

The Notion of Pantry: A Speculative Defense of Unuse

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My title is less odd than it seems. The concerns expressed herein are born from reactions to recent practices of departmental “de-activation” amongst university campuses (SUNY-Albany, Penn State, & UNLV); from the downsizing of entire faculties in the name of interdisciplinarity due to supposed lack of student interest in classes (a place-holder term for not pulling one’s own weight with regard to student enrolment); and of decisions on the part of governments (both local and federal) to determine the nature of inquiry and, by implication, the nature of intellectual labour (as recent events in Wisconsin and Iowa have shown). The issue, in other words, regards intellectual survival in an age of austerity—and specifically the idea that speculative inquiry is a wrong that must be defended.

Part of what is at stake here is the polemical category of “wrong” itself, and the ease with which we are accustomed to synchronizing the category of wrong with that of the epistemic mistake. I want to propose something different; namely that wrong is a political category, not an epistemological one.¹ And as a political category, it disposes spaces and temporalities that interrupt the conventions of correspondence which enable the circulation of value in contemporary political life. As a political category, wrong regards the rendering remarkable of a site of resistance that stands in excess to the prevailing practices of articulation and deliberation.

In contrast, the political economy of austerity (something that has a much more lucrative cultural politics and history than recent debates suggest) relies on the affect of duress in order to assign tort to excess. In universities, the result is not only the inevitable pressure to produce (both publications and Ph.D. students), but the even odder scenario that production must happen under duress: that education must struggle to produce in order to justify its existence against other unproductive expenditures like the health industry or the service industry. Nothing less than the administration of time, and one’s relationship to one’s own time, is what is at stake in the recent attacks on schooling.

My polemical provocation is simply this: both left and right political ambitions have dispensed with the possibility of speculating the otherwiseness of value; that is, both the left and the right (in differing ways) adopt and endorse a conception of value that is at once moral, epistemic, and econometric: it is moral because it relies on criteria for the assignment of good and bad value as the first task of critical judgment; it is epistemic because it treats all political claims as knowledge-bearing entities that must be examined as either true or false before they may count as political claims at all; and it is econometric because the assignation of good and bad value marries the logic of production and exchange. The result is a confrontational stalemate that produces an implicit prohibition for speculating the otherwise of value. Here, I want to reconsider and rework the possibility of the speculation of value.

The polemical concerns I raise thus regard school and schooling, in the largest sense possible of the Greek *skhole*, as well as how the administration of the excesses of *skhole*, of *skhole*’s unproductive expenditure, has been priced and subsequently deemed too costly. “The notion of pantry” speculates on the excesses of *skhole*, its practice of dispensing with time, of

wasting time; or, the work of leisure. Another title for these remarks may have been “the labour of aesthesis” —which is the kind of intellectual labor I am wanting to at once endorse and sustain. With these remarks I would thus like to generate a polemical confrontation between the *de-activation* of academic departments because deemed insufficiently productive, and the *dispensation* that is the unproductive expenditure of *skhole’s* time; in short, I want to defend the notion of pantry.

In this regard, I note with some unease the ways in which the formal image of necessity as policy-oriented discourse characteristic of the post-behaviorist social sciences has been, with an uncompromising voracity, consumed by humanities disciplines. But this is true because universities have accepted as their mantra a certain work ethic that imagines knowledge-production as at once epistemological and effective—by which I mean efficient, useful, and hence justifiable; or, dare we say it, right labour?² In this regard, it seems to me that due to a variety of pressures, the humanities and social science disciplines have been forced to forgo and dispense with the radical thesis of speculative reflection that sustains the principle of the unusability of the unthought. It is my contention that this is wrong—politically; it is my further contention that we dispense with this dispensation, and that we put meaning and symbolism back in the pantry, if you will.

Allow me to explain what I mean.

