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TOWARDS NEW
MATERIALISM: *THINGS*
IN POEMS EDITED
BY JOSEF HRDLIČKA AND
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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the most important threads of the monograph *Things in Poems* edited by Josef Hrdlička and Mariana Machová, (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2022) in the context of studies on objectivism. Attention is paid to the evolution in the meaning of the object poem (*Dinggedicht*) as well as the status of the word itself, which becomes autonomous from the concept behind its material form. The case of poetry by, among others, Francis Ponge and Miron Białoszewski was briefly discussed.

KEYWORDS: objectivism, theory of the object, object poem, contemporary poetry, world poetry

Some critics prefer to interpret objectivism directly as anti-subjectivism – with its neutrality of description, withdrawal of a strong subject, focus on details, observations of the simplest activities and events. They willingly enrich this perspective with the resignation from the poetic staffage hallowed by tradition, full of duties or conventions, and focus on a sparse, often gnomic form, stripped of all kinds of ornaments. There is no metaphysics here, only concreteness; instead of author’s comments – only the “meat of the text” (or, “the telegraph bread”, as Slovenian reists would write; Šalamun 1979: 16), text that consists, more than usual, of words, letters, dashes and dots. Formal minimalism and attention to detail open the poem to a number of possibilities, although some would see this gesture as a symptom of contesting all compulsions – including the need to use uniform categories and constant points of reference. Either way, what we get is a self-universalizing poem, deriving from a specific set of signs the “stereographic multiplicity of meanings” (Barthes 2012: 50).

Others enjoy discovering the objectivity of an object. They look at everything that is non-human and non-normative from the perspective of anthropocentrism: sometimes to give space to those blocks of matter whose voice is less audible, to support them in their emancipatory intentions, while staying aside; and sometimes to include the experience of things in the general experience of reality. In such cases, critics talk about examining the “granularity of the world” (Czemiel 2017: 45), about co-creating an ontology of things, which also have their own “ways of being” (Sudjic 2009: 30) and even certain “lifestyles” (Krajewski 2013: 10), which may sound disturbing in relation to objects; and

rightly so, because somewhere subcutaneously we sense the coming “total revolution of the object” (Breton 2012: 257) predicted by surrealists a hundred years ago, or at least the “general strike of things” (Böhme 2012: 37) discussed in the writings of materialists and neomaterialists. What seems to be at stake in this game of domination is also the confirmation of assumptions about the animated status of objects – chairs that would rather not stand, a washing machine rolling out of the bathroom, umbrellas and socks with freedom on their banners.

Finally, there are those who, with avant-garde zeal, would demand – and in fact they did demand – a move beyond the poem, into the space of free interpenetration of languages and messages, where the finished textual product is intercepted and harnessed into the system of poetic influence. However, it does not lose anything in its expressiveness, on the contrary: deprived of its original purpose, it emancipates itself as a “semiophore,” bringing together what is material and belonging to the economic order, and what is symbolic and relating to aesthetics (Pomian 2012). A poem in such an arrangement would not so much evoke an object, serve as its support or workhorse, but rather turn into the object itself, reducing its purely textual impact. The case of poems-installations made of pencils (Vlado Martek’s *postpoezija*, see Martek 1980), paper plates (Miroљub Todorović’ *gestualna and objekt poezija*, see Todorović 1980), or razor blades (Kolář’s *evidentní básně*, see Kolář 2012) would serve here as the most significant example of the reification of the text, but it is enough to stop at the poems that only express the desire to be a pencil, a box of matches or a laundry receipt (Kornhauser 1978: 19).

And yet there is something that unites all beneficiaries of objectivist diversity. It is the belief that poetry fulfills itself in creating new beings and in making these beings independent, that it should be directed outside certain entities or persons, and not inside their very human affairs; that writing from sight, hearing and smell gives more than the endless reproduction of one’s own poetics, concerns and fantasies. In other words: the less the author signs her/himself into a poem, the more lively and meaningful and diversified the poem could be. Of course, it is not the case that transformations of statuses and ranks take place in a similar way, and the negotiation of relations between what is subjective and what is objective always ends in a compromise. There is no question of stability here, even if it seemed to us that objects should be its guarantors. Objectivist poems are constantly transforming, gathering in new constellations and overturning orders.

