Disclosed but Not Destroyed: Object Withdrawal and Speculative Attunement in Ben Marcus's *The Age of Wire and String*

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Abstract

Ben Marcus's *The Age of Wire and String* (1995) is often read as radically difficult. This article argues that its difficulty comes not from a lack of structure but from an excess of it: definitions, taxonomies, and procedures that promise conceptual mastery while continually deferring it. Taking its cue from Marcus's call for "mysteries […] disclosed but not destroyed", and drawing on Stéphane Vanderhaeghe and Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology, I read the book as an aesthetics of partial, object-led disclosure in which things withdraw from human-centered meaning. Withdrawal, however, does not need to end interpretation. To understand how the reader can encounter withdrawn objects when they cannot be mastered as stable meanings, I propose the concept of "speculative attunement", which builds on Sianne Ngai's theory of tone and minor affects: a posture that speculates about what withdraws while attending to the tonal, affective, and sensory pressures through which it still becomes available. A coda on John Ashbery's "leaving-out business" shows how Marcus turns omission into an ontology, where meaning survives as encounter rather than explanation.

Keywords: Ben Marcus, *The Age of Wire and String*, object-oriented ontology, speculative fiction, speculative attunement, affect, tone, Sianne Ngai, Graham Harman, John Ashbery

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Disclosed but Not Destroyed: Object Withdrawal and Speculative Attunement in Ben Marcus's *The Age of Wire and String*

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Ben Marcus's 1995 debut novel *The Age of Wire and String* (hereafter *AWS*) is often treated as a radically difficult work: part encyclopedia, part ethnography, part technical manual, and part comic distortion of narrative. Subtitled simply "fictions", the book collects forty-one short pieces that often read less like stories than vignettes, aphoristic sketches, definitions, arguments, classifications, and glossary-like "Terms". Subtitles such as "Resuscitated Wife", "The Death of Water", "Act of Wind", "Floating Island", "First Green", "The Golden Monica", and "Cessation of All Life" evoke a strange taxonomic world. Yet these explanatory forms do not clarify; they estrange, placing persons, objects, gods, houses, foods, weather, and social roles on par and recursively rearranging them so that no single category seems dominant or exclusive. Peter Schwenger comes closest to naming the book's central contradiction when he calls *AWS* an "unclassifiable work on classification" (Schwenger 2006, 124).

From the outset, the title itself announces an uncanny historical sequence, later defined as "AGE OF WIRE AND STRING, THE: Period in which English science devised abstract parlance system based on the flutter pattern of string and wire structures placed over the mouth during speech" (135). As such, the book's most authoritative documentation arrives under a veneer of expertise that materializes language as apparatus, casts speech as an engineered effect, and refracts historical knowledge through a pseudo-scientific regime. It suggests that whatever reality this age affords, can be approached only asymptotically, without ever accruing the cultural meaning allegedly conferred upon it.

Starting from this interpretive impasse, this article asks what kind of meaning can be disclosed without being damaged by disclosure. Marcus poses the problem at the outset of *AWS*: "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" (4). The passage frames reading as an ontological encounter with "mysteries" and "things": the object must be approached but not seized, "disclosed but not destroyed" by the reader's desire

to master it. It is no coincidence that the text repeatedly treats looking, knowing, and desiring as entangled forms of contact.

In what follows, I will argue that *AWS* is not hard to interpret because it lacks structure, grammar, or syntax. Rather it is difficult because it offers an excess of structure: a dense machinery of definitions, taxonomies, and procedures that promises conceptual mastery while continually deferring it. Therefore, Marcus's disclosure without destruction can be more forcefully grasped not as an absence or failure of meaning, but as a refusal of hermeneutic possession, as if the book were training the reader away from standard routes of interpretation and toward the tonal, perceptual, and affective intensity of literary objects. Instead of emptying the literary object of significance, Marcus relocates significance from decipherable content to the charged conditions of encounter. Meaning in *AWS*, then, may be absent in the conventional sense, but it is not absent altogether: it is disclosed partially, and, often, deformingly. It is not decoded but lodged in the internal pressure of its encyclopedic catalog and in what Sianne Ngai calls its "tone", that is a "text's affective bearing, orientation, or 'set toward' its audience and world" (Ngai 2005, 43). In the following paragraphs, I argue that *AWS* is not merely obscure or resistant to interpretation, but forces a different method of encounter, one that moves from disclosure without mastery and object withdrawal toward what I will call "speculative attunement" to the virtual intensities harbored by its objects. This means that readers must both speculate about what withdraws from stable meaning and attune themselves to the tonal, affective, and sensory pressures through which it still becomes available.

To make this argument, I take my cue from the opening part of *AWS*, "Argument", where Marcus turns disclosure into a problem of perception, desire, and objecthood. The book's claim that the thing must be "trained to see itself" suggests that reading *AWS* requires a criticism that does not simply decode its hidden culture, but attends to how the text trains itself, and the reader with it, to become perceptible through its own procedures. I therefore will read "Argument" as an aesthetics of partial, object-led disclosure. In the second part of the article, I build on Stéphane Vanderhaeghe's pioneering object-oriented reading of Marcus's fiction, and Graham Harman's theory of object withdrawal, to explain why the book's objects resist reduction to human-centered meaning or symbolic interpretation. However, I will argue that resistance does not need be the endpoint of interpretation as *AWS* also requires attention to the somatic and tonal orientations through which objects come into view. In the third part of the article, I will propose the notion of speculative attunement to understand how the reader can encounter withdrawn objects when they cannot be mastered as stable meanings.

