassoux’s own correlationism, identical to that he otherwise denounces, be grasped.

The ability of set theory, of mathematical logic to build on itself, to spawn these infinities upon infinities of different orders, in the manner Meillassoux exploits, indeed stands in contrast to the fate of Frege’s logic and his nascent philosophy of language. As is well-known, Frege’s program, his attempt to forge a logical formalism able to generate the totality of modern mathematics with the exception of geometry, ran into what became known as Russell’s paradox. In the face of Frege’s regimentation of functions, his attempt to move from first to second-order functions and their corresponding extensions, and consistently on up, Russell invented a novel higher-order function, or concept, ranging over lower-order extensions: that of extensions that do not include themselves as members. The extension of this same function would fall under this concept, then, only if it did not fall under it, and vice versa – an outcome obviously not sustainable within a logical deductive system. Though seemingly technical and even contrived, Russell’s paradox showed that extensions

¹⁵ “We will retain the following translation of Cantor’s transfinite: the (quantifiable) totality of the thinkable is unthinkable. Accordingly, the strategy for resolving Hume’s problem can now be stated” (Meillassoux 2008, 104).

¹⁶ For a relatively deep, yet accessible “dive” on this possibility known as the Banach-Tarski paradox, see Kaseorg 2007.

could not always be made into objects, into arguments of other functions, as Frege had supposed, nor could one, then, freely generate new higher-level functions and “move up the ladder,” in the way Frege envisioned to lay the basis for his definition of the numbers.¹⁷

Now what tends not to be recognized in contemporary philosophical appropriations of set theory, in particular Meillassoux's, is that the very same paradox that Frege confronted and failed to resolve, as well as some others, also affected the first versions of set theory that Cantor framed. Russell in fact had studied Cantor's work, and initially established his paradox with an eye to his theory. Moreover, Ernst Zermelo, of Zermelo-Frankel (or ZF, the now standard formalization of set theory), discovered virtually the same issue as Russell in his own examination of Cantor's early writings. Zermelo's axiomatization of set theory, later fine-tuned by Frankel, was thus designed to avoid precisely the same paradoxes to which Frege's logicism fell prey. Though Zermelo's attempt is widely considered successful, nevertheless, to achieve his goals, Zermelo had to pay a price. To avoid the issues Frege and Russell confronted, Zermelo's axiomatization of set theory made it impossible to generate sets in some situations where that possibility intuitively should be available (for example, when all the members in question, originally found in different sets' subsets, fall under a single function, thus disallowing sets, such as Russell's, composed of sets not members of themselves).¹⁸ Similarly, it is impossible in Zermelo's theory to speak of all sets, the set of all sets or the so-called universal set. There is not one function or concept under which *all* set theory's sets fall. Accordingly, the set as such cannot be defined within set theory itself (which was also true of Russell's formalism in his *Principia*, as Gödel noted). Axiomatized set theory indeed by design cannot provide a univocal notion of a set. Instead, its axioms define what counts as a set and what does not by way of the operations that can be performed upon it, remaining silent about what this notion everywhere designates, as well as the original collections, afforded by broader domains of discourse, from which sets are first generated.

With an eye to these stipulations and restrictions, Meillassoux's way of proceeding at the moment he turns to Cantor and set theory is, then, correlationist in his own original sense. In the formalism on which Meillassoux depends, “set” itself has no

¹⁷ Russell's own revision of Frege's project, in his *Principia Mathematica*, written with Whitehead, used what was called the theory of types to avoid these difficulties – types being assigned to concepts and to value-ranges to restrict them to their own levels. This strategy, in turn, encountered Gödel's proof, based on the *Principia*'s formalism, that both consistency and completeness were never attainable in complexly ordered logical systems, thereby bringing the logicist program in mathematics to its end. Chapter seven of Joan Weiner's *Frege Explained* gives a strong and accessible account of the problems Frege's philosophy of arithmetic encountered (Weiner 2004, 115–126). See also chapters five and six of Hans Sluga's *Frege: The Arguments of the Philosophers* (Sluga 1999, 102–148).

