

Almanac: Literature

Tobias Skiveren
Aarhus University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1344/jnmr.v1i2.31842>

A spool of thread can neither run nor talk; and yet, it does both in Kafka's short story "Cares of a Family Man" from 1919. Moving and chatting all by itself, Kafka's spool presents itself as a puzzling enigma for the reader as well as the narrator who simply cannot figure out what kind of being this lively thing is: a diminutive human of wood or a somewhat untraditional tool? Jane Bennett, however, is less in doubt. In *Vibrant Matter* (2010) she utilizes Kafka's story and its non-human protagonist for making present and tangible her ontological concept of vital materiality. Here, the not-quite-dead and not-quite-living spool becomes a speculative figure for imagining what life beyond anthropocentric dichotomies between "dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)" might look and feel like (Bennett, 2010, p. vii).

While *Vibrant Matter* has indeed been influential, Bennett is not alone in such endeavours. Her reading of Kafka is but one instance of a much larger theoretical trend where (feminist) new materialist scholars turn to literature when thinking through post-anthropocentric notions of materiality (see e.g. Alaimo, 2010, and 2016; Barad, 2015; Bennett, 2020; Haraway, 2016; Kirby, 2011; Neimanis, 2017, and Rivera, 2015,). At first sight, though, literature does not seem to be the most obvious alliance for such projects. How, we might ask, does one align the renewed emphasis on the non-human agency of materiality, biology, and nature emblematic of new materialism with a phenomenon that is traditionally associated with a wholly different domain, namely the all-too-human character of discourse, textuality, and semiotics?

This challenge is, of course, not an easy one. But one way to bridge the gap, it seems, has been to recast literature as a material force that exceeds the domain of the Anthropos by resisting the epistemological inspections of the reader. No longer simply a discursive site for negotiating more or less subversive identity constructs, literature

becomes an abstruse and recalcitrant non-human actor that can never be fully known. Thinking of “seemingly and obviously immaterial events such as a reading of a text” as in fact deeply entangled with complex material forces, Claire Colebrook claims, seems to return “us to what Derrida referred to as undecidability. There is no way of knowing the proper sense of a text” (Colebrook, 2011, p. 12, 19).

While this way of recasting the materiality of the signifier as the materiality of the object has been quite popular in literary theory informed by speculative realism (Harman, 2012 and Joy, 2013), such explanations are not adequate for Bennett’s engagement with Kafka nor the majority of new materialist involvements with literary texts. In fact, these involvements seem to enact a quite different approach, highlighting literature’s ability to, not withdraw from the reader, but cultivate more matter-attuned and fine-grained sensibilities. Rather than stipulating an epistemological aporia of matter (instead of signs), several key figures construe literature as a privileged site for affectively and imaginatively exploring the world of material forces. “Poetry,” Bennett writes, “can help us feel more of the liveliness hidden in such things and reveal more of the threads of connection binding our fate to theirs” (Bennett, 2012, p. 232). Similarly, Stacy Alaimo claims that “producers of various works of literature, art, and activism may themselves grapple with ways to render murky material forces palpable” (Alaimo, 2010, p. 9). Studying the affective enfleshments in postcolonial writings, Mayra Rivera too maintains that “literary language, such as [Frantz] Fanon’s, engages our imaginations at a visceral level, to help us feel what cannot be seen” (Rivera, 2015, p. 141). Here, literature becomes a privileged site for rendering the somewhat abstract notions of new materialism palpable, sensible, and felt.

Adopting Bruno Latour’s phrase (Latour, 2004, p. 29), we might expand this line of reasoning and conceptualize literature as a technology for “learning to be affected” by life beyond the Human. By facilitating aesthetic encounters with fictional worldings, it enhances the receptivity of the sensory apparatus and develops a sensibility to a world that, in turn, becomes further differentiated, in the sense that these differences now become able to affect the body (see also Skiveren, 2019). Reading fiction, in these terms, is no longer just about the transfer of information or the circulation of semiotics. Nor does it about the actualization of stored sensations from the past. In reverse, literature changes future sensations by opening a corporeal sensitivity to what had hitherto been beyond our perceptual horizon. Who can look at a spool of thread in the

same way after reading Kafka's story? Drawing on such affective pedagogies, the many references to literature in new materialist theory seem to aim at teaching us to perceive the imperceptible, to feel, hear, see or sense the vibrancy of matter unfolding within and around us.