An Argument About "Argument"

The book's opening "Argument" establishes the text's tonal pressure before any story begins. Midway through the "Argument", Marcus discloses how the catalog asks to be read: "A catalog of poses and motions produced from within a culture may read, then, like a form of special pleading" (3). The phrase "special pleading" indexes poses, moods and behaviors that can be read only through special attunement to the tonal logic of *AWS*: at once authoritative, defensive, supplicating, and self-justifying. "Pleading" carries a double force: a desire to argue and assert, but also to implore the reader to safeguard what remains undisclosed at the core of this monumental undertaking against those "systematically looting our country of its secrets" (3). Consequently, disclosure remains doubtful, since it ultimately depends on the reader's almost instinctive responsiveness to what remains implied. Read through Ngai's understanding of tone as an "affective orientation" toward "audience and world" (Ngai 2005, 43), "special pleading" proffers a tacit affective disposition, setting the text toward the reader as a syncopated signal that moves unevenly between procedural gravity and comic overstatement.

The "Argument" performs this unevenness exactly: it speaks in the tone of an arcane ethnographic document while borrowing the solemnity of a legal proceeding, casting itself as an ambitious attempt to "prosecute" the case of the "life project" through investigation, dissection, and record-keeping. At the same time, it anticipates the book's internal pressure, the tension produced by the catalog's own language, as causal chains are elided and the text must persuade us to accept the very secrecy it claims to clarify. The invitation, as we can see, contains its own caveat: any comprehension, if it can be called that, of society's secrecy must proceed aporetically, without ever actually proceeding and without accessing the secret archive or repository of this project. As the text declares, "There is no larger task than that of cataloging a culture, particularly when that culture has remained willfully hidden to the routine in-gazing practiced by professional disclosers" (3).

The act of "special pleading" translates here as the "Argument's" desire to make a case for its designated objects of interest and defend them from the "in-gazing" of "professional disclosers" and their presumed interpretive authority. The choice of the title "Argument" is important, because it confers this authority before any self-professed discloser can claim it. Yet Marcus strategically hollows out this staged authority from within, furnishing the catalogue with failed agents of knowledge and pretentious names that seem doomed, from the start, to misread the culture they claim to interpret.

The name "Sernier" is the first comic test of this sabotaged authority. With its scholarly confidence the name ensnares the reader in an academic ruse: it sounds like a source, a witness, perhaps even a credential. This uncertainty is sharpened by Marcus's parody of scholarly objectivity, where the text declares that "the product must be ravaged of bias by scholars prepared to act as objective witnesses" (3). "Sernier" appears attached to this promise of "objective witnesses", yet the disconcerting addition "and others, although without violence" (3) makes objectivity feel immediately compromised, as if the text has smuggled a legal disclaimer into its ethnographic archive. Obviously, "Sernier" and his fellow witnesses are discredited by the very language that claims to authorize them: they do not simply remove bias, but, rather, attack the object in the name of clarity. This unexpected parenthetical aside introduces a phantom mood of violence while denying violence at the same time. It softens the rhetoric of attack only to make that attack more conspicuous, leaving Sernier's status oddly suspended: professional, witness, threat, human observer, or merely another object in the catalogue, disclosed only enough to keep the reader affectively unsure and trust impossible. Instead of authorizing interpretation, "Sernier" arguably exposes the absurdity of wanting a final authority at all.

Once Sernier fails as an authority, disclosure itself has to move elsewhere and take another form. What follows is a redistribution of disclosure itself: the "Argument" becomes *AWS*'s methodological threshold, defining disclosure as necessary precisely because it is dangerous. The slide from the cataloging impulse to a warning against easy disclosure is instantiated by the claim that "the outer gaze alters the inner thing", and that "by looking at an object we destroy it with our desire" (3). This sharpens the paradox that objects in Marcus's archive require disclosure even as the desire to know them threatens to deform what they are.

Rather than easing narrative tension, the "Argument" thus forewarns the reader that the phenomenal world of *AWS* is shadowed by a withdrawn counterpart that resists the gaze and the human impulse to regulate or possess its essence. In another important way, *AWS* stymies and complicates its own cataloging process by turning classification into a crisis of perception: its objects demand systematization, but "accurate vision" requires relinquishing anthropocentric authority, so that "the thing must be trained to see itself, or otherwise perish in blindness, flawed" (4), as if the object's fate depends on gaining some independence from the gaze that seeks to command it from without. By shifting the burden of visibility from the human observer, perhaps even the reader, to the thing itself, the "Argument" anticipates the object-oriented problem: if the human observer cannot command the scene, the object must become available otherwise. It appears only partially, involuntarily, never coherently, through oblique vocabulary, "in clusters and dispersed" (3), suspended between the gaze that wants to disclose it and the self-perception it is

somehow asked to achieve. The thing can be seen only when it begins, impossibly, to see itself against the current of ordinary language.

In sum, *AWS* presents a radical problem of objecthood: its definitions are materially vivid and semantically precise yet remain ontologically recalcitrant because their explanatory force is also a mode of concealment. In response, I contend that the reader's interpretation must shift from the recovery of hidden meaning to an encounter with the strange intensities produced by Marcus's aesthetics of partial, object-led disclosure.