¹⁸ This feature follows from Zermelo's Axiom of Separation; for a discussion of it and the following claim, the paradoxes attendant upon the positing of a “universal set,” see Hallett 2013.

isolatable semantic value, no single meaning, concept, or function belonging to it. At the same time, nature in itself as purportedly transfinitely contingent can only be spoken about at all thanks to this otherwise empty scheme. The nature Meillassoux has in mind cannot be designated as such apart from this formalization. Accordingly, neither nature (being) nor thought (the set) at this moment have any standing apart from one another. Neither access to radically contingent nature in itself nor to the set as such is available in Meillassoux's account, only to their correlation – in conformity with the definition of correlationism Meillassoux himself initially gives.

Meillassoux at this moment in *After Finitude*, then, practices correlationism exactly as he defines it, something which I would argue is also true of Alain Badiou's work.¹⁹ Accordingly, the question posed of whether correlationism can be imputed to the present paper's stance returns. If Meillassoux cannot avoid correlationism, both of a pre-Kantian variety (as in the first, syllogistic, instance) and a post-Kantian one (as just reviewed), no alternative to some version of this position may exist. At the same time, a different arrangement may perhaps better retain Meillassoux's original commitment to realism than Meillassoux's own thinking, and to this extent no longer deserve the correlationist label.

To sketch this alternative possibility, the limits of Frege's project that have begun to be glimpsed must be further set forth and this middle ground more fully laid bare. The paradox that Frege stumbled over, and that set theory subsequently found ingenious ways to circumvent, shows how this middle region is open-ended on its upper, as well as its lower bound. In fact, neither extreme being possessed of stable, definable elements, the two openings ultimately are one.

Concepts or functions, inherently incomplete and unsaturated, are to be identified for Frege, as has been noted, by their extensions, through all those instances that fall under them, all the arguments that make them true. This confidence, which implies a vertical construction of higher-order functions and value-ranges, cannot be wholly sustained, as has just been witnessed. The inherent instability of functions and concepts, in turn, ripples back on to the statements wherein they operate, ultimately leading to the demand that something other than expression, some thing or worlded subject matter, buttress each sentence's operation.

Statements are all the more unstable, and some sort of worldly factor are thus required to support them, moreover, since statements encounter problems of their own with maintaining their identity as construed by Frege. Frege deems statements closed, complete, and autonomous, as he also does the names found in them. For

¹⁹ Badiou's *Being and Event*, of course, rests on a sustained appropriation of set theory. That work never appears to me to *aim* at genuinely mathematical, set-theoretical rigor, but to use set-theory instead as a kind of philosophical allegory, as attested by Badiou's unorthodox treatment of the null set, and it is thus correlationist from the ground up. (On the null set, see Badiou 2005, 68 and 90). Ricardo L. Nirenberg and David Nirenberg have, in any case, contested *Being and Event's* claims to rigor, were it to make them, in their "Badiou's Number: A Critique of Mathematics as Ontology" (Nirenberg and Nirenberg 2011).

Frege, both the statement and the name possess reference (what would make the statement true, and in the case of the name, the object named) and a sense (which Frege later called the “thought”). Frege could treat concepts as he did in part because the statements in which they function are understood in terms of these supposedly autonomous meanings and senses, and thereby viewed, to this extent, as independent.²⁰

Statements and names possess self-subsistent ideal senses for Frege, a notion Meillassoux surprisingly at one moment himself credits.²¹ This construal, which later is overtaken in analytic philosophy by the attempt simply to formalize the semantics of statements, in both versions ultimately proves unsuccessful, however. For one thing, indexicals, such as “I” or “here” or “now,” with their inherent semantic incompleteness, their lack of stable meaning in respect to what they designate, are never able to be entirely subtracted from the equation; no construal of the statement can wholly factor out their operation, especially when it comes to naming and names.²² “I” or “this” always involves an expression’s *context* and thus provides no meanings that can simply be lifted out of it and stand alone, even if there may be rules for generating other sorts of significations (turning “I” into “Josh,” for example). In addition, statements may appear in what are called indirect contexts, within reports about a speaker’s beliefs or other attitudes. The truth of the latter, however, vary from the truth or falsity of the statement when it stands alone, thus raising the question of how their own semantics are to be understood.

