Things in Poems

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KAROLINUM

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Karolinum Press is a publishing department of Charles University
Ovocný trh 560/5, 116 36 Prague 1, Czech Republic
www.karolinum.cz

Language supervision by Julia Bailey
Layout by Filip Blažek (designiq)
Set in the Czech Republic by Karolinum Press
First English edition

A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of the Czech Republic.

This book is published as an output of the Charles University (Faculty of Arts) research programme Progres Q12: Literature and Performativity.
This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund project "Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World" (reg. no.: CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000734).

ISBN 978-80-246-4940-5 (pdf)
ISBN 978-80-246-5030-2 (epub)
ISBN 978-80-246-5031-9 (mobi)
ISBN 978-80-246-4939-9

The original manuscript was reviewed by Michal Jareš, Institute of Czech Literature of the CAS, and Záviš Šuman, Charles University, Prague.

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Content

Introduction: Things in Words[1]

JOSEF HRDLIČKA

The concept of the *Dinggedicht*, typically referred to in English as the "thing poem" or "object poem," was first brought into the debate about poetry by Kurt Oppert in the early twentieth century (Oppert 1926), as many of this book's authors remind us. In doing so, he managed to capture trends that went beyond the German-language poetry he was writing about, while also setting out a theme of some significance in modern poetry. Things – and let us note that, in a broader sense, the notion of a thing can encompass various entities, including living ones – have been appearing in poems since earliest times. At the very beginning of the Western poetic tradition as we know it today, we find the shield of Achilles, described in book 18 of Homer's *Iliad*, which Bill Brown (2015, 1) refers to as "Western literature's most magnificent object." Poets and dramatizers return to it again and again, and as Karel Thein points out in the opening chapter, for Homer this is certainly not just a simple description of an object, but a depiction creating an object through a process of *material imagination*. Homer's portrayal of the shield is a work of oral poetry, and in this respect, we may well draw a parallel between the workmanship of Hephaestus and that of the rhapsode, recounting the poem of the shield's creation to the audience. Unlike most subsequent objects in poetry, the shield of Achilles is primarily evoked through the medium of sound and the spoken word.

1 I have drawn a number of the ideas in this introduction from the PhD thesis being written by Jakub Hankiewicz and from our discussions about it, as well as conversations with other authors contributing to this book.

The somewhat later entry of the written word onto the ancient Greek stage brings a new element to the interplay of media and objects. In Greece, script was initially regarded in terms of voice. As E. Havelock (1977, 374–75) points out, the earliest preserved inscriptions, themselves found on objects, are formulated as the spoken words of the particular object that bears the writing – so that the mediating modality is not paper or papyrus, but the voice of the object. What we would today call the rhetorical trope (*prosopopoeia*) that lends voice to inanimate things, is, from the standpoint of an oral culture, much closer to our natural perception: writing is perceived as a spoken language, whose vehicle is the voice of a living being, not its material medium (clay tablets, stone, or papyrus). Many records of this form of expression have been documented in ancient inscriptions on earthenware and stones, often on tombstones, with the added complication that the writing here generally does not speak for the object, but is a would-be pronouncement by the deceased.

Thus, antiquity opens up a polymorphic media constellation, where we find poems that portray objects in different ways through verbal utterance (typically ekphrastic poems), objects that "speak," and in Hellenistic times also the first pictorial poems, which by their visual arrangement depict the object's shape. All three briefly outlined types of poetic treatments have their equivalents or continuations in modern and contemporary poetry. From the *technopaignia* of Simias of Rhodes (cf. Dencker 2011, 568–70), through Optatian's *carmina cancellata* (ibid., 623n)[2] and the medieval *carmina figurata*, through the baroque *Figurengedichte*, the lineage leads on to Apollinaire's calligrams and the visual poetry of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[3] Prosopopoeia appears as an element of the first type of poem and a similar, although more complicated, figure of animation of an object can have an unexpected effect, as in Rilke's poem "Archaïscher Torso Apollos" (The Archaic Torso of Apollo). In the twentieth century, an important role is played by the poetics of fictional epitaphs and inscriptions on stones, in the works of, among others, Edgar Lee Masters (*Spoonriver Anthology* 1915), or a few years earlier, in Victor Segalen's *Stèles* (1912), and later by, for example, Yves Bonnefoy in his collection entitled *Pierre écrite* (more loosely titled in English as *Words in Stone* [1965]). In his collection,