Object-Oriented Ontology and the Limits of Interpretation

Stéphane Vanderhaeghe is among the first critics to confront the radical problem of objecthood that the "Argument" places at the center of *AWS*: whatever becomes visible in Marcus's catalogue does so under conditions that already threaten to distort, damage, or partially conceal it.[1] In his incisive study *Dear Incomprehension* (2024), Vanderhaeghe identifies Marcus as a central figure of "American speculative fiction", a category he uses to describe writing whose language constructs a vast aporetic playground for speculative maneuver through resistance, opacity, and incomprehension. Vanderhaeghe observes that Marcus's "language […] is marked by an intrinsic crisis that renders [its] contents eminently problematic and elusive", a paradox made explicit in the "Argument" of *AWS*: "Whatever mysteries the text contains, they remain intact; the society that the book is supposedly a catalogue of remains deeply hidden at the heart of its disclosure" (Vanderhaeghe 2024, 157). The "intrinsic crisis" Vanderhaeghe accurately pinpoints in Marcus's writing is not merely a symptom of difficulty; I contend that it is a quest for knowledge persistently caught in tension with a culture that demands clarification. This crisis is directly connected to the book's most opacifying process: the training of the thing to "see itself", a counterintuitive procedure through which objects become partially perceptible while risking to "perish in blindness, flawed" (4), as the "Argument" puts it.

This crisis becomes especially vivid when Marcus's objects no longer seem to reside only in linguistic flux but begin to operate within an invented American terrain. In this spatial register, the charged dynamics of *AWS* recall what I have been calling Marcus's aesthetics of partial disclosure and depend here on American imagery that invokes culturally loaded toponyms, only to place them in syntactic relations that cannot be securely mapped onto any historical or geographical

[1] I am grateful to Stéphane Vanderhaeghe for encouraging me to pursue the object-oriented direction of this essay, a direction that also informs my wider doctoral research. His account of speculative fiction, textual resistance, and incomprehension, especially in relation to Harman, makes it possible to read Marcus's difficulty not merely as interpretive obstruction, but as textual withdrawal, autonomy, and objectal depth.

reality. America, in other words, is being made to "see itself" as a distorted grammar of regions, seasons, domestic units, and comic reproductive behavior. This logic is especially clear in "FEBRUARY, COPULATED" as the entry seems to offer American coordinates through "the Ohioans, Morgans and Virginians", who "appear to share a February of eight houses" (62). These names initially suggest recognizable regional or communal identities as "Ohioans" and "Virginians" openly invoke American geography, while "Morgans" unsettles the sequence by hovering between surname, family, tribe, or invented collective. Yet the phrase "share a February of eight houses" prevents that self-description from becoming any less elusive while these American markers seem to see themselves as no one else ever has: through a kind of "special pleading" that makes their coordinates appear authoritative, as if their importance required no external proof beyond being American, named, and precisely arranged.

This culture lets these toponyms mirror it back to itself, but the mirror does not clarify; America begins to resemble what Stanley Cavell, following Emerson, calls a "new yet unapproachable America" (92): an ontological domain rather than a national space. Its compositional elements modify the content almost limitlessly, piling marker upon marker onto this strange February until the entry feels over-specified and emptied out at once: February remains as the intended remainder, while everything it is supposed to organize withdraws leaving behind a sweeping syntax of phantom choices that overrides any recoverable social logic.

In "Nestor's rape farm" this "intrinsic crisis" of meaning takes a more disturbing form, as the object-world is exposed through the damaging calm of administrative record and gathered under the deceptively ordinary moniker of "the Charles family". We are told only that G. D. Nestor "runs" the farm, his initials comically suggesting a grand or godlike authority that remains absurdly unchallenged, while the report that "the fourteen primary dogs of Dakota systematically raped the Charles family in August" gives the sentence a grotesque bureaucratic composure (*AWS* 138). In this case, I argue, story-objects and reader-onlookers alike risk "perish[ing] in blindness", unable to grasp whether this is comic taxonomy, atrocity reported in the tone of ordinary record, or both at once.

Vanderhaeghe's reading usefully recasts Marcus's textual difficulty as a problem of object withdrawal. To clarify what is at stake in this connection, it is necessary to turn to Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology, since the conflicted procedures of disclosure already staged in the "Argument" — reveal or conceal, see or be blinded, disclose or damage, clarify or obscure — make a strong case for reading *AWS* through an aesthetics of partial disclosure: sequences of partially illuminated objects, from the American "February" to "Nestor's rape farm", which accumulate without cohering into a whole, deferring the disclosure that remains pending within

the catalog. What matters for my reading, and what OOO helps to clarify, is that this deferral is not a weakness in Marcus's catalogue but its governing principle because it marks the autonomous reality of this peculiar culture that exceeds the terms used to explain it.

Graham Harman, the principal architect of this philosophical strand, explains reality as "always radically different from our formulation of it […] never something we can encounter directly in the flesh", insisting that "we must approach it *indirectly*. This *withdrawal* or *withholding* of things from direct access is the central principle of Object-Oriented Ontology" (Harman 2018, 7; emphasis in original). This pertains to human and nonhuman entities alike: "All entities tend to reside in a cryptic background […] even humans withdraw into a dark reality that is never fully understood, while also being present to observers from the outside" (Harman 2011, 37–40). The implication of this ontological position is clear: no narrative — however detailed or recursive — can fully clarify the inner nature of things, whether animate or inanimate, because they remain irreducible to human experience alone. Marcus's animate constructions such as "the snoring person" (8), "Albert nightly killer" (13), and "John to steal" (121), his ordinary family figures such as father and brother, and inanimate objects such as "sleep holes" (13), "gevorts box" (63), and "air tattoos" (93) all demand interpretation while refusing to be lifted completely out of obscurity. We can say, then, that *AWS* is difficult not because it lacks order, but because its order is recalcitrant, continually flouting the classificatory promise on which the catalog appears to depend.