“Johnny believes Flipper is a fish,” to take an example, obviously may be true even when “Flipper is a fish” is false. Frege, accordingly, attempts to distinguish references and senses in the two cases. Specifically, he claims that the embedded statement (“Flipper is a fish” appearing in “Johnny believes that Flipper is a fish”) has for its *reference* the *meaning* of this same statement when it stands alone. In this case, when embedded, the reference of “Flipper is a fish” is not Flipper and his possible fishiness, but the meaning of the statement that speaks of such. But if this is so, what this statement’s own new *meaning* is in this context (what “Flipper is a fish” *means* when it appears in “Johnny believes that Flipper is a fish”) seems inexplicable. If its old meaning becomes its new *reference*, what *meaning* can this expression now embedded in the new statement have? Alternatively, if it has *no* meaning, as some commentators suggest that Frege came to believe, how can a statement contain references without meaning, yet still be capable of independently being adjudicated true or false?²³

20 For the relationship between sense, reference, and “thought,” see, respectively, Frege 1997a and Frege 1997b.

21 Meillassoux affirms that “generally speaking, statements are ideal insofar as their reality is one of signification” (Meillassoux 2008, 12).

22 On indexicals and these issues more broadly, see Kates 2015.

23 Sluga somewhere suggests that Frege eventually came to believe that they lacked all meaning – how that suggestion would work, however, clearly presents a conundrum (Sluga 1999).

In Frege's account, then, the instability of concepts ultimately combines with the instability of statements, the latter being the contexts in which concepts themselves are found. As a result, statements do not close on themselves, nor can names be assigned fixed senses and references. No regimentation can organize once and for all concepts, extensions, and their various levels. Accordingly, the project of treating what is said, discourse, in separation from its background, from the actual contexts it operates in, including those things and subject matters talked about, cannot itself be maintained. Frege's model at both its upper and its lower reaches frays, yielding a continuum of understanding and insight, wherein not just concepts, but sentences and names must recur to other instances of their use to articulate what they say and mean, in a fashion that also requires attention to the referents in question, to these expressions' subject matters.

Indeed, it follows from Frege's failure that ultimately neither what a statement says nor whether it may be true can be known without acquaintance with other instances of talk!, as well as with what is being talked about, instances which necessarily in part recur to the speaker's and the hearer's history. Once Frege's stipulations cease to hold sway, to understand both what "Flipper is a fish" expresses, as well as whether it is true or false, attention must be paid at once to the fact that it is little Johnny who says it, and to the matter being talked about ("Flipper" in context could be the name of his dog who has just jumped in a fountain), as well as other related expressions ("sushi is fish") and topics (whales, porpoises, tuna, their habits and habitats), yielding not an intentionalism, but a triangulation across differing dimensions, all of which are in motion. In a similar vein, at the present juncture, physicists can identify and generate new subatomic particles on the basis of particle physics' current theorizations, though these theories include problems, the resolution of which may change the contents and character of these observations themselves. Both aspects, what is observed and what is theorized, are correlated with contexts, and hence also with where researchers stand within this discursive middle ground. What Frege would call the concept and the world are both in play, and with them come what is said and what is being talked about and their history.

Leeway, to be clear, remains for truth, ultimately construed as an irruption from elsewhere, since these statements' very articulations, their ability to express anything at all, are deemed impossible in isolation from referents and the world. Hence, no *construction* of what exists by thought or speech is here in question. As a result, the present conception, unlike his own, avoids what Meillassoux calls correlationism, at least to this extent. While no "view from nowhere" here takes hold – that *pre-Kantian* correlationism toward which Meillassoux at times backslides being rejected, indeed owing to understanding's finitude – on the present account things and their determinations can and do meet us from unexpected directions of their own devising. Thinking and being follow different careers, even as they also intersect.