2 See Michael Squire's chapter on the topic.

3 See Dalia Satkauskytė's chapter on the role of visual poems in Lithuanian poetry of things and Julie Koblížková Wittlichová's chapter on things and thingness in the visual poetry of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Segalen touches on an aspect also picked up by other poets in the early twentieth century. At the heart of his book are poems supposedly inscribed on stelae, which, whilst not making a reference to these commemorative inscription-bearing stones as such, do hint at their presence, as an imaginary framework. Yet in his foreword, Segalen posits that these objects are both proffering their messages and defying to be read. He introduces to the very heart of the collection a strange tension – between what is written and what lies beyond its reach:

> They disdain being read. They do not call for voice or music. They have contempt for the changing tones & syllables from the provinces that may happen to travesty them. They do not express; they mean; they are.
>
> (Segalen 2007, 61)

For the purposes of our endeavour, which includes reflecting on how things speak in poems, it is not without interest that Segalen wrote *Stèles* while he was in China, and devoted himself with great earnestness to the study of ancient Chinese culture.

Pavel Novotný, in his chapter on modern poems, notes yet another approach in analysing the media possibilities of an object poem, and shows how its theme (a particular thing) can simultaneously be reflected in the structure of a poem, as with Enzensberger, whose poem keeps balance between the expressed content and the object, while the even more radical Artmann poem represents more a "poem-object".

The central poet of Oppert's text is Rilke, and his collections *Neue Gedichte* (New Poems; 1907) and *Der Neuen Gedichte anderer Teil* (New Poems: The Other Part; 1908). Rilke produced both these collections at a time when philosophy and sociology were similarly inclined. At that time, Edmund Husserl was putting forward his phenomenology programme, with his famous motto about a return to the "things themselves," and the poetry of the era was turning away from fast-fading Symbolism towards things in their own right. The poems of Williams, and Pound's "imagist" thesis, according to which everything in the poem is to serve the "treatment of the 'thing'" (Pound 1968, 3), are only a little more recent. In his study on the "elusiveness of things" (2010),[4] William Waters

4 Its translation was published in the Czech version of this book.

shows how things in Rilke's works elude being directly grasped. The language of the poem reveals its own materiality and does not allow us to perceive a thing only as an illusion created by a poem. The reader is continually drawn into a game between the presence of language and the presence of what the language is evoking. This is quite different from the early Enlightenment-era poems of Brockes, in which things serve their given purpose (to reveal God's creation) and the thought-provoking language of the poem is intended to be lucid and transparent.