This recalcitrant order governs the book's larger structure. In terms of object-oriented ontology, Marcus's objects are not clarified by their relations; rather, they become stranger through them. Structurally, *AWS* is divided into eight sections: "Sleep", "God", "Food", "The House", "Animal", "Weather", "Persons", and "The Society". At first glance, these headings promise conceptual order, but they immediately miscue thematic direction by severing titles from ordinary readerly expectations. The "Persons" section, for example, includes "Flap, Wire, and Name", whose opening — "Wire man, electric cell in which the family energy from the naming of a man is converted directly to electrical water flaps in a continuous person" (103) — turns the very category of "person" into a structural experiment. What might ordinarily have been presented as a private subject with an inner life is here, counterintuitively, routed through "family energy", naming, electricity, water, and mechanism until it becomes a "continuous person". Personhood is not quite abolished, but processed and externalized until it emerges as a fluid object: whatever might count as family feeling, identity, or inner experience is converted into an objectified, technical, oddly communal form. Meaning, if we can call it that, does not settle in any one category; it moves as a field of relations in which objects compose one another while continuing to withdraw from any single hierarchy, not even a theological one. "God", for instance, is no more contained

by its own section than by "Food", where divinity reappears as "pretentious tulip gods built over homes and churches to honor what was initially seen as a generous sky" (33).

David Winters argues that the world of *AWS* is made from "an assortment of apparently ordinary elements", but each element is also composed through the others, such as the brother who is built from food, and food in turn can be built from textiles, sticks, and rags. Marcus's text, Winters argues, draws on "a restricted pool of lexical objects, continually rearranged into new combinations" (Winters 2016, 125). Though Winters does not explicitly read *AWS* through the subject/object divide or the object-oriented ontology problem of withdrawal, his account of its "restricted pool" of lexical elements makes that divide visible, since Marcus's recursive combinations generate relations while leaving explanation out.

The most intense aesthetic subtractions occur in the concise "Terms" segments that follow each of the book's thematic sections. For instance, the first glossary entry after the "Sleep" section defines "leg initiations" as an "act or technique of preparing the legs for sleep" (13), well before the phrase appears in the later story "Leg of Brother Who Died Early" (117). When the term reappears, it does not confirm the initial definition but further fragments its clarity, contradicting its initial explanation and linking "leg initiations" instead to "the roarer" and "subfeet walking rituals" — references whose explanatory context is pointedly withheld from the earlier sleep-related frame (117). This indirect logic of object-revelation is anticipated in the visual paratext. The front cover design offers the most immediate expression of what I call the aesthetics of partial revelation. The cover creates a sense of pseudo-interactivity: a dynamic collage of sketches that invites the reader to handle the book as though its surfaces could be rearranged or reinterpreted. It displays six illustrations of tools, pipes, machine-like parts, and a humanoid silhouette, all seemingly poised to be cut out and reapplied to a new surface, inviting the reader to generate new connotative relations among them.

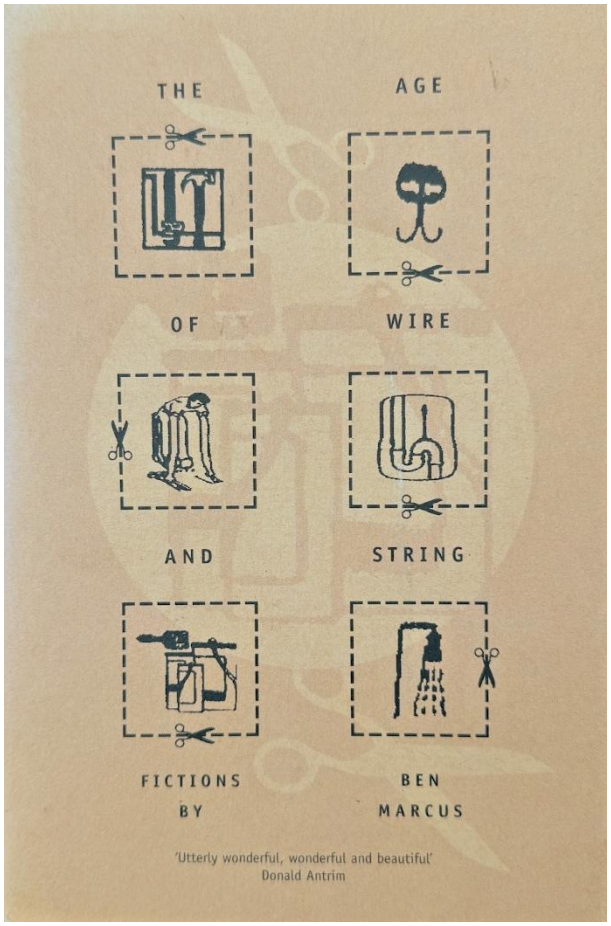


Fig. 1: Front cover of Ben Marcus's *The Age of Wire and String* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995).

Each word of the title is associated with a unique visual element, yet there are no visible constraints on how these images or words might be rearranged. The layout thus stages at a remove the reality *AWS* purportedly discloses, approaching it indirectly through detachable surfaces and partial signs, producing fragmentation without explanatory excess or any final rule for their arrangement. These examples demonstrate how the "intrinsic crisis" Vanderhaeghe observes, becomes a limit of interpretation: the fragments cannot simply be decoded. Vanderhaeghe's broader account of speculative fiction names this limit as a formal condition rather than a readerly failure, as failure is "scripted at [its] core", as part of its "(un)operating mode" and "(dys)functional strategies" (Vanderhaeghe 2024, 13–14).