Having arrived at this middle ground, some of its implications for literary studies, finally, may be briefly unfolded. This ground and its corresponding hermeneutic

view of truth (hermeneutic solely in that things' unfoldings and their understanding and expression are always preceded by prior episodes of each), both imply facticity, not in some perhaps fanciful Kantian sense, but in Heidegger's. Facticity indicates that world – understood as a pre-existing nexus of things and understanding – precedes each individual instance of expression and any encounter with specific existents. On existence and existents holistically conceived, a genuinely wild, because never fully apparent, real, in turn, will have already left its mark. Owing to facticity, persons have always already been handed over to a world already there in a way that entails that the finitude of understanding has a supra-finite, or indeed in a different sense than Cantor's, *transfinite* real as its correlate. While thought has always been tethered to a world in Heidegger's holistic and practical sense, a transfinite real – the ultimate reference of what Frege called the true – has also previously left its mark on this arrangement. Facticity thus pertains not just to the individual persons who come upon the scene, but to this entire matrix. The backgrounding thereby afforded, in which the real has always already been taken up, in turn, lets the difference between what is and what is said be maintained, while honoring their mutual yet differing intelligibility, yielding at once a confluence *and* divergence of thought and things.

Facticity, in short, on the present account, enables a (non-naïve) realism.²⁴ In turn, as so conceived, reality and the real prove capacious enough for literature, literary criticism, the arts, and the humanities to field insights and truths on their own terms. Any final, stable one-to-one correspondence between statements and their subject matters having ceased to be in question, while the statement as such is no longer privileged, multiple modes of expression and their corresponding insights can now be seen to operate. In these instances, too, the real precedes any given articulation, it overflows every context, while also giving itself in them. Accordingly, literature and criticism, as well as the arts and humanistic disciplines can have an eye to their subject matters and pursue their concerns with an aim at some sort of truth, while drawing on their own various traditionalities or historicities, articulating understandings in their specific fashions, albeit these are never determinative in advance of what transpires in any given instance.

Indeed, statements, descriptions, and reports never speak apart from their immersion in larger contexts of utterance and understanding, owing to their appurtenance to the middle ground here in question. Literature, criticism, and the humanities, however, regularly bring just such larger contexts forward and explicitly make them parts of their own talk! The complex dimensionality inherent in this middle ground, which allows for, rather than checking, insight (without feigning to escape its own temporally conditioned existence) in our disciplines explicitly enters into understanding texts, posing problems, disclosing truths, and/or generating new feel-

²⁴ Hence on the present view, fossils, to take Meillassoux's example, can be, and also can be *fossils*. That fossils would have existed had human beings not sprung up hundreds of millions of years or even billions of years after their formation, no one actually doubts. The *understanding* that fossils exist, however, would not, of course, itself exist under these same circumstances.

ings and sensibilities. Humanistic instances and their understanding uniquely foreground their own embeddedness and implicit traditionality, though the possibility for this sort of scrutiny inheres in all discourse or talk!

On the present account, inquiry and truth, are not only broadened, then, extended to the arts and humanities, but turn out to be filiated, funiculated, organized in strings, temporal and historical. This middle ground's lack of closure entails that every insight or problem or achievement emerges in a discourse already begun, making possible going back over its articulations, in respect to its subject matters and its expressions.

Accordingly, in question can never be "science," or "nature," but some development (information theory, gene splicing) broached from out of an ultimately temporal aggregate of sayings, texts, and subject matters that can be gone over with an eye to a question and a future understanding. Similarly, what is necessary for the sorts of truths the humanities and literary criticism usually convey are not considerations pertaining to structures and forms (as surface reading and other contemporary critical moments also suggest), nor even networks or zones of interpenetration and indeterminacy.²⁵ Instead, attention must be paid to the relevant historicities, by way of discursive threads themselves convened on occasion and oriented by situated problems, questions, affects, and other styles of understanding. Literature and criticism and other humanistic disciplines must pursue questions and discoveries (as here concerning the relation of set theory to semantics, or in other instances, evolving types of narration or the formation and understanding of race or gender) by giving due weight to the different traditions of understanding at play in such talk! In these contexts, themselves reconvened with reference to the questions at issue, and thus in their own fashion in part always novel and unprecedented, such problems and subject matters, as well as others, can be explored; only there and then can insights about our situation, and perhaps also at times remedies for it, be discerned.