Some of Rilke's work with language and the depiction of things foreshadows elements of Baudelaire in his famous poem "Une Charogne" (A Carcass), which Rilke credited with enabling the progression to factual testimony. "I could not but think that without this poem, the whole trend toward 'telling it like it is,' which we now presume to find in Cézanne, could not have started" ("Entwicklung zum sachlichen Sagen," "Letters on Cézanne," 19 October 1907, in Rilke 1996, 624). Baudelaire's poem seems at first glance to be an allegory in which the woman addressee is, with apparent irony, likened to the cadaver she will one day resemble. In several respects, Baudelaire upsets the convention of allegorical poems, which is found in pure form in his "L'Albatros" (The Albatross), for example. The poem is not divided into two clear planes, but is presented as a recollection of his encounter with a carcass, the narrative being more in the past tense than the present, so characteristic of allegory; and, above all, the depiction of the dead creature takes up the greater part of the poem, and in its detail and suggestiveness breaks out of the figurative mould of allegory. Rilke later consistently deconstructs the clear poetic figures and conventions of then already waning Symbolism, and gives things (and beings) some basic autonomy in his poems – as if they were an other that a poem could touch upon but never grasp. Here one might consider the similarity with Heidegger's distinction between an object (*Gegenstand*) and a thing (*Ding*), from his lecture "Das Ding" (The Thing), in which a thing merely opens up more questions about its "thingness" and eludes a whole gamut of simple answers. In *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (The Origin of the Work of Art), Heidegger points out the thingness of a thing as seen through a work of art, using the well-known example of Van Gogh's painting of shoes. As he puts it, the artwork reveals "what the equipment, the pair of peasant shoes, *is* in truth" (Heidegger 1993, 161). Yet it could be said that Van Gogh's painting points out the difference between an object and a thing, rather than revealing the thing as such. It presupposes a certain motion

of reflection, reminding us that the thing does not surrender itself to our grasp and stays hidden behind its object-based purpose and instrumentality.

In this book, we give some examples of the early poetics of things, when objects appear as stand-ins for something else, but at the same time keep their particular and detailed essence, their "thingness" – whether we look at the symbolic practices of Chinese poetry, based on the notion of a correspondence of all things as part of a universality unified by a shared order and vital energy; or the works of early German Enlightenment poet Barthold Heinrich Brockes. But even here we are not dealing with the purely functional use of objects. The earlier poets seem to get carried away with them, and their flourishes of description are foreshadowing how things will be breaking free of the figurative plane towards their autonomy, culminating with Baudelaire, Rilke, and others in European poetry. One stage in this movement is characterized by European Symbolism. Writers such as Jean Moréas, in his manifesto *Le Symbolisme* (Symbolism), follow up on the distinction between allegory and symbol that derives from Goethe and Romantic aesthetics (cf. Todorov 1985, 235–60). Seen from this perspective, in allegory the object stands for something else, while as a symbol it keeps its factual worth, even though in Symbolism it is the idea embodied in the symbol that prevails. One consequence of such a view is uncertainty about the significance of things, which an allegory can grasp unequivocally, as well as marking the beginnings of their elusive autonomy. It is well expressed by the characteristic inversion in the lines of Czech symbolist Otokar Březina, written in 1899: "Ve tmách symboly věcí / mlčenlivé" ("In the dark, symbols of things / silence-keeping" [Březina 1958, 179]). A quite blunt shift of emphasis from figurative meaning of the thing to the thing itself can be seen in the text of Ezra Pound (1917), which redirects Moréas' take on the symbol back to the thing:

> I believe that the proper and perfect symbol is the natural object, that if a man uses "symbols," he must so use them that their symbolic function does not obtrude; so that *a* sense, and the poetic quality of the passage, is not lost to those who do not understand the symbol as such, to whom, for instance, a hawk is a hawk.
>
> (Pound 1968, 9)

Pound's statement clearly reveals the fundamental contradiction of this distinction, in which the symbol, as a trope or poetic figure, stands contrary to the object as a thing in the world. A similar shift from Symbolism to the specificity of things – both from the point of view of tradition and in the intimate domain of, in this case, the kitchen – can be seen with Osip Mandelstam, whose work is discussed by Anne Hultsch.