To go beyond this intrinsic crisis and hermeneutic failure, I propose not to intensify the reflex to decode the text, but to slow it and treat Marcus's anti-representational formalism as a constructive means of intensifying objecthood through affective and sensory experience. What Vanderhaeghe calls failure, "(un)operating", or "(dys)functional" strategy need not be understood only negatively, as fiction's refusal to be read but as an aesthetic procedure driven by tonal pressure, mood, and the object's desire to disclose what it also withholds. Conventional comprehension may fail, but that failure is productive because it forces reading into somatic experience. The longer stories sharpen this logic, since many of them offer capsule versions of why *AWS* is so difficult to interpret: they do not withhold meaning absolutely, but disclose it in distorted, partial, and bodily forms. I want to describe an alternative mode of disclosure that resists destruction: one in which withdrawal produces affect, tone organizes encounter, sound and bodily pressure become interpretive forces, and the reader learns to *feel* the object without converting it into interpretive possession.

The opening story, "Intercourse with Resuscitated Wife", condenses this aesthetic of partial revelation almost aphoristically. Its first sentence — "Intercourse with resuscitated wife for particular number of days, superstitious act designed to ensure safe operation of household machinery" — stages Marcus's method as a weirdly comic miniature (7). The act is named as superstition, which places it outside rational causality while still granting it a bizarre practical force. The reader can understand, with some effort, how a necrophiliac ritual might be superstitious; what remains absurd is how it could keep the appliances running. This gap is crucial because it does not simply make the wife symbolic of the household machine but produces a stranger relation: the wife, the ritual, the household, and the machinery become linked without becoming fully interchangeable. The "resuscitated wife" is therefore not merely a figure of domestic objectification, although that violence is clearly present. She becomes an opaque household

technology: a body recruited into the fantasy of order, function, and control, yet not fully consumed by that fantasy.

Here Marcus's idea of disclosing "the inner thing" becomes especially important because revelation arrives through altered perception, but it is never innocent because to disclose the object is also to deform it, as Marcus repeatedly reminds us, as if revelation were the by-product of an unfinished scientific experiment. Here, then, disclosure becomes most aggressive: it does not illuminate the object from the outside but alters the very conditions under which the object can appear, pressuring its relations into visibility. The sentence's imperative grammar makes this pressure explicit: "She must be found, revived, and then penetrated until heat fills the room, until the toaster is shooting bread onto the floor" (7). The comedy is grotesque, but precise. The desire at work is not simply desire for the wife, but for an operational home, a domestic system made to function through the body. The wife becomes the point where household order, bodily use, superstition, and machinery cross. Yet the passage resists being mastered as a single allegory. A critic could flatten it by saying that Marcus merely reduces the wife to a household instrument. That reading is partly right, but too easy. It explains the passage by destroying its strangeness, while Marcus's point is not only that the wife is objectified, but that objectification itself becomes unstable, excessive, and bizarrely animating.

As the first longer story, "Resuscitated Wife" introduces *AWS* as a carefully contrived conceptual machinery since it grants its objects a guarded agency, then short-circuits death, body, domestic order, and ritual, making the reader feel that these terms belong together without allowing that belonging to settle into ordinary sense. This announces the broader formal logic of Marcus's fiction: the refusal of ordinary intelligibility does not abolish meaning so much as displace it into a communicative relay, merely changing the conditions under which the text can reach the reader. In this story, that logic becomes visible in the final tonal turn, where Marcus adds melancholic remembrance of pre-corpse time to grotesque comedy without resolving either: "Days flip past in chunks of fake light, and the intercourse is placed in the back of the mind. But it is always there, that moving into a static-ridden corpse that once spoke familiar messages in the morning when the sun was new" (7).

The example demonstrates that *AWS* should not be treated as a text that merely resists the reader. It *besets* the reader, to use Vanderhaeghe's term, but it also solicits forms of attention that are not reducible to decipherment. The book's appeal lies in the fact that its objects do not become compelling because they can be translated back into stable meaning; they become compelling because they are painstakingly constructed as opaque presences. This opacity is produced through a dialectic of subtraction and addition that structures both the stories and the glossary, as the

preceding examples demonstrate. In assigning itself the task of cataloging a vast culture, *AWS* approaches its reality, in a deliberately Harmanesque sense, "indirectly" and without exception as it relentlessly withholds the familiar supports of narrative and reference while overproducing alternative systems of relation, motion, bodily pressure, and material instruction. Harman's object-oriented criticism attempts to clarify why this procedure is constructive rather than merely dysfunctional: "the literary text runs deeper than any coherent meaning, and outruns the intentions of author and reader alike" (Harman 2012, 200). Marcus's text likewise exceeds everyone's expectations of what meaning should be, including, probably, his own. Its objects exceed the definitions that appear to contain them. What looks like an erasure of sense is therefore never pure absence since subtraction clears away the habits of recognition, while addition proliferates other forms of relation. This dialectic is central to my argument because Marcus's "failed" definitions are affectively successful precisely insofar as they create effects neither author nor reader can fully master.

Returning briefly to Vanderhaeghe's analysis of "Resuscitated Wife" makes this point clearer. Despite his emphasis on incomprehension, Vanderhaeghe's own reading moves toward an affective logic of grammatical subtraction and agential proliferation. He writes that "the dead wife is acted upon", as the passive construction makes explicit: "She must be found, revived, and then penetrated". For Vanderhaeghe, the grammar "sidestep[s]" the active subject, leaving the implied "'you' radically decentered; by the time 'you' appears", the wife has become active, while "'you' are ironically acted upon" (116). The scene therefore demands to be read not as a simple opposition between subject and object, or user and used body, but as a redistribution of agency across wife, body, household, and ritual.