This does not mean that no arrangements can be drawn here and no facts have access to this space. Here you go: *Things in Poems*, the monograph edited by Josef Hrdlička and Mariana Machová from the Charles University in Prague (Karolinum Press, Prague 2022), is a proposal to read world poetry – from the ancient times until today – through the prism of interest and inspiration in objectivism. The starting point would naturally be the concept of the *Dinggedicht*, the object poem, introduced by Kurt Oppert almost a hundred years ago, as Hrdlička notes in the introductory essay (Hrdlička 2022: 7); then, of course, American imagism and objectivism itself come along, as trends that have been developing since the 1910–20s in the United States and then spreading throughout Europe. Objectivists, both those who wanted to call themselves that way and those who did not want to, such as William Carlos Williams, aimed to describe reality unmediated by subjective interpretation, sought to break away from the lyricism and symbolism of poems, paid attention to the analysis of the smallest manifestations

of everyday life, including utilitarian and serial objects, and seemingly unspectacular events involving them.

French pre-objectivists such as Victor Segalen, whose thoughts on the role of objects in the poem are recalled by Hrdlička (Hrdlička 2022: 8–9), and even earlier Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud and other pre-avant-gardists, for the first time defined object so clearly as something that is an end in itself, constituting an autonomous entity, and not being only a means to an extra-textual goal. The poets like Francis Ponge or Yves Bonnefoy added to the pool of topics and techniques the description of reality in the form of quasi-encyclopaed entries reflecting the essence of objects, placing them in a different light than it is usually done. Ponge's "objective lyricism," thoroughly analyzed by Michel Collot, is contained in the formula of description of things understood as a counterpoint to the subject's willingness (or ability, in a broader sense) to express itself (Collot 2022: 121).

Ponge's poetry, especially from *Le Parti pris des choses* volume [1942], would be a turning point for two definitions of objectivity: on the one hand, it would reflect Rimbaud's need for meaning through being, and on the other hand, it would foreshadow experiments with materialism undertaken by conceptual artists, especially those associated with visual poetry: "the expressiveness of words comes not from their transparency, but their obfuscation and opacity" (Collot 2022: 116). Julie Koblížková Wittlichová complements this perspective with a detailed overview of object poems; Hansjörg Mayer's and Salette Tavares' concrete poems, Pierre Garnier's spatialist works or Jiří Kolář's evident artifacts all show how the words as such are absent: "the visual component – in the form of a specific three-dimensional object – has now fledged to full independence" (Koblížková Wittlichová 2022: 217). The issue here would be to overcome the limitations of the poem as a textual entity and direct the receiver's attention to the functioning of the poem in space and the performative aspect of poetry.

A object poem could also be represented by the combination of various, preferably incompatible elements, coagulated in the rhythm of the stream of (un)consciousness. Miroljub Todorović's collage techniques, Ladislav Novák's lists of various aspects of everyday life or OHO collective works test the limits of this convention; but also all the poets who were influenced by avant-garde thinking about the poem as an artifact that is characterized primarily by its material dimension. Jakub Hankiewicz, discussing two poems by Miron Białoszewski and Zbigniew Herbert, describes a small but important differences in the approach to understand the relationship between a word and the concept hidden behind it. Nevertheless, the strategy of both authors could be seen as similar when talking about the issue of "the object's complete openness" (Hankiewicz 2022: 159). The object poem should be interpreted as a harbinger of another reality rather than a guarantor of the status quo.