We know that the analytic term “unproductive expenditure” comes to us from Georges Bataille’s studies on political economy, and we also know how Bataille’s notion of unproductive expenditure is an assemblage-concept that finds its basis in his unique critique of utilitarian theories of value, and in an analysis that regards the principle of loss as necessary to the perpetuation of production and consumption, where the focus is on those things like jewels, cults, and games, that “have no end beyond themselves.”³

Now, given that the English term “expenditure” is so efficient in its ability to crystallize a complex dynamic of forces, both physical and metaphysical, into a concise episteme, we tend to disregard the original French word that sources our English translations of “expenditure”—that is, *dépense*—from the French verb *dépenser*. Bataille’s famous essay, “The Notion of Expenditure,” first appeared in the French journal *La Critique sociale* in 1933, at the beginning of a massive world depression and after the crippling economic crash of Black Thursday (October 24, 1929) that brought an end to a period of overvaluation, excess, and of an unproductive expenditure of economic speculation of the Roaring 20s. The original French title of that essay is “La Notion de dépense.”

I think it worthwhile in our age of austerity to confront the radical provocation of the “*dépense*” which the English translation somehow mitigates. For it is in the *dépense* that we find the ontological conditions of value; the fact that there is no efficiency that will erase and successfully dispense with excess; that excess is the being of value; and that to dispense with excess through the administration of production and the implementation of austerity programs is to create a partition of the sensible where only a few are entitled to manage excess. The *dépense* is the excess of value understood as that which cannot be accounted for, which cannot be administered, which cannot be managed.

The notion of *dépense*—we must note—finds origins in the Latin *dispensa* which is both an exemption or a dispensation (as in “to dispense with”), and a pantry (in Italian, for instance, *dispensa* is the word for pantry, as is the French *dépense*). In other words, Bataille’s *notion de dépense*—or “notion of pantry”—carries the idea of a dis-organized distribution that lacks criteria for order. I have never seen a properly organized pantry; and even Martha Stewart’s pantry dispenses with a necessary principle of organization, however ordered it may be, precisely because it is the medium of the pantry to be a place of non-necessity—or contingency—where things are stored but dis-organized.

That is, the pantry is where those things not immediately useful are placed—with the expectation that a use for them might arise, but without any guarantees. The pantry is a space of non-necessity, of potential pure loss: just think of how many things we throw out from our pantry because they expire and go bad. We buy food because we think we might need it, store it in our pantry, and discover it some days, months, or years later to have expired, to have died, withered and rotted. There is no better picture of Bataille’s principle of loss than a pantry full of expired food; and I have no doubt that Bataille was sensitive to this fact and that his choice of “*dépense*” as the word to designate his notion of “unconditional expenditure” was selected with that resonance in mind: in a 1930s world of starving and unemployed millions due to mass-delusional economic speculation, the picture of a rotting pantry *is* a picture of the putridity of unregulated capital.

It is also a picture of unusability and of that which is left unthought. Food rots in a pantry because we unthink it, we forget or dispense with it. I cannot help but also imagine an artificial etymology between the *dépenser* of the *dépense*, and the (*dé*)*penser* of the unthought—a dispensing with thought in order to speculate. The notion of pantry, I want to say, makes available the unusability of the unthought as a condition for speculation. So here is my polemical thesis in the face of current threats of academic austerity:

The value of speculative unthought is unusable.

What does it mean to say that speculative unthought is “unusable”?

It doesn’t mean that it is useless. Uselessness is the antithesis of use, to be sure. But Bataille’s notion of pantry isolates a domain of value outside this dialectical logic of production and exchange. The *dépense* of thought’s dispensation points precisely to the exemption of the principle of pure loss; hence, the unusability thesis. Speculative thinking—which I consider the ground of humanities, social science, and basic science research—is unusable to the extent that it is not reducible to a logic of production that guarantees the banality of the use/uselessness dialectic. It is not purposive, in other words, though it invites modes of handling that extend beyond utilitarian management.

To say this is to suggest that the principle of speculative unusability is grounded in a classical aesthetic thesis that sustains the idea that aesthetic objects—in order to count as aesthetic—are not reducible to their value content. This means—crucially—that aesthetic objects *are not* things “for us.” This is what Kant meant when he forwarded what I’ve elsewhere called the radical democratic thesis of “disinterest” by affirming that there can be no rules to determine the beauty of an object because the object is unthinkable, dispensed, or exempt,—that is, *dépensé*—from the logic of interest.⁴ Oddly enough this is the most sublime and un-Kantian

moment in all of Kant's writings—and, in fact, it is the moment when Kant is closest to David Hume. And there is no doubt that Kant, himself, realized this; which helps explain his subsequent back-stepping, after this initial confrontation with disinterest in the *Critique of Judgment*, in wanting to make the beautiful a symbol of the moral. For Kant, the radical heteronomy of the *dépense* of aesthetic experience was literally unbearable—his critical system could not hold it up; thus he reinstated an interest in the moral through symbolism.