Although new materialism has not yet fully consolidated itself as a distinct approach within the field of literary studies, this way of approaching literature seems to resonate with a number of studies generated in recent years within the subdisciplines of ecocriticism (see Oppermann & Iovino, 2014; Iovino, 2018a, 2018b; Oppermann 2018; and Trumpeter, 2015), posthuman literary studies (see Thomsen 2013; Dinello 2005; Squier 2004, Lau 2018 and Snaza 2019) and feminist literary criticism (see Yi Sencindiver, 2014, Skiveren, 2018, and Ryan, 2013). While these disciplines take the non-human agency of nature, technology, and corporeality as their respective points of departure, they all utilize literature as a fictional site of figur(at)ing out what a world of vibrant matter, trans-corporeal flows, intra-active entanglements, and in-corporeal materialities might look and feel like. We are not the same as a spool of thread, and a spool of thread is not the same as us; and yet, these studies demonstrate, Kafka's short story might help us sense (and make sense of) the idea that these differences are differences of degree rather than kind.

Bibliography

Alaimo, Stacey (2010). *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Alaimo, Stacy (2016). *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times*. Minnesota: Minnesota University Press.

Barad, Karen (2015). Transmaterialities: Trans*/Matter/realities and Queer Political imaginings. *GLQ*, Volume 21(2-3), pp. 387-422.

Bennet, Jane (2010). *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Bennett, Jane (2012). Systems and Things: A Response to Graham Harman and Timothy Morton. *New Literary History*, Volume 43(2), pp. 225-233.

- Bennett, Jane (2020). *Influx and Efflux: Writing Up with Walt Whitman*. Durham/London: Duke University Press
- Colebrook, Claire (2011). *Matter Without Bodies*. *Derrida Today*, Volume 4(1), pp. 1-20.
- Dinello, Daniel (2005). *Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology*. Austin: University of Texas Press
- Haraway, Donna (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Harman, Graham (2012): *The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism*. *New Literary Criticism*, Volume 43(2), pp. 183-203.
- Iovino, Serenella (2018a). *(Material) Ecocriticism*. *Posthuman Glossary*, ed. Braidotti, R. and M. Hlavajova. London: Bloomsbury.
- Iovino, Serenella (2018b). *Literature of Liberation*. *Posthuman Glossary*, ed. Braidotti, R. and M. Hlavajova. London: Bloomsbury.
- Joy, Eileen (2013). *Weird reading*. *Speculations*, Volume 4, pp. 28-34.
- Kafka, Franz (1971). *Cares of a Family Man*. *Complete Stories*, ed. Nahun N. Glatzer, New York: Schocken.
- Latour, Bruno (2004) *How to Talk About the Body: The Normative Dimension of Science Studies*. In *Body & Society*, Volume 205(10), pp. 205-229
- Lau, Carolyn (2018). *Posthuman Literature and Criticism*. *Posthuman Glossary*, ed. Braidotti, R. and M. Hlavajova. London: Bloomsbury.
- Neimanis, Astrida (2017). *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Oppermann, Serpil and Iovino, Serenella (2014). *Material Ecocriticism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press
- Oppermann, Serpil (2018) *Ecomaterialism*. *Posthuman Glossary*, ed. Braidotti, R. and M. Hlavajova. London: Bloomsbury.
- Ryan, Derek (2013). *Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory. Sex, Animal, Life*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

Skiveren, Tobias (2020). Feminist New Materialism and Literary Studies: Methodological Meditations on the Tradition of Feminist Literary Criticism and Critique. In Moslund, S. P., Marcussen, M. K., and Pedersen, M. K. (ed.): *How Literature comes to Matter: Post-Anthropocentric Approaches to the Study of Literature*, forthcoming

Skiveren, Tobias (2019). On Good Listening, Postcritique, and Ta-Nehisi Coates' Affective Testimony. In Stephen Ahern (ed.): *Affect Theory and Literary Critical Practice: A Feel for the Text*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 217-233

Snaza, Nathan. (2019). *Animate Literacies. Literature, Affect, and the Politics of Humanism*. Durham/London: Duke University Press

Squier, Susan Merrill (2004). *Liminal Lives. Imagining the Human at the Frontiers of Biomedicine*. Durham/London: Duke University Press

Thomsen, Mads Rosendahl (2013). *The New Human in Literature: Posthuman Visions of Changes in Body, Mind and Society after 1900*. London/New York: Bloomsbury

Trumpeter, Kevin (2015). The Language of the Stones: The Agency of the Inanimate in Literary Naturalism and the New Materialism. *American Literature*. Volume 87(2), pp. 225-252

Yi Sencindiver, Susan (2014). Living Literary Others (and its Post-Linguistic Challenges). *Otherness: Essays & Studies*, Volume 4(2), pp. 1-22.