What Vanderhaeghe identifies grammatically, and what Harman helps explain ontologically, I extend affectively, since withdrawal alone cannot fully account for the experience of reading *AWS*. The shifting relation between acting and being acted upon produces what Ngai calls a "tacitly inferred communicative situation or structure of address" (Manning 2020, 127). Put simply, tone makes us feel that the text is addressing someone, in some attitude, even when no clear message is being communicated, as in the story's final turn: "[b]ut it is always there, that moving into a static-ridden corpse that once spoke familiar messages" (7). The phrase gives the scene a clear emotional orientation, attuning the reader to how the object becomes affectively available without becoming transparent, while unmistakably structuring an address that bridges speculative fiction's resistance to comprehension and the intensities through which its reality nonetheless presses itself upon us. I will call this critical posture "speculative attunement", and in the remainder of this article, I will demonstrate how this takes place in *AWS*. Marcus's objects continue their "special pleading": they

press, irritate, amuse, disturb, and act upon the reader. To read them speculatively is to accept that their full reality cannot be unveiled as something must remain withdrawn. To read them attuningly is to remain sensitive to the tonal and affective overlayings that gather around what might be meaning, and to follow the partial transmissions through which withdrawal becomes comic deformation and/or damaged visibility.

Speculative Attunement and the Affects of Partial Disclosure

In his lemma on so-called "neorealist" American fictions from the period 2000-2010, Lee Konstantinou proposes the category of "ontologically attuned fictions" to describe contemporary works that, after postmodernism, attempt to re-establish a relation to the real without returning to mimetic transparency or classical realism (Konstantinou 2017, 111). Konstantinou's choice for the concept "attunement" already shifts realism away from representation and toward orientation: a way of registering reality when direct reference has become unstable. These fictions acknowledge the sign–referent divide but persist in the effort to "jump" it through affective and ontological strategies (Konstantinou 2017, 111). As Konstantinou puts it, affective neorealists, including Marcus, do not simply repeat postmodern "sublime desire" for an absent thing; they "promise to give us the thing itself" (Konstantinou 2017, 117), thus seeking renewed, affectively charged forms of contact with the real.

Yet in *AWS*, Marcus radicalizes this promise, as the "thing itself" does arrive without surrendering its autonomy: intricately overwrought, resistant to scrutiny, and "trained to see itself", available only instinctively and affectively. With affect and attunement I refer to the pre-interpretive intensity that charges the chasm between sign and referent, the interval where the prose in *AWS* is felt before it is understood. Marcus's affective grammar emerges from that gap: it speculates about what remains hidden there while attuning the reader to the weird forms through which "the thing", the object, or the body is nevertheless encountered. In fact, Konstantinou's "jump" is slapsticked in *AWS*, as it usually crosses the gap by crashing into comic deformation. "Walter" is the first test of speculative attunement: the point where this slapsticked "jump" becomes a method for reading partial disclosure.

No matter how many times the reader encounters "the battlefields of the Middle West" or the figure named "Walter" (102), the ontological coordinates of the wire-and-string world remain only partially disclosed. As this reality is construed, there is no direct path to fully apprehending it; "Walter" can only dangle signs of accessibility before us — a name, a call, a code, a half-life — while each sign fails to secure its referent. "Walter" therefore becomes legible only as prepersonal

intensity: the force through which Marcus's prose acts on the reader before explanation can take hold. The question, then, is how to disclose what hides behind Marcus's elongated sentences in "Half-Life of Walter in the American Areas" (101–2) without reducing "Walter" to a person, symbol, or military code.

Should we take the step of centering "Walter" as a human subject — an interpretive shortcut the text mischievously resists — we find ourselves back in Harman's domain, where withdrawal applies equally to human and nonhuman entities. But speculative attunement asks a sharper question: not *who* or *what* Walter finally is, but how Walter becomes affectively available without becoming conceptually stable. It is obviously clear that "Walter" works less like a character than like the "continuous person" encountered in "Flap, Wire, and Name" and, like the preceding named figures, it urgently solicits interpretation without surrendering to the everyday familiarity of its name, but only as a malleable continuity that persists through forms of disclosure that deform what they reveal.

This is why the term proliferates rather than clarifies. "Walter" appears as a proper noun, a "half-life", a code for "the deaf soldiers of Mexico" (102), and a conduit of dog-becoming: "every boy-bodied man in a nation was a potential animal helper and [...] could by means of Walter be made to join ranks with dogs and dog helpers" (101). The opening definition of Walter as "the compulsory call for those serving in the animal forces" (101) turns the name into a summons, a military signal, and a mechanism of bodily conversion. Eventually, "Walter" stops behaving like a figure and becomes a modified pattern of assignments, its unspoken essence methodically inverted — *ad absurdum*. The disorientation produced by Walter's strangeness gradually becomes attunement to this surplus of assignment, preparing the reader to read him not as under-defined but as overproduced. At this point, ordinary interpretation can only overmaster or abandon "Walter". However, speculative attunement allows the reader to take a third route: it turns speculation into an adjustment of attention to the pre-interpretive intensity generated by Walter's transformations, from human name to call, from call to military instrument, from instrument to animal force, from animal force to half-living residue. This is where Konstantinou's "jump" across the sign-referent gap mislands, because it is slapsticked into comic deformation: the leap crashes into a chain of grotesque substitutions warping any ordinary expectation of what a name, body, or subject should do.

Despite all its liveliness, Walter is animated as a compromised body-function, a figure made to move through manipulation. As Ngai explains, "becoming animated in [an] objectifying sense" is bound to "becoming automatized", and such animation turns the body into "a spectacle whose 'aesthetic' power increases with one's increasing awkwardness and helplessness" (Ngai 2005, 99).