Siding with things – if we can so name this motive force in the history of poetry, a move which took place sometime in the early twentieth century – means that things have definitely come out of the repertoire of tropes and figures, have ceased to be poetic instruments, and poems have turned attention to them in their own right. This step opens up a new horizon, in which things can continue to serve us, no longer as a poetic prop, but with the aim of their own depiction, and in relation to the human. Rilke's poetry is not here to illustrate a historical tipping point, but a distinguished example, akin to Heidegger's philosophy, which marks the ascent of the thing to autonomy – attained by virtue of its very elusiveness. The poetry which was to follow in the latter twentieth century seems to have been surveying this new field and asking how variously things could be approached. Somewhere on the border between such autonomy and utility stands a landmark Czech poem "Věci" (Things) by Jiří Wolker, from 1920. When we speak of things in Czech poetry, most Czech readers will be reminded of the opening line:

Miluji věci, mlčenlivé soudruhy,
protože všichni nakládají s nimi,
jako by nežily,
a ony zatím žijí a dívají se na nás
jak věrní psi pohledy soustředěnými
a trpí,
že žádný člověk k nim nepromluví.
Ostýchají se první dát do řeči,
mlčí, čekají, mlčí
a přeci
tolik by chtěly trochu si porozprávět!

Proto milují věci
a také milují celý svět.

(Wolker 1953, 44)

I love things, silent comrades,
because everyone treats them
as if they were not alive,
and yet they do live and do watch us
like faithful dogs do with attentive looks
and suffer,
because nobody talks to them.
They're too timid to be the first to speak,
they keep silent, waiting, silent
and still
they would so like to have a little chat!

That's why I love things
and love the whole world, too.

The consciously naively conceived poem has its subtlety, hidden even in the Czech word for comrade (*soudruh* – literally, fellow-companion). While it has a history linked with the communist movement, it has its rightful Czech etymology, in which the prefix *sou-* corresponds to the word meaning "together." Wolker, on the one hand, seemingly unjustifiably personifies things and puts them in the subordinate role of faithfully accompanying man; but on the other, he accurately describes the pitfalls of the relationship between people and Things, that voicelessness instead of language that would try to get a grasp on things. Moreover, he foreshadows the theme of the social life of things, which cannot be cut loose of human life in any way.

The long history of things in Western poetry could then be characterized as attempts at dialogue with things, the difficulty of which we are reminded by Wolker. Yet many subsequent poets were fully aware that personification is a dead end if we seek to touch the "secret" of things. Dialogue with things cannot take the form of a two-*person* conversation; rather it is a search for a form of speech that can "address" things in their autonomy and open up to their "response," which is unavoidably beyond verbal expression. Francis Ponge's objective lyricism, as written about by Michel Collot, can be understood precisely as such a ceaseless addressing of things. A particularly remarkable chapter here is on post-war Polish poetry, in which things have become a central theme. Poets such as Miron Białoszewski and Zbigniew Herbert, as Jakub Hankiewicz writes, were developing dialogic strategies from quite different sides, in order to get closer

to things. We find another approach to entering into a dialogue with things in Jaromír Typlt's chapter on things in post-war Czech Surrealism. Leaving aside the surrealist conception of the object, which would merit its own treatise, in this chapter we see an unusual shift typical of late Surrealism in Czech poetry; Typlt characterizes it with the word "brazenness" – as though in these texts the things themselves were demanding to be heard and were actively breaking out of the confines of their graspable object purpose and relevance, as opposed to the person, who is merely passively reacting.

Many of the poems cited here focus on one or a very few specific things, and do not turn their attention to the "social life of things," written about by Arjun Appadurai and Bill Brown. Heidegger's concept of readiness-to-hand (*Zuhandensein*) well describes the fact that some things are within easy reach; but less well does it acknowledge just how fundamentally not only our hand, but indeed the entire human body is dependent on things. The human palm is open to things, and it is just when things are lacking that the social connection of man and things also becomes glaring. Poets like Günter Eich very accurately show this state of "material shortage" or need. Another oft concealed side of things arises in relation to architecture, which shapes our human space but at the same time has its object-minded side, as Josef Vojvodík shows by means of the poems of Czech poet Milada Součková, who lived in exile in America from 1948 onwards.

