

“Im-material Networks: Reading through the Assemblage in Literary and Cultural Studies”

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Robert Scholes, *Protocols of Reading* (Yale University Press, 1989)

‘Reading is transformational ... But this transformation cannot be executed however one wishes. It requires protocols of reading. Why not say it bluntly: I have not yet found any that satisfy me.’ (Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, 1972)

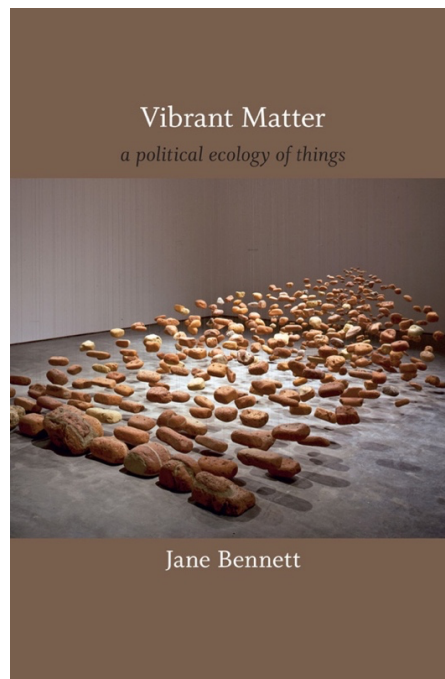
Rigour: ‘a virtue of method, of process, rather than of result, of product’ (p. 85) – it comes ‘closer than any other term used by Derrida to being a protocol of reading’ (p. 86)

E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) (“Only Connect”, *Howards End*, 1910)

I.A. Richards, *Practical Criticism* (1929)

Cleanth Brooks *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947)

Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010)



- A Vibrant and Vital Materiality

“By ‘**vitality**’ I mean the **capacity of things** — edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also **to act** as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own. My aspiration is to articulate a vibrant materiality that runs alongside and inside humans [...]” (p. viii)

“The story will highlight the extent to which **human being and thinghood overlap**, the extent to which the **us and the it slip-slide into each other**. One moral of the story is that we are also nonhuman and that things, too, are vital players in the world.” (p. 4)

- The Agency of Matter: The Actant

“The term is Bruno Latour’s: an **actant is a source of action** that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can *do* things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events. It is “any entity that modifies another entity in a trial,” something whose “competence is deduced from [its] performance” rather than posited in advance of the action. Some actants are better described as protoactants, for these performances or energies are too small or too fast to be “things.” I admire Latour’s attempt to develop a vocabulary that addresses multiple modes and degrees of effectivity, to begin to describe **a more distributive agency**. Latour strategically elides what is commonly taken as distinctive or even unique about humans, and so will I. At least for a while and up to a point. I lavish attention on specific “things,” noting the distinctive capacities or **efficacious powers of particular material configurations**. To attempt, as I do, to present human and nonhuman actants on a less vertical plane than is common is to bracket the question of the human and to elide the rich and diverse literature on subjectivity and its genesis, its conditions of possibility, and its boundaries.” (pp. viii-ix)

“*Actant* [...] is Bruno Latour’s term for **a source of action**; an actant can be human or not, or, most likely, a combination of both. Latour defines it as “something that acts or to which activity is granted by others. It implies no special motivation of human individual actors, nor of humans in general.” An actant is neither an object nor a subject but an “intervener,” akin to the Deleuzean “quasi-causal operator.” An operator is that which, by virtue of its particular location in an assemblage and the fortuity of being in the right place at the right time, makes the difference, **makes things happen**, becomes **the decisive force catalyzing an event**.” (p. 9)

(See B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, OUP 2005)

(See Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 2015 : ‘no longer to diminish or subtract from the reality of the texts we study but to amplify their reality, as energetic coactors and vital partners’, p. 185).

- Thing Power

“I will highlight **the active role of nonhuman materials** in public life. In short, I will try to give voice to a thing-power. As W. J. T. Mitchell notes, “**objects** are the way things appear to a subject—that is, with a name, an identity, a gestalt or stereotypical template. . . . **Things**, on the other hand, . . . [signal] the moment when the object becomes the Other, when the sardine can looks back, when the mute idol speaks, when the subject experiences the object as uncanny” (pp. 1-2)

- The Locus of Analysis

“Vital materialists will thus try to linger in those **moments** during which they find themselves fascinated by objects, taking them as clues to the material vitality that they share with them. This sense of a **strange and incomplete commonality** with the out-side may induce vital materialists to treat nonhumans — animals, plants, earth, even artifacts and commodities—more carefully, more strategically, more ecologically.” (pp. 17-18)

- The World as Network: The Assemblage

“Assemblages are ad hoc **groupings of diverse elements**, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within. They have **uneven** topographies, because some of the points at which the various affects and bodies cross paths are more heavily trafficked than others, and so power is not distributed equally across its surface. Assemblages are **not governed by any central head**: no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group. The effects generated by an assemblage are, rather, emergent properties, emergent in that **their ability to make something happen** (a newly inflected materialism, a blackout, a hurricane, a war on terror) is distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone. Each member and proto-member of the assemblage has a certain vital force, but there is also an effectivity proper to the grouping as such: **an agency of the assemblage**. And precisely because each member-actant maintains an energetic pulse slightly “off” from that of the assemblage, an assemblage is never a stolid block but an open-ended collective, a “non-totalizable sum.” An assemblage thus not only has a distinctive history of formation but a finite life span.” (pp. 23-24)

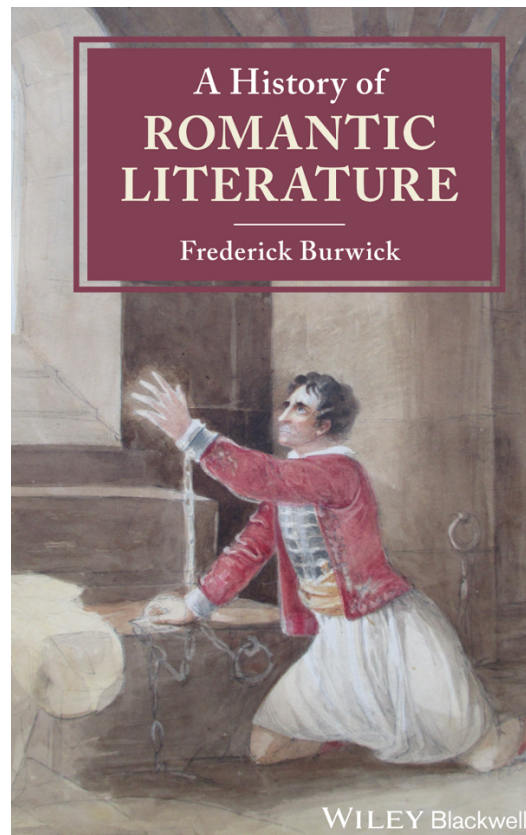
“[...] bodies enhance their **power in or as a heterogeneous assemblage**. What this suggests for the concept of **agency** is that the efficacy or effectivity to which that term

has traditionally referred becomes distributed **across an ontologically heterogeneous field, rather than being a capacity localized in a human body or in a collective produced (only) by human efforts.**" (p. 23)

In lieu of an environment that surrounds human culture [...] **picture an ontological field without any unequivocal demarcations** between human, animal, vegetable, or mineral. *All* forces and flows (materialities) are or can become lively, affective, and signaling. And so an affective, speaking human body is not *radically* different from the affective, signaling nonhumans with which it coexists, hosts, enjoys, serves, consumes, produces, and competes. (pp. 116-17)

Macro-Analytical Application

Frederick Burwick, *A History of Romantic Literature* (Wiley Blackwell, 2019)



The authors crafted a poetry and prose of emotional extremes, and a writing style prioritizing spontaneity, improvisation, and originality. Not entirely without paradox, they also found their originality in folk traditions and the antiquarian revival of literary forms and themes of the medieval past. In examining Romanticism as historical movement, I have adhered to recent theories of assemblage; that is, I have addressed the social networking among authors, the informal dinners and teas, the clubs and salons, and the more formal institutions that emerged to establish and manage relations between readers and writers. Those who shared ideas convened at universities, religious meetings, workers' societies (unions were illegal), protest groups, and publishing houses.¹

Rather than deal with the authors as if they wrote alone and isolated from society, I endeavour to identify and describe their interactions with their communities and with one another, as well as their response to major events of the day. Letters, diaries, and memoirs are useful sources in reassembling the exchange of ideas. Further, I find it frequently relevant to integrate the authors' own

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ments and further changes. In reflecting on the considerable range of this *History*, I want to reassure the reader that s/he is not left stranded as was the knight in Keats's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'. Personally, I find inspiration in the careers of Friend and Dyer, who were as versatile as Coleridge in adapting to the expectations of altered social and political conditions. The interaction among writers whom I have discussed in terms of **assemblage** and networking found its

place in theatres, in church parishes, in lecture halls, in salons, teas, and social gatherings. The intellectual fervour did not die with the age. The assemblage has passed into reception, and its dynamic animation can be sought on bookshelves. As Shelley declared in his 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', the poet can always 'call the phantoms of a thousand hours', who reside in the poems they have left behind. Times change but the literature persists.

Micro-Analytical Application

Simon Armitage “Horses M62” (*The Guardian* 3 September 2006)

Sprung from a field,
a team
of a dozen or so

is suddenly here and amongst,
silhouettes
in the butterscotch dusk.

One ghosts
between vans,
traverses three lanes,

its chess-piece head
fording the river of fumes;
one jumps the barricades

between carriageways;
a third slows
to a halt

then bends, nosing
the road, tonguing the surface
for salt.

Standstill.
Motor oil pulses.
Black blood.

Some trucker
swings down from his cab
to muster and drove; but

unbiddable, crossbred nags
they scatter
through ginnels

of coachwork and chrome,
and are distant, gone,
then a dunch

and here alongside
is a horse,
the writhing mat of its hide

pressed on the glass -
a tank of worms -
a flank

of actual horse ...
It bolts,
all arse and tail

through a valley
of fleet saloons.
Regrouped they clatter away,

then spooked by a horn
double back,
a riderless charge,

a flack of horsehoe and hoof
into the idling cars,
now eyeball, nostril, tooth

under the sodium glow,
biblical, eastbound,
against the flow.

Protocol/s for reading:

immaterial – material

textual/linguistic – the non-verbal

Non hierarchically

Connectively – through gaps and fissures

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