This is exactly Walter's condition. Whatever remains of a body in the name "Walter" is animated through absurd automation, from military duty to animal force to "half-life". Walter becomes compelling not because he fails to signify, but because his objectification produces a sequence of affective shocks the reader must follow and adjust to.

"Walter" therefore does not become one of Marcus's "successful objects" — if any object in *AWS* ever does — or a thing "trained to see itself" in any simple sense. Rather, it is the reader who is trained to feel the texture of relation to him through linguistic and conceptual friction. Marcus subtracts ordinary referential anchors while overproducing alternative structures, until Walter becomes both too specified and impossible to stabilize. His "helpless automatization" ends bizarrely and unheroically in 1992, when "the call of Walter, and song versions of the call in battle" are adapted to produce hostile affect in "the battlefields of the Middle West" (102). The passage offers no catharsis. It registers instead through what Ngai calls "minor and generally unprestigious feelings", forcing the reader to exchange mastery for irritation, unease, and bewildered attention (6). To read Walter and the Middle West, then, is not to solve them, but to watch meaning coagulate in the gap between sign and referent, until that gap itself becomes the affective grammar of "Half-Life of Walter in the American Areas".

These semantically precise yet ontologically elusive intervals, which the "Walter" story makes visible, are what speculative attunement strives to follow throughout the book, not in order to solve the interpretive impasse of meaning, but to return more sharply to this article's opening question: what kind of meaning can be disclosed without being damaged by disclosure? A possible answer is that affective disclosure preserves not the meaning of explanation, but the meaning of encounter: the repeated contact with an object's force, pressure, or anticlimactic deflation, even when we know in advance that the reality behind it may never become fully intelligible.

The object is disclosed but never delivered whole, made visible but possibly damaged by visibility, placed before the reader only through the distorted procedures by which it has been forced to "see itself". Speculative attunement is therefore hardly to be understood as a new form of mastery, but a way of staying with the object's partial transmissions; a criticism that registers how objects bear upon the reader through their affective availability, and a form of speculation that allows us to follow them without pretending to exhaust them. From "February", "Sernier", "Walter", "Nestor", the "resuscitated wife", and the "storm veterans" to even "Ben Marcus, The", these figures become readable not as decodable symbols, but as volatile sites of encounter. The final test of this method is the author's name itself. In the "Terms" entry "Ben Marcus, The", the name appears only nominally, detached from any stable authorial persona and theatricalized as an epidermal zone of inscription: "False map, scroll, caul, or parchment. It is comprised of the first

skin. In ancient times, it hung from a pole, where wind and birds inscribed its surface" (76). Authorship itself becomes an object: skinned, weathered, "dented", and "studied", but never restored to sovereign intention and Marcus does not stand above this object-world; he lets his own name be absorbed into it.

The final and most personal intensification of speculative attunement occurs in "The Animal Husband". It is the only story in *AWS* written in the first person with a sustained and emphatic use of "I", introducing the storyteller alongside his father Michael, brother Jason, and a figure named Grandover. Their lives unfold in proximity to birds and various manifestations of air and sky, all of which share the same ontological terrain:

> I am the one my father said is supposed to scratch down on this bundle. We are from the hill. He didn't say that, but I am his son. The bird above us is too big to see around, but the white air gets on its skin and helps us see to carry the animals back and forth on the sled. He says that I will always be his carrier, his animal assistant. (104)

This opening establishes a network of thickening connections among entities that seem to recognize one another through a familial or communal logic. After these first lines, which hint at the primacy of personal confession, the distinction between animate and inanimate begins to erode. Birds, sled, air, skin, and speech acts emerge as equally charged participants in a shared ontographic field. The tonal shift that briefly centers the human subject then gives way to the story's more anxious tonal movement, structured by unanswered questions: "I am in [1] now, on the hill, in his room, where the bird can't see me. I get to be the one that fills in the spaces he forgot to fill in. Will they know it in their ears if I throw this bundle off the hill? Will the bird see me?" (104–5). Again, affective, or, more precisely, anxious, grammar traps the reader in an interpretive impasse, forcing an encounter with an object-world that negotiates both an ontological and emotional quandary. This comes close to what Ngai describes when she writes that "affect seems [to be] a fugitive presence attached to or hovering in the vicinity of words" (Ngai 2005, 46). In "The Animal Husband" the reader's speculative attunement to this "hovering" becomes harder to track and more urgent to follow because affect moves across a flattened field where no "protagonist" can securely dominate. This leveling of beings reflects the foundational premise of what Harman calls "flat ontology": a metaphysical commitment to treating all objects as ontologically equal (Harman 2018, 54). Once "the bird and the white air" rise into prominence above the human characters, the possibility of establishing a stable hierarchy vanishes. Each sentence generates new objects that stand on equal footing with the last, enacting what Harman describes as "the realist tradition of

philosophy, in which both humans and non-human things are treated not as correlates of each other, but as having equally rich independent lives" (Harman 2018, 67).