But the dispensation of interest thesis—first articulated by Hume and partly sustained by Kant—never went away, and it is at the heart of the notion of pantry—and here it is:

The principle of speculative unthought affirms that the human, natural, and social sciences are not in the business of generating meanings.

Meanings are always *for* someone or *for* something; meaning always has a use value, or an interest. This is why Kant had to invoke symbolism to suture the tear of the aesthetic caesura that inserted radical heteronomy into his otherwise homogenous critical system. As I said, he could not bear the heteronomy of the *dépensé* and so had to make the beautiful a symbol of the moral. The lesson here is that symbolism is always moral—the poetics of symbolism are carriers of a moral theory of the image.

Now, this doesn't mean that we don't make critical judgments that assert the meaning of things: that's precisely the task of critical thinking, and the task of judgment. But theory—the speculative fabrication of the thingliness of things—and criticism—the asseveration of our convictions regarding a thing's impression—are two distinct activities. What I want to point to in drawing this blurred distinction between theory and criticism, then, is the possibility of thinking the value and objecthood of things in and of themselves, without having to bear the weight of the epistemological expectations of symbolism, signification, and other modes of actuarial validation.

In elaborating this, I find mutual inflection with what some recent post-continental thinkers call speculative realism and an object-oriented-ontology. By extracting things from the pressures of signification (of the “for whom” of meaning), we might be in a position to start shying away from what Quentin Meillassoux has recently referred to as the *correlationist fallacy* that says that our critical thinking, in its post-Kantian variant, is always epistemological in wanting to make things relate to our capacity to know them. That is, the production of meaning as the conventional privilege of academic discourse wants to retain the usefulness and necessity of meaning *for us*: this is the basis of the measurement of impact factors for publications and tenure decisions, and the expectations for justifying the relevance of one's research.

The objects and tools of our analysis do not exist for us: the refugee is not there so that I might study her, nor is the film there so that I may analyze it; objects are—to use a language that is at once familiar but worth dispensing—unpurposive. Their unpurposiveness can only be noted by a particular stance that one takes when, as Heidegger had also noted, the thingliness that is a thing's use is interrupted, dispensed with, and rendered unusable. Once it is unusable, it strikes out our attention in a manner heretofore unappreciated. Recall Heidegger's discussion in *Being and Time* of the broken hammer and the emerging tri-partite structure of unusability that results from the modes of concerned absorption—and, indeed,

the frustrated prurience—that are conspicuousness, obtrusiveness, and obstinacy. Each of these instants of unusability (and I speculate there are more) speak not only of an attitude we hominoids have towards objects, but of a life of objects themselves, a secret life withdrawn from us.

In his work on an object-oriented-ontology Graham Harman speaks of the “allure” of objects, an allure derived from an object’s withdrawal from us. For Harman, all objects are always at least dualities to the extent that they possess an outer and an inner life; this is the lesson he gathers from Heidegger’s analysis of disclosure. Thus, his version of speculative realism “begins by providing us with a world of ghostly realities that never come into contact with each other, a universe packed full of elusive substances stuffed into mutually exclusive vacuums.”⁵ The picture is curious, and compelling; especially because for Harman, the elusiveness of objects does not call forth inquiry. It is not the task of speculation to analyze and unpack the inside of objects in order to make them meaningful, to make them count *for us*. This is the forceful rejoinder that speculative realism throws at post-Kantian hermeneutics. With the dispensation of the ‘for-us’ of knowledge we also dispense with the correlationist urge to establish a necessary equivalence between object and meaning in order to know the object, in order for the object to count as valuable. “An object,” Harman says, “is a complex and irreducible event [...] No object, however banal, is just the empty representative of a standing reserve of calculable presence. However naive an object might seem, it still makes its incisions into being, exploding with power at a level always escaping our view.”⁶

Though Harman doesn’t come out and say as much, as it is not his ambition to do so, an object’s “explosion with power” and its “incision into being” are what aesthetic experience has had to contend with from the get-go (hence Steven Shaviro’s correct intuition that with an object-oriented-ontology we are in the realm of aesthetics⁷). The problem of aesthetic experience is one of having to come to terms with the unusability of aesthetic value in the face of its intensity and inexhaustibility. An aesthetic experience is one in which one has a sensation of incisive conviction regarding the presentness of an object; this, despite the fact that there is no source or site of evidence that will count as necessary or sufficient to determining the validity of that incision. I take this to be the force of what Harman means when he says that “However naive an object might seem, it still makes its incisions into being, exploding with power at a level always escaping our view.”