A late turn in this long "dialogue" with things is characterized by the term "hyperobject," coined by English philosopher Timothy Morton. This is taken up by Justin Quinn in a chapter devoted to Paul Muldoon's poems. Within the hyperobject concept, it is things that gain the upper hand in their own way, and a human being or the human body finds itself in a position where various aspects of objects beyond human graspability are revealed. This poetry shows a person's entanglement with things that subordinate his ostensibly central position. If we come back to our initial media-borne constellation of things in relation to language, the beginning of the poem by Slovak author Ivan Štrpka opens up a complex inversion where the writing speaks and a person is the object displayed, framing another object:

„Nevideli ste ma?“ pýta sa nápis náhlivou detskou rukou sotva čitateľne načmáraný pod fotografiou vážne strateného dievčatka s akýmsi vážnym, neurčito odpudivým, nechutne premúdrelým zvieratkom v nešikovnom náručí.

(Štrpka 2016, 16)

“Have you seen me?” is the question posed by the inscription written in a hurried and barely legible child’s scrawl under a photograph of a lost girl holding some kind of sombre, vaguely repulsive, objectionably smug-looking animal in her gawky embrace.

The Projected Heart: Ekphrasis, Material Imagination, and the Shield of Achilles

KAREL THEIN

In contrast to the narrow definition of *ekphrasis* as "the verbal representation of visual representation" (Heffernan 1993, 3),[1] the recent understanding of ekphrastic practice has moved, quite decisively, beyond a simple polarity of the verbal and the visual. As a result, ekphrastic creations appear to us as complex products of embodied imagination, which lends them an agency and animation. If these are culturally determined, they are also embedded in the reader's or listener's physical activity, which cannot be reduced to abstract meanings. To speak of ekphrastic life is therefore not just a metaphor, and if we cannot offer an exact definition of such a life, this uncertainty only echoes the equivocation of the term "life" in any context. In the following pages, I will assume that ekphrastic life is instantiated in what I call "material imagination." I do *not* use this term in Gaston Bachelard's sense of the allegedly original connection of imagination to the power of the four elements;[2] but rather to express the nexus of hands, heart, and voice, which all play a role in the birth of the paradigmatic

1 In what follows, the references are limited and incomplete, since I prefer to preserve, as much as possible, the format of a conference talk. For a sample of the enlarged field of ekphrastic cum art historical studies, see, e.g., Männlein-Robert 2007; Squire 2009; Elsner 2010; Morales 2011; Squire and Elsner 2016; Platt and Squire 2018.

2 Illustrative of this conception is Bachelard 2002. His chapter on "the dynamic lyricism of the blacksmith," which would seem close to our subject, deals only with modern texts and shifts the figure of Hephaestus-Vulcan to the background.

ekphrastic thing – the shield of Achilles forged by Hephaestus in Book 18 of Homer's *Iliad*.

Before addressing the circumstances of this shield's forging, and lacking the space to do justice to the long history of its interpretations, I take my first and direct cue from its recent revisionary reading in Bill Brown's book *Other Things*, whose opening sentence states that "Western literature's most magnificent object, Achilles' Shield, enacts a drama of animate matter" (Brown 2015, 1). I start with this quotation since Bill Brown's take on the shield of Achilles epitomizes the shift in emphasis towards the material aspects of ancient practices, which resist any clean-cut distinction between words, images, and things. Of these practices, there are innumerable examples, including those that engage the Homeric shield by engrafting it into other texts and visual artefacts.[3] In this large context, my necessarily modest aim is to demonstrate which qualities of the "original" shield of Achilles invite these treatments, which then become, in their turn, an integral part of its afterlife. I will elaborate upon the expression "a drama of animate matter" by focusing on the matter of the ekphrastic shield and in what sense this matter is animate. At the same time, I hope to indicate how this animation takes advantage of the ontological instability shared by artefacts and images.

Prior to turning to ancient texts, I wish to pause for a moment to consider the way in which Bill Brown brings out the animate character of the