

## THE OBJECT-ORIENTED ASPECT OF IRVING'S *A TOUR ON THE PRAIRIES*

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### **Abstract**

This brief paper has basically two aims. First, it intends to introduce object-oriented ontology (OOO), a branch of contemporary thought which regards everything as an individual “object” of equal standing, as a potentially effective theoretical framework to examine a literary text, especially in order to explore the complexity of interactions between/among both human and nonhuman objects on a horizontal plane. Second, it analyzes how the narrator of *A Tour on the Prairies*, one of the long-neglected texts of Washington Irving, gradually begins to question the naive human/object binary and broadens his horizons through an encounter with another object. Specifically, I examined a series of the contacts which the narrator makes with buffaloes, and then demonstrated how he, though taking a naive, human-centered schema in the beginning, gradually attains the liberal perspective through the recognition that the object before him is a being that is ontologically equal with him. I concluded the argument by attesting that the text, albeit in a gentle manner, invited us to see the world and existences in it with a more liberal—i.e. object-oriented—perspective.

**Keywords:** Washington Irving, *A Tour on the Prairies*, Object-Oriented Ontology.

### **1. Introduction**

As far as one can infer from various accounts of existing publications which deal more or less with Washington Irving, it would not be wide of the mark for her or him to assume that the author has now secured a highly recognized status in the pantheon of the literature of the United States; several of the critics even went to the extent of designating him as the “father of American literature” (Payne, 1919, p. 90; Sullivan, 2012, p. 218). In actuality, not a few works of Irving still attract a considerable amount of interest from both the general public and the practitioners of literary studies (Pollard, 2007).

Nonetheless, it is hard to dispute that the works which Irving produced in the later phases of his career have not earned due regard up to now (Wyman, 2010). This may be on account of the fact that the large part of these pieces comprises of less romantic and seemingly nonfictional travel writings and biographies, rather than imaginary stories which, albeit understandably, are more popular subjects for literary criticism by ordinary. But indeed, when one inspects them a bit more closely, she or he will notice that they are similarly exquisite narrative texts which merit more serious analysis in the light of, say, their world-making capacity, meta-cultural capability, and philosophical penetration.

*A Tour on the Prairies* is exactly one of those hitherto underestimated but writerly texts. Being the first of the author’s three writings which portray diverse scenes in the extensive

western districts of the still young United States, this text purports to be a record of the narrator's journey with a band of uncouth frontiersmen cruising on horseback. The route of their cross-country trek lies through the territory which he dubs the Far West and we now know as Oklahoma. There the narrator encounters a vast variety of entities, most of which are alien to him. Among them are Native American peoples, undomesticated wildlife, tiny insects, plants and forests, and inanimate matters like turbulent rivers and enormous boulders. When allowing for this idiosyncratic trait of the text, it is somewhat odd that surprisingly little scholarship has been dedicated to it from a standpoint informed by the nonhuman turn, a broad term which Richard Grusin (2015), who is the chief editor of the book entitled *The Nonhuman Turn*, defines as a "macroscopic concept...meant to account for...a number of different theoretical or critical 'turns'...that argue (in one way or another) against human exceptionalism" (p. ix-x).

With this peculiarity in mind, the author of this paper aims to demonstrate that the text presents a uniquely anti-anthropocentric, or rather what could be described as an object-oriented perspective. To be specific, the argument of this essay would go as follows; first, it will sketch how *A Tour* has been read and interpreted by preceding scholars heretofore, and then clarify that the exploration of the text from an anti-anthropocentric viewpoint has not been conducted sufficiently yet. Second, it will brief the core tenets of object-oriented ontology, and put forth it as the foundational framework to detect the distinctively anti-anthropocentric feature of the text. Third, with the outlook inspired by OOO, I will inspect those descriptions in which the narrator has contacts with buffaloes, i.e. another kind of objects, and therewith reveal that the text promotes an object-oriented position. Concretely speaking, the narrator, albeit having reductively counted the animal as a mere target of hunting for a while, drastically changes his worldview after a significant moment. He, in the face of a buffalo murdered by him, reconsiders and alters his attitude with which to interact with different beings thenceforth. In the concluding section, this paper will declare that, in this way, Irving, though gently, urges us to rethink the position of humanity among many other existences which are neither inferior nor superior to us ontologically.