I’ll extend Harman’s object-oriented-ontology and suggest that the withdrawal of things also regards a withdrawal of any necessity attributable to an object; to put this slightly differently, I will say that to consider an object’s withdrawal means that necessity is a correlationist feature of objects—a quality imposed upon them in our thinking of them as substances “for us”—rather than a fact about them. An object’s withdrawal suggests the absence of necessary rules for approaching and unpacking that object, hence an absence of necessary criteria for our interface with it, and by extension the dispensation of necessity itself.

There is a political force to this aesthetic insight that says that with the dispensation of necessity we unleash the intensity of the otherwise. Anything whatever might happen otherwise, and thus everything is also otherwise thinkable, otherwise doable. What this aesthetics of politics affords, ultimately, is something I want to call a *process pluralism*—a pluralism that remains in a state of becoming precisely because the ontological *dépense* of

necessity makes it such that anything whatever might be otherwise. The notion of pantry thus regards the *dépense* of necessity.

What speculative realism and an object-oriented-ontology make available is something that the hermeneutic turn in aesthetics, and in humanistic thinking in general, had de-activated; namely, the sensation of absorption arising from an object's obstinate unusability. To return meaning to the pantry and rediscover the potential of the unusability of speculative unthought thus requires the following agenda items:

1. Dispensing with the “for us” and a return to a speculative thinking (variously and amply conceived) “irrespective of the question of the existence of a knowing subject,” as Meillassoux has so aptly put it.⁸ By this, I intend that we might stop making things work for us, so that we can admit their working upon us.
2. It means, further, dispensing with the privilege of meaning as the organizing validity criteria for the production of knowledge.
3. It requires a dispensing with the formal rhetoric of epistemology as the master signifier of critical thinking.
4. And—finally—the taking count of events of aspectual interface.

By “aspectual interface” I refer to a mode of engagement and presentation with peoples, objects, and things. When we dispense with the necessity of the “for us” we are left with aspects, partial impressions, or what Hume in his *A Treatise of Human Nature* calls “broken appearances,” by which he means those discontinuous luminosities that wander about like dust particulate bumping in, against, and between one another.⁹ An aspect is a durational impression that advances contours of proximity which potentiate processes of intonation among advening appearances. Aspectuality is juxtapositive; it is an occurrence wherein impossible entities bestow mutual inflection the one upon the other. In short, an aspectual interface is something we grasp, not something we know.¹⁰ And to be disposed to the grasp of things, to their allure, or to their punctum (Barthes), requires the kind of “concernful absorption” (Heidegger) with the world that dispenses with the linear time of conceptual coherence, that dispenses with what I call (echoing A.N. Whitehead) *the fallacy of misplaced consistency*—that is, the fallacy that says that in order for things to count as mattering to attention, an equivalence must be established between object and meaning.

An aspectual approach looks to objects as things that project aspects, rather than contain meanings; thus, the labour of aesthesis in an aspectual approach to the advening of appearances does the work of bearing juxtapositive impressions in such a way as to admit the inflection of a thing's luminous presentness. Following Barthes's treatment of the *punctum* in his book on photography, I might say that an aspectual approach speculates on the serial, punctual, and uncoordinated nature of impressions; an impression is, in this sense, dis-organized. There is no overarching logic to the punctuality of an impression, or to its juxtaposition with other impressions. Thus, there is also no necessity to an impression either. This is the lesson we gather from David Hume's ontology: that there is no necessity to a relation despite our sensation of conviction regarding a relation's facticity. The notion of

pantry, in other words, follows Barthes, Hume, Whitehead, and many others, in their manner of dispensing with the fallacy of misplaced consistency.

In this way, we place meaning back in the pantry.