Rather than constructing encyclopedic taxonomies, Marcus foregrounds an alternate realism: a speculative, dense portrayal of curious livelihood that refuses to "cave in to personal prejudices about what is or is not real" (Harman 2018, 55). The realist tradition Harman names through flat ontology is, of course, non-representational; it does not conform to the mimeticism of conventional literary realism. Yet Marcus's bypassing of conventional narrative also returns us to Peter Schwenger's account of melancholy as "inherent in the shortfall of definition itself", a melancholy he says, "permeates *The Age of Wire and String*" (Schwenger 2006, 127). This melancholy becomes another form of "special pleading", an imploring pressure that gathers at the end of the story's first part and crescendos into a distorted, reverberating sensory scene: "I go into my blankets when the bird shuts down. I get to see what happens in the black air in my room, and there is also where I get to hear the light get eaten by my father and grandfather, and sometimes even she is there, and the smell of her when I am under my blankets under the shut-down bird" (105). The phrase "sometimes even she is there" seems to intimate the absent mother, as if the narrator were pleading from under the blankets for rescue from the bird and the male members of his family. But Marcus withholds confirmation as the plea survives only as smell, black air, eaten light, and partial presence: melancholy made affectively available without becoming explanation.

This melancholy can certainly be placed near what Ngai calls a "dysphoric" mood: an uneasy melancholy that refuses catharsis. The initial crescendo of Marcus's passage purposefully fizzles out; its dénouement winds down into the static, repetitive loops condensed in the pronoun "myself": "This is our great big place and we are just myself living in this house" (105), and again, "our house is big enough for all of us and we are just myself living in it" (109). Ngai names this state stuplimity, "a tension that holds opposing affects together" (Ngai 2005, 271); in this case, it combines "stupefaction" — numbed bewilderment — and "sublimity" through the "slow[ing] down of language, a rhetorical enactment of its fatigue…the undoing [of language]", and through "a process of material buildup, where words are slowly added rather than subtracted" (Ngai 2005, 255–6). The reader is again drawn into a dialectic of subtraction and addition, concentrated in a single voice whose reality is defined against missing family members and the text's refusal to disclose the nature of their withdrawal. Unlike the other stories, "The Animal Husband" makes that shortfall personal without making it transparent. The confessional register of "I, the animal assistant" oscillates between recollections of household violence — "father would never talk… Only when Jase fell asleep did he punch at us. I could never sleep then" (107) — and more pastorally infused, almost mythic images: "This is what they did. They carried the hair on the sled.

They went to the other hill and to the mountain, and also under the hill, where you can't see what color is the bird" (114).

Coda

In conclusion, meaning survives in *AWS* not because it is finally recovered, but because it is kept in motion: withheld enough to remain autonomous and overproduced enough to become affectively available. Marcus subtracts the ordinary guarantees of reference, character, and explanatory context, but he does not leave a blank. He adds procedures, taxonomies, names, bodies, weather systems, animal codes, domestic machines, and pseudo-scholarly instructions, imbuing them with minor, uncathartic affects such as "animatedness" and "stuplimity", until absence itself becomes crowded and strangely usable. From "special pleading", Sernier, and the "objective witnesses" to the demand that "the thing must be trained to see itself", *AWS* produces its own conditions of readability: special procedures that train the object, and its audience, to become perceptible through distortion.

To clarify this further, the poetry of John Ashbery offers a useful horizon, as his "leaving-out business" and practice of "put[ting] too much in" describe a poetic method in which sequence is made through omission and excess at once (cf. Moramarco 1976, Molesworth 1977, Sweet 1998, Hickman 2012). In "The Skaters", Ashbery stages the desire for "the meaning of all this" only to recast explanation itself as a "death-trap":

> It is time now for a general understanding of
> The meaning of all this. The meaning of Helga, importance of the
> setting, etc.
> A description of the blues. Labels on bottles
> And all kinds of discarded objects that ought to be described.
> But can one ever be sure of which ones?
> Isn't this a death-trap, wanting to put too much in [...]
> This leaving-out business. On it hinges the very importance of what's novel…
> [b]ut calling attention isn't the same thing as explaining, and as I said I am not ready
> To line phrases with the costly stuff of explanation
> (Ashbery 1966, 39)

Ashbery's refusal to supply "the costly stuff of explanation" allows Marcus's subtractive/additive logic to come into sharper focus. Hickman describes Ashbery's method as a "negotiation between

fragmentation (leaving out) and proliferation (putting in)" (Hickman 2012, 51). Meaning thus emerges between accumulation and omission, between the pressure to include and the counter-pressure to withhold. The double logic of this procedure is clarified by David Sweet, as he argues that the density of "collectibles" might seem to represent "a deadly inclusiveness", the impulse to put everything into the poem (Sweet 1998, 326), while in fact the true danger is not the catalogue itself, but the will to explain it, the desire to extract "the meaning of all this". As such, "unexplained catalogues" may be "a mode of 'leaving-out'" precisely because they refuse to "explain themselves". Conversely, explanation itself can become "a form of 'leaving-out'", because it replaces the "clutter" and density of things with a "convenient summary" (Sweet 1998, 326). "Putting-in", then, names two opposed gestures at once: the catalog puts in objects while leaving out explanation, whereas explanation puts in summary while leaving out the object's density. Hence, "putting in" and "leaving out" are not opposites but reversible strategies, simply because too much description may still omit explanation, while explanation may erase the very density it claims to clarify.

I contend that this Ashberyan logic is radicalized in Marcus's *AWS*, as he turns it into an ontology. In *AWS*, leaving out no longer concerns only lyric continuity or poetic arrangement; it becomes the condition under which objects exist. Instead of searching for how much can be left out while the sense of the original remains, the question is how much can be disclosed before the object is destroyed by explanation. While Ashbery's omissions make objects resonate and his catalogs and fragments test the limits of explanation, Marcus's omissions make objects withdraw and his cataloging makes explanation itself part of the fiction's trap. Most crucially, Marcus does not eliminate the reader's desire to understand; he estranges that desire until it becomes capable of sensing what it cannot possess. This means that disclosure survives damage only when it refuses possession. Meaning, finally, survives not as explanation, but as encounter.

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