Inquiry and insight always occur at concrete crossroads, at once both not, and of, the critic's own making. Discovery/invention of this type, moreover, operates alike in poetry and science, philosophy and literary criticism, mathematics and legal scholarship, where researchers at once understand and innovate from within a situation both intellectual and worldly that they must also in part project, owing to their work's ultimately futural orientation. Of course, the view here on offer of such achievements is not necessarily the one found in such sayings themselves: poems, theories, theorems, literary criticism and so on. This middle ground, entailing the historicity of all understanding, nevertheless can be traced at work in all of these and other discursive achievements, and thus the silence of their concepts.

²⁵ On surface reading, see Best and Marcus 2009; Latour, of course, is the prime progenitor of actor-network theory, or ANT. For an interrogation of his program, see Kates 2017.

What does all this concretely imply for literature and literary studies, then? Neither the upper nor the lower bound holding, the middle ground here sketched being all there is, in the end, it is fair to say that all speech effectively is literary speech: all talk! involves a new sighting, an attention to some, as in part still undetermined, subject matter, along with inviting, if not always necessitating, an eye to the means and medium of that subject matter's articulation on a given occasion. Otherwise stated, judgement, critique, is poetic; it inevitably involves *poesis*, a kind of making, not of its subjects, but their understanding. The reverse, however, also is the case. To affirm that all speech is literary, after all, equally implies that none is, that neither literature nor literary criticism ultimately stand apart from any other sort of talk!

Schlegel himself perhaps had in mind a similar collapse of these distinctions when he spoke of poetic critique. At the very least, Schlegel indicates that literary speech may comment on other speech. The context of his remark concerns the capacity of one work (in this case Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*) to speak about another – here Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (a discussion and then production of which is presented in Books III and V respectively of Goethe's novel). For Schlegel, however, unlike in the present instance, such retroactive potentiating of one work by another, ultimately gives access to the aesthetic in its specificity, in its purported difference from the remainder of understanding. It makes available a so-called literary absolute descended from, but not identical to Kant's setting out of the free play of our faculties in his *Critique of Judgement*.

In the present instance, however, aesthetic experience is no more subjective or objective than any other; correspondingly, the distinction between that experience and other sorts, and thus between literature and other discourses is not structural or fundamental in Schlegel's sense nor an alternative one. The difference between literary talk! and other sorts is instead a matter of quantity, pertaining to the degree, not to the kind, of attention paid to how what is said is said and to who is speaking, alongside what is being talked about and the insertion of all three into an ongoing sequence or tradition or historicity.

Accordingly, for the present approach, innovations in media (in lyric poetry, drama, or the novel), which Kant took to be the work of genius, can never be separated from their subject matters. As is readily evident in Thomas Pynchon's early works or in some of Gerhard Richter's paintings, new views of a subject and new means of presenting it mutually enable one another. The medium draws attention to some phase of existence and presents it anew, in Pynchon's and Richter's case this aspect often being an historical occurrence (in fact sometimes the same one, the second world war). In turn, concern with grasping that occurrence or some other subject matter permits innovations to be forged within their respective artistic traditions – as in Richter's blurred paint, or Pynchon's discovering in the molecule responsible for a banana's aroma a new model for his prose.

Poets, literature, the literary and the aesthetic are thus neither the antennae of the race, nor a transcendental clue to human existence and its self-understanding.

They do not accede to a realm apart, whether painted paradise or hell. These discourses and endeavors instead work with the same tools of which the rest of us dispose. This fact has never, nor does now, however, prevent literature and the other arts from unearthing valuable nuggets, providing flashes of illumination at once on what is and how we understand it – insights that critics, thinkers, readers, and society must both potentiate and heed.

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