

JOSEF HRDLIČKA – MARIANA MACHOVÁ (eds.): Things in Poems. From the Shield of Achilles to Hyperobjects

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The present volume is a revised edition and translation of a book which was edited by Josef Hrdlička, Martin Pšenička and Alena Snelling and published under the same title in Czech (*Věci v básních. Od Achilleova štítu po hyperobjekty*) by Charles University in 2020. The original publication contained 20 essays and a Czech translation of Bill Brown's influential article "Thing Theory" (2001). The English edition contains fifteen of the essays, and Brown's article is not reprinted in it. The Czech edition of the book was already the result of the cooperation of an international team of scholars. Therefore, some contributions appear in the original version only in the present volume.

The volume brings together analyses of a wide range of poems from different parts of the world and different epochs. The trajectory envisioned by the editors starts with the Greek epic and ends with contemporary poetry. The contribution by Karel Thein discusses Homer's description of the shield of Achilles, which is considered to be the first known example of ekphrasis in ancient Greek poetry. Michael Squire's analysis deciphers several of the early 4th-century Latin poet Publius Optatianus Porfyrus's experiments with the poetic-pictorial form. Zornica Kirková and Olga Lomová's essay on early "medieval" Chinese poetry examines rhapsodies on rare objects (such as bowls) brought from distant places to the court of Cao Cao (155–220), written by poets such as Cao Pi and Xu Gan, among others. In her chapter on the poetics of things in the work of the didactic German Enlightenment writer Barthold Heinrich Brockes, Alice Stašková analyzes the common features that his poems share with the modern

concept of poetry of things, concluding that the poems disregard their foundation in favor of theonomy.

The majority of the contributions focus on 20th-century poetry. Michel Collof's thesis is that Francis Ponge's lyricism can be called objective because it concentrates on objects and renounces subjectivity, although it does not completely rule out subjective expression. Anne Hultsch reads the manifestos of the Russian Acmeist Osip Mandelstam in which he calls for a return to the specific and earthly (i.e. to physical objects) which leads her to the conclusion that directing one's attention to things does not automatically involve impersonality. Jakub Hankiewicz asks what poets can say about a thing and its nature, offers readings of the Polish authors Miron Białoszewski and Zbigniew Herbert, and argues that, in contrast to the approach to things in philosophy, poetic language allows for eluding any definition of things or for the simultaneous expression of opposites. Josef Vojvodík takes a look at Roman architecture in the Czech poet Milada Součková's "Il Gesù" and describes the world of things in her poems as a world of their stories and relationships with people. Pavel Novotný argues that Hans Magnus Enzensberger and H. C. Artmann draw on the tradition of *Dinggedicht* because they play on their processual character by spinning their own variations on themselves. Julie Koblížková Wittlichová explores visual poems by Ilse Garnier, Sallette Tavares, Ján Mančuška, Jiří Kolář and Hansjörg Mayer, which are not homogeneous in terms of their media. Both their textual and visual components present the depicted thing from a different perspective, so it

cannot be perceived by any single means of expression.

Josef Hrdlička reflects on poems by the Czech poet Richard Weiner, the German poet Günter Eich, the French poet Saint-John Perse and the American poet Elizabeth Bishop, and argues that the relationship to things depends on one's horizon. In Weiner's poem the horizon cuts one off from the rest of the world, in Eich's poem, probably inspired by Weiner, the horizon imposed by the isolation in a POW camp leads to a personifying relationship with things, and in Perse's and Bishop's poems, the horizon of recent change subverts the relationship with things. Jaromír Typlt also directs attention at the relationship to things. He speaks about the "brazenness of things" in Czech surrealism of the 1960s (Stanislav Dvorský, Milan Nápravník) and claims that things are especially challenging to humans when they are showing their breakdown and undesirability. Dalia Satkauskytė surveys the history of the treatment of the thing in modern Lithuanian poetry and concludes that poetry which comes closest to materiality is concerned with the relation between the things and the subject. Kirill Korchagin returns to the problem of ekphrasis in his analysis of the works of two latter 20th-century poets, Arkadii Dragomoshchenko and Andrei Monastyrski, finding the influence of Buddhism – more specifically, of the idea of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) – in their poetry. Using the language of Christian theology, Korchagin identifies two opposing strategies of handling ekphrasis in their poems, calling Dragomoshchenko's strategy cataphatic and Monastyrski's apophatic. The fascinating journey through the various ways in which things/objects can be treated in poetry is concluded with the essay by Justin Quinn who focuses on hyperobjects (i.e. objects that cannot be perceived in their entirety due to their size) in the poetry of the Irish poet Paul Muldoon. Quinn is primarily concerned with the hyperobject of global warming, observing that the way Muldoon treats the subject indirectly makes the hyperobject phase out of perception.

"Things in poems" is indeed a suitable designation for the various modes in which things exist in poetry – from ekphrasis, to lettered art, to *Dinggedicht*, to visual poetry, etc. This volume is a collection of well-written studies that inquire into this topic, although it cannot treat it exhaustively and does not have such an ambition. However, it should be noted that despite the wide range of discussed concepts, the whole volume is theoretically well grounded. The contributors often refer to or elaborate on Kurt Oppert's essay "Das Dinggedicht" (Object poem, 1926), as well as Bill Brown's "Thing Theory" (2001) and *Other Things* (2015). For this reason, the volume manages to bring new insights into various aspects of thing theory as applied to poetry, especially regarding the relationship between things and the subject, and things and language.

Several of the contributions, such as those by Hrdlička, Koblížková Wittlichová, Korchagin and Vojvodík, take a comparative approach. In addition, the juxtaposition of the various ways in which things exist in poems as presented in the volume provides for an indirectly comparative perspective. It must also be appreciated that the volume shows openness to non-European literatures, even though most of the chapters deal with 20th- and 21st-century poetry written in European languages. There are clearly numerous other instances from around the world which could be covered under this theme, including the *citrakāvya* ("pictorial poetry" or "wonder poetry") of Sanskrit literature, i.e. verses in which the arrangement of syllables gives rise to a pattern resembling objects such as a conch, a sword or a mirror, or the Arabic descriptive poetry called *waṣf*. Such studies would allow for cross-cultural comparison and open the question of influence, as well as of the possible universality of certain literary phenomena.

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