To do so means to place the expectations of signification at the level of all other criteria, dispensing with their necessity, and acknowledging that the content of things is an aspect of objects, one aspect amongst many. It also means putting the human in the pantry and rendering it indistinct from all other things. The *dépense* of Bataille's pantry affords this to the extent that it promises a radical exoneration from rank or from any principle of organization. In this respect, the work of the speculative realists—of Quentin Meillassoux's critique of correlationism and Graham Harman's object-oriented-ontology—that I draw from to buttress these remarks find sustenance in the speculative tradition reintroduced by Alfred North Whitehead some 100 years ago. "Philosophy," Whitehead says,

is the self-correction by consciousness of its own initial excess of subjectivity. Each actual occasion contributes to the circumstances of its origin additional formative elements deepening its own peculiar individuality. Consciousness is only the last and greatest of such elements by which the selective character of the individual obscures the external totality from which it originates and which it embodies [...] The task of philosophy is to recover the totality obscured by the selection.¹¹

I want to say that a rediscovery of speculation commends a recovery of aspects obscured by the "for us" of signification, which means a recovery and polemical dispensing of the temporality of *skhole*, of the excessive time-dispensing that comes with speculation's interface with novelty. This is the speculative moment of the wrong: it is a suspension of time that does not pursue the question of the "what for?" but encounters instead the problem of the "what now?" What happens now with the advenience of this unthought? A speculative wandering that provokes the "what now?" of encounter possesses a punctuality; it is the sensorial event of absorption with the world and with those luminous presences that haunt, occupy, impress, and inflect themselves.

I take this to be the full force of Roland Barthes's admonition that the *punctum* does not enlist an account of any specific kernel of knowledge, but the recounting of an event of sensorial interface with the allure of things; such punctual and wounding experiences—Barthes says poignantly—allow him to "remonstrate with his moods" rather than justify with his knowledge.¹² An aspectual approach to the mutual inflection of things is a way of remonstrating with one's moods, of letting what strikes one's moods do so, of admitting absorption through the dispensation from the temporal efficiency of the fallacy of misplaced consistency. This requires the foregoing of the moral-intellectualist privilege of the "for us" of epistemology—it requires, that is, a *dépense* with the production of meaning as the policy-fetish of the humanities and social sciences—in order to open up our contingent multiplicities to Hume's "broken appearances."

If there is an intellectual agenda that such a labour of aesthesis endorses—institutionally, intellectually, architecturally—it is a speculative return to the pantry of things, to the perpetually dissensuous and disjunctive unusability of the wrong. Intellectual emancipation

begins with the dispensing of *skhole's* time that admits to the wrong of speculative absorption.

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Notes

This paper was written in honour of the retirement occasion of my friend and colleague, Andrew Wernick. I am grateful to him—and to the organizers of that event (esp. David Holdsworth) held on February 4, 2011—for the opportunity to present these speculations. A shorter version of this paper was also presented at the “What’s in a Name?” Roundtable of the International Studies Association meeting in Montreal, Canada (2011). I am grateful to the organizers, participants, and audience at that roundtable for their thoughtful questions and criticisms.

¹ See Jacques Rancière, “Wrong: Politics and Police,” in *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 21–42.

² Just think here of the kinds of reimbursement forms and grant forms we are asked to fill out in the name of transparency, and how the entirety of their formal, rhetorical structure is based on justifying and legitimating one’s intellectual labour. Now, I’m not saying that there isn’t a place for this, and that accountability is always unwarranted. I am asking how and why this paradigm should dictate an intellectual agenda.

³ Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 169.

⁴ See *The Political Life of Sensation*, “From Nomos to Nomad: Kant, Deleuze, and Rancière on Sensation” (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

⁵ Graham Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Peru, IL: Open Court Books, 2005), 75–76.

⁶ Graham Harman, *Towards a Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Ropley, UK: Zero Books, 2010), 33.

⁷ See Steven Shaviro’s essays: “The Actual Volcano: Whitehead, Harman, and the Problem of Relations,” in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 279–290, and “The Universe of Things,” in *Theory & Event* vol. 14 no. 2.

⁸ Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008), 117.

⁹ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: A Two Volume Set*, eds. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.4.2.36.

¹⁰ This is a distinction developed by those individuals (like myself) who draw inspiration from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s discussion of aspect-dawning in the *Philosophical Investigations*. James Tully, Linda Zerilli, Aletta Norval, and Richard Flathman are all thinkers inspired and indebted to aspect-dawning as a mode of political theory.

¹¹ A.N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 15.

¹² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981), 18.