Moreover, objectivists, as is increasingly discussed in the context of contemporary philosophy and anthropology, played an important role in the development of new theories focused on the status of the object (for instance, the ideas of New Materialism); Justin Quinn's attempt to analyze Paul Muldoon's texts as hyperobjects resonates with Michael Squire's essay, which examines Optatian's visual works from the fourth century AD as an anticipation of a revolutionary thinking about the relationships between the fields of art, but also in relation to the place of the reader/viewer. Squire even insists that we look for the sources of interest in objects as separate entities in antiquity: "as thing

poems, *avant la lettre*, as it were, Optatian's fourth-century works raise questions about the longer archaeology of a supposed twentieth-century literary and cultural phenomenon" (Squire 2022: 37). Of course, such a claim is not isolated, as many researchers consider the origins of reistic content in contemporary poetry should be sought in experiments with ancient and medieval *carmina figurata*. The question, however, is to what extent this formal perspective actually concerned the intentionality behind the creative activity and the conceptual aspect itself.

Recent studies on world poetry of the 20th and 21st centuries – with an increasing number of scientific monographs and volumes of sketches, conferences and seminars – indicate that objectivist tendencies not only can be noticed in it as often as in the literature of other countries, but also that they are emerging from different perspectives; they provide the opportunity to tell the story of individual poetics in an innovative way, even if slightly different from the American concepts of complete neutrality of view or the concrete aspirations of the neo-avant-garde. Regardless of whether the "objectivist view" covers the issue of non-literary, experimental materialism (texts, products and fetish artifacts), the mythic, magical or simply extra-rational sphere of the unconscious (as in the case of the Surrealists; in *Things in Poems*, Jaromír Typlt devotes an interesting chapter to the Czech post-war Surrealists like Stanislav Dvorský and Petr Král), the memory and archaeological aspect (as in the case of Herbert), the apology of everyday life (Białoszewski), a vivisection of the essence of being (Ponge), or a critique of socio-political reality (Dalia Satkauskytė refers to this in her chapter on contemporary Lithuanian poetry), is an extremely cognitively promising perspective.

Thanks to *Things in Poems* monograph it turns out that between Herbert's *A study of the object* and Białoszewski's *Revolutions of things*, which could be considered the two poles of objectivist poetic diction – there are as many differences as similarities. Giving objects more importance, and even a kind of autonomy, is the starting point for the expansion of textual worlds: either rooted in the past (treating objects as entities seen and interpreted through their stability and immutability), or projected into the future (thinking of things as harbingers of the unknown). Zornica Kirková and Olga Lomová, for instance, bring closer the phenomenon of Chinese literature about things (*yong wu*) not only as a curiosity, but also as an important point of reference to contemporary practices.

The book is intended to be both a summary of the objectivist praxis of world poetry and an opening to new readings; everything that comes next will refer to the possibilities outlined here: everyday-linguistic-observational or dreamlike-mythical-encyclopaedic. The authors and editors of the volume keep in mind that it was in the second half of the 1950s that changes took place in global poetry in thinking about the text, which begins to mean differently through its materiality, including its spatial dimensions, or the shape and color of the font, and, as it becomes extremely individual, it changes its meaning and attitude towards the reader/viewer. Increasingly, instead of being a standardized content carrier, it is a being *par excellence*, instead of conveying a specific message – it could communicate nothing except itself (in accordance with poststructuralist postulates, but also with contemporary transhumanist theories; see Satkauskytė 2022: 261–262).

As the analyzes prepared by the authors of *Things in Poems* would indicate, subsequent poetic trends – from the ancient pre-visual poetry, to the hyperobjects of today, the poets themselves eagerly take advantage of the opportunity to take the poem beyond

the framework of the poem and take it under one or another banner. Although thinking about a poem in terms of its standardness can be illusory, because, to quote Polish objectivist Tymoteusz Karpowicz, the things that the poem incorporates are only „cocoons of other things” (Karpowicz 1960: 21). After all, there is no need to take anything for a banner anymore, since the poem itself can be a banner. Or a box of matches. Or a laundry receipt. An uncovered lamp on the desk.

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