## 2. Literature Review

Because *A Tour* is the sole text which will be analyzed in this project, this review will chiefly concentrate upon texts which similarly discuss *A Tour* as their central and primary subject. In so far as I was able to discover in either online databases (e.g. WorldCat, ProQuest, EBSCO, etc.) or offline archives, there have thus far been eight papers which deliberate upon *A Tour* as their foremost subject.

The first one is the master's thesis written by Henry Charles Semmler in 1965; exploring idiosyncratic traits of the chief characters, he asserted that "Irving favored native Americans over his fellow whites" (p. 48). Too reasonable as the conclusion seems, we should appreciate its role as the pioneer of the study of *A Tour*.

Following Semmler, Dahlia Terrell produced two works on this piece, both of which were intended to locate the reliable text of *A Tour*. Pointing out that "neither the first British edition...nor the first American...were accurate printings", and that the American "text which should be the proper one is full of misprints" (Terrell, 1966, 1970), she sorted out irregularities between different editions, located errors, and effectively identified its proper text. Her efforts must be remembered in that they provided the text of *A Tour* upon which following academics could safely rely.

After the achievements of Terrell, the critical study of *A Tour* began in earnest. Dula (1973) assessed the initial reception of the text, Kime (1973) analyzed the text as a “complete” narrative, i.e., “a formal or thematic whole” and concluded that Irving discovered “the West as reality”. The studies of Clark (1978) and Reynolds (2004) tried to augment the assessment of the West given by Kime, with each of them averring that the West played an important part in shaping the narrative.

The study which is most relevant to mine is that of Linda Steele. Proclaiming that “the frontier is not a place, but the prairie is” (Steele, 2004, p. 101), she demonstrated how diverse environmental features of the place made an impact on him, and asserted that the text presented the foresight and a premonition of the imminent peril which civilized humans could pose to the natural environment.

The contribution which my essay will make to the accumulation of those insights afforded by previous critics consists in revealing the anti-anthropocentric, object-oriented aspect of the text.

### 3. Research Method—Theoretical Foundation

This part sketches the framework based on which I will display a novel reading of the text: object-oriented ontology (OOO).

OOO has been developed by such thinkers as Ian Bogost and Graham Harman. Simply put, it strives to even out relations between/among ‘objects’, which cover whatever can be conceived as ‘real’—men, natural and cultural phenomena, inanimate matters, the orbs, and subatomic particles which, in their complications, compose the world (Harman, 2005; Bogost, 2012).

There may seem little difference between OOO and other critical frameworks trying to decenter the human such as ecocriticism. But its most salient trait is that it defines objects as remaining “forever beyond our grasp, but not because of a specifically human failure to reach them. Instead, relations in general fail to grasp their relata” (Harman, 2011, p. 171; italics original). Namely, it utterly refuses to privilege one object, and always underlines its individuality. With this outlook, one can avoid a pitfall into which other approaches may fall: excessively favoring the non-human and devaluing the human.

This brief essay is deeply indebted to OOO in that it inspired me to claim that *A Tour* puts forward a peculiar perspective which could be well explicated by it and enables me to explore contacts between objects in the text with as neutral attitude as possible.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 From an Observer to a Hunter

Now I am going to investigate the tack with which the text invites its readers to contemplate both themselves and their surroundings from a fresh, object-oriented outlook. Below a chain of descriptions in which the narrator talks about buffalos is to be examined. Inasmuch as the accounts of the species are distributed right through the text, the discussion to follow will range over various chapters.

Generally speaking, readers would at first find that the narrator accepts the human subject/nonhuman object polarity without noticing its sheer hubris or the lack of reasonable grounds. But, in a chapter titled “The Grand Prairie—A Buffalo Hunt”, after killing one buffalo with his own hand, he is abruptly confronted with the fact that the animal is never a mere thing to be exploited by men. Absolved from the transient frenzy of hunting in which he has reduced the buffalo to a quarry for him, the narrator comes to the perception that

the beast is another unit which ontologically stands on the level plane with humans. The run of those repentant reflections related by the narrator and alterations in his attitude toward other existences after the occasion is, as will be shown, piercing testimonies to the irrevocable transformation of his worldview.

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In the beginning, it should be of some note that the narrator makes a mention of buffaloes in the very initial paragraph of the first chapter, which implies that the animal is going to be an important strand of the text; he narrates, "Over these fertile and verdant wastes still roam the elk, the buffalo, and the wild horse, in all their native freedom" (Irving, 1835/2013, p. 2).

Admittedly, one might reckon that the narrator here calls forth a commendation for the natural state in which untamed animals can ramble across the vast tracts of the land and conduct themselves with no hindrance which shackles their freedom; yet, she or he would discover that such a construal is not fitting shortly after reading succeeding several sentences, with the narrator stating:

These, in fact, are the hunting grounds of the various tribes of the Far West.... The regions I have mentioned form a debatable ground of these warring and vindictive tribes.... Their hunters and "Braves" repair thither in numerous bodies during the season of game, throw up their transient hunting camps..., commit sad havoc among the innumerable herds that graze the prairies, and having loaded themselves with venison and buffalo meat, warily retire from the dangerous neighborhood. (Irving, 1835/2013:3).

Although it would be untenable to assert solely from these quotations that the narrator has an intention to run down a buffalo for himself, it ought to be safe to conjecture that, even at this moment, the animal is regarded as one sort of the preys which are hunted down by human beings, either for their meat or perhaps other purposes like displaying one's prowess in venery.

In fact, in a succession of reports in the subsequent chapters, readers would witness the narrator himself beginning to reckon the animal as a mere objective of hunting. Despite that, it should equally be noted that the narrator does not partake in slaughter during the early stages of the journey, remaining an 'observer' instead. The sequence which he narrates first is about an unsuccessful venture by a band of his fellow travelers; one of whom, a young nobleman of impetuous nature, is eager to accomplish a feat of hunting a buffalo of significant size. It begins with the passage which states:

We found the Count and his companion, the Virtuoso, ready for the march. As they intended to overtake the Osages, and pass some time in hunting the buffalo and the wild horse, they had provided themselves accordingly.... (Irving, 1835/2013:11).

The narrator continues to tell of the group of men who are intent to search for the famous beast of the prairies and hunt it down. In good time, the rash young count, his mentor called virtuoso, and their Indian protégé set out for the target, plunging into the unmapped wastes and leaving the main body of rangers which include the narrator. He relates the occasion thusly, "Nothing, however, could restrain the romantic ardor of the Count for a campaign of buffalo hunting with the Osages, and he had a game spirit that seemed always stimulated by the idea of danger" (Irving, 1835/2013:19-20).

Whereas their attempt ends in a downright miscarriage, the consistent manner with which the narrator delivers the reports of the sequence is more noticeable; although he does not take part in the small squad led by the count to hunt the animal, it is obvious that he, possibly affected by the enthusiastic air, also thinks of the species as, say, the hunted, while disregarding, or rather overlooking a large number of other qualities which a more careful person would identify.

One should not miss the meaningful fact that the stance of the narrator toward the animal alters in the scenes which follow this brief episode. As seen above, he does not get involved in the expedition and functions as an outside observer of the event; yet, surely the occasion exercises certain influence on him. Afterward, he too becomes eager to pursue the animal.

Describing a successful hunt of a buffalo as “achieving great exploits” (Irving, 1835/2013:21), and calling the destination of his party “buffalo range” (p. 24), he keeps referring to the bovid animal almost in every ensuing chapter. This would imply a decent increase in his curiosity about the animal, and it cannot be ignored that the traces, footprints, and tracks of the animal—promises of the forthcoming feat—make a variety of mighty impacts upon the men; a trace “made every eye sparkle with animation” (Irving, 1835/2013:35), the bones and horns of a buffalo brings “a reviving effect on the spirits” of the company (p. 70), “the expectation of falling in with buffalo in the course of the day roused every one’s spirit (p. 77), and the eventual encounter with a herd of buffaloes makes the excitement of them rise “almost to fever height” (p. 79).

The narrator is alike influenced by this feverish atmosphere and not able to maintain a moderate detachment which has thitherto prevented him from directly engaging in a killing including buffalo hunts. Several days after the first successful hunt of a few buffaloes, the party comes across another drove of them. The narrator represents the scene as follows:

After riding a few miles, Beatte...called out and made signals.... My horse looked toward the place, snorted and pricked up his ears, when presently a couple of large buffalo bulls, who had been alarmed by Beatte, came crashing through the brake, and making directly toward us. At sight of us they wheeled round, and scuttled along a narrow defile of the hill. In an instant half a score of rifles cracked off; there was a universal whoop and halloo, and away went half the troop, helter-skelter in pursuit, and *myself among the number*. (Irving, 1835/2013:102; italics mine).

This foray results in a fiasco; but that is not significant. Evidently he joins those men who, without paying heed to the dignity or the right to live, hectically hurtle to slay the different life forms simply in order to either taste a transient pleasure or gratify their vainglorious pride. That he is not in temporary elation but wholly wants to make the great coup—i.e. the killing of life—could be discerned from the encounter with a different fold:

There were four buffaloes in a neighboring meadow....In a little while we came in sight of the buffaloes, looking like brown hillocks among the long green herbage. Beatte endeavored to get ahead of them and turn them towards us, that the inexperienced hunters might have a chance. They ran round the base of a rocky hill, that hid us from the sight.... My horse, who, under his former rider, had hunted the buffalo, seemed *as much excited as myself*, and endeavored to force his way through the bushes. (Irving, 1835/2013:103; italics mine).

Here he professes the excitement that he feels in chasing buffaloes in an unveiled fashion. It is beyond question that the narrator arrantly reduces the animal to one aspect, namely the object to be hunted down by men. Other subtle properties which a buffalo would possess—whether it be a cordial interaction between a mother buffalo and her calf or a similar feature between them and mankind—are on no account taken into his consideration. No other word than arrogance could express this mindset.

Of course, it may not be fair to blame the narrator only, for such a hubristic view is never exclusive to him, but rather an endemic symptom among the men of the entire band, as he says, “the buffalo meat brought home in evidence, spread exultation through the camp, and *every one* looked forward with joy to a buffalo hunt on the prairies” (Irving, 1835/2013:122; italics mine).

Nevertheless, the narrator is not inattentive enough to pass over the deleterious respect of this frame of thought forever. As I alluded to in the introductory section, the twenty-ninth chapter entitled “The Grand Prairie—A Buffalo Hunt” presents the conversion on the part of the narrator, though at the irredeemable cost of the life of a buffalo.

#### **4.2 The Moment of Revelation: Toward an Object-Oriented Perspective**

On that day (which is October 29th in the text), he and the rangers finally reach the terrain which is called the “grand prairie”, where there are innumerable herds of wild horses and buffaloes. Feeling probably a sense of inferiority, coming from being one of the few who has not succeeded in hunting even an indifferent prey, much less a great one (e.g. an elk, a steed, and, of course, a buffalo), he accedes to the suggestion of his courier of the frontier, recounting. “Beatte proposed to my messmates and myself that we should put ourselves under his guidance, promising to take us where we should have plenty of sport,” (Irving, 1835/2013:124). Though the guide goes his separate way in order to catch a wild horse, the narrator and two of his fellow mates successfully locate a band of buffaloes shortly afterward.

Partly due to his insufficient preparation, and mainly because of bad luck, this first attempt is foiled. But what is significant is that the narrator, now himself engaging in hunting, completely reduces the different life to no more than an object, in fact calling buffaloes “black objects” (Irving, 1835/2013:124). In addition, how he is preoccupied with the avidity for acquiring the prize could be recognized by his confession that he has no idea of the whereabouts of other members, with him observing:

The ardor of the chase had betrayed me into a long, heedless gallop. I now found myself in the midst of a lonely waste, in which the prospect was bounded by undulating swells of land, naked and uniform, where...an inexperienced man may become bewildered, and lose his way as readily as in the wastes of the ocean. The day, too, was overcast, so that I could not guide myself by the sun; my only mode was to retrace the track my horse had made in coming, though this I would often lose sight of.... (Irving, 1835/2013:127-128).

In a following paragraph, he eloquently relates the “loneliness” and the “dreariness” which one senses “in the solitude of the prairies” (Irving, 1835/2013:128); readers would naturally presume that if one who is endowed with just mediocre discretion finds himself in a situation similar to this, it is very likely for her or him to soon turn back. Still, the excitement is so uncheckable that he determines “not to seek the camp” until he makes “one more effort” (Irving, 1835/2013:128). After a while, he spots a sizeable horde of the animals

quietly grazing in the distance, and embarks upon another hunt, notwithstanding that “the pursuit might take us to such a distance as to render it impossible to find our way back before nightfall” (Irving, 1835/2013:129).

Those depictions which inform us about the development of the venery are undeniably graphic and accurate enough to impart the real incident, and Bernhardt’s (2013) assessment that this scene “marks the acme of Irving’s achievement not only as a sketcher, but also as a realistic writer” (23) sounds reasonable. Yet, it is more critically important that, if several elements which are unique to the species are dropped, the descriptions could be applied to any rendering of a hunting scene. Namely, what the narrator sees in the other entity before him is only its aspect as a quarry; in other words, the reduction of the animal to an object to be run down manifests itself in the most striking manner than ever. The decisive shift occurs when he, albeit in “the delirium of the chase”, dispatches the lethal shot at the target; he represents the moment thusly:

A fortunate shot brought it down on the spot. The ball had struck a vital part; it could not move from the place where it fell, but lay there struggling in mortal agony, while the rest of the herd kept on their headlong career across the prairie. (Irving 130).

The animal which has theretofore presented a lively appearance as the chased object is now ‘broken’ and on the verge of its death. In order to comprehend what is happening in his mind at this point, it would be helpful to consult Graham Harman’s interpretation of Heidegger’s tool analysis. Harman claims:

The hammer’s true independence comes not from the fact that it is sometimes seen as an isolated thing, but from the fact that it can *break*. And insofar as the hammer can break, this makes it a surplus not contained in the holism of systematic functions anymore than the kingdom of visible form. (Harman, 2014:102; italics original).

As abstract as the statement looks at a glance, the pith of the argument is not that esoteric. When a subject makes an instrumental use of an object, the subject cannot be conscious of its presence apart from the relationship which the subject has with the object. But the object may break at any moment in by no means predictable ways, which compels the subject to be aware that the entirety of it can neither be understood by its visible form nor exhausted by a bundle of explanations of the object. When one is cognizant of the fact, she or he should inevitably become humble and reflect over the other existence in front.

The narrator seems to have undergone an experience of this type just after the brutal assault on the buffalo, while his excitement dies down:

Dismounting, I now fettered my horse to prevent his straying, and advanced to contemplate my victim. I am nothing of a sportsman; I had been prompted to this unwonted exploit by the magnitude of the game, and the excitement of an adventurous chase. Now that the excitement was over, I could not but look with commiseration upon the poor animal that lay struggling and bleeding at my feet. (Irving, 1835/2013:130).

Although he has repeatedly made references to buffaloes till this juncture and just been in a close and direct contact with one of them, this is the first time for him to “contemplate” the animal, and what he finds is a dying entity which has led its own life in the same world in which human beings live. Faced with genuine agony caused by himself, the narrator must be

forced to look squarely at the fact that the buffalo, which has been reduced to an object but must have a countless number of dormant qualities, is now deprived of its future.

He shortly resolves to take the responsibility of his atrocious deed—by putting an end to its life. He relates that experience in the following words: “To inflict a wound thus in cold blood, I found a totally *different thing* from firing in the heat of the chase” (Irving, 1835/2013:130; italics mine). This “different thing” discovered by him produces a transforming effect upon his schema which is never evanescent. Standing still on the spot, he is not able to contain a train of rumination, saying, “I stood meditating and moralizing over the wreck I had so wantonly produced, with my horse grazing near me” (Irving, 1835/2013:131). In contrast, one of his companions, in no way disturbed by the sight, curves out “the tongue of the buffalo” and hands it over to him to “bear back to the camp as a trophy” (Irving, 1835/2013:131).

This chapter itself abruptly ends with these words, and the narrator never directly touches upon either the experience or the effect which renders his worldview more liberal until the close of the narrative. For all that, even the most careless of the readers could observe the ramifications in a variety of accounts in the subsequent chapters, especially in his conduct and attitude toward other life forms.

To begin with, he, equipped with an evidence to brag of his prowess in hunting, voices not a word about his accomplishment after rejoining the main body of the travelers, in spite of the fact that those who do the same are eligible to be “lauded on all sides for his exploits” (Irving, 1835/2013:133). In lieu thereof, he articulates his concern for his lost comrade over and over, whilst his peers are on the spree with the meat of buffaloes. Secondly, thenceforth he stops to strain his horse excessively, whereas he has broken one steed thoughtlessly, being “not aware of the imprudence of indulging him” in whatever the horse likes, and driven another in the array of attempts to hunt a buffalo to exhaustion. Thirdly, and most importantly, readers could perceive from his reports of a community of prairie dogs that he now regards other beings from a ‘horizontal’ perspective. He considers the animal to be having “something of the politic and social habits of a rational being” and “systems of civil government and domestic economy” (Irving, 1835/2013:139). What should be noted is that the descriptions are not mere comic anthropomorphism; instead, the narrator tries to recognize as many aspects of them as possible, though he most likely knows that it is not possible to understand the whole of the other existence.

All of these elements insinuate a pivotal change of his outlook for other beings, and it would be remiss of us not to hear a gentle call from the text; it encourages us to be cognizant of our naïve attitude which is subjective, reductive, and anthropocentric, and to review the world and the fellow existences in them from a more open-minded, object-oriented perspective.

## 5. Conclusion

By focusing on the series of those contacts which the narrator in *A Tour* has with buffaloes and analyzing their repercussions, I demonstrated that the text has a facet which challenges our anthropocentric schema. Of course, as is often said, this trait is only one of many qualities of the text and does not necessarily counter other interpretations.

Yet, what I want to emphasize is that Irving’s progressive worldview was acutely and prudently conscious of both the limitation and foibles of humanity. This insight could be found not only in *A Tour*, but also in *The Sketch Book*, *Tales of the Alhambra*, and an assortment of biographical pieces which he wrote in the later phases, though a



comprehensive discussion of them requires another paper. When we consider that it is increasingly getting important to contemplate our relationships with animals, plants and even inanimate matters in this age of environmental crises, it would not be wise of us to be heedless of such a percipient whisper of his texts. They, albeit in a subtle and unassuming fashion as *A Tour* adopts, urge us to rethink the position of mankind amongst countless fellow objects in the universe, and embrace a horizontal, object-oriented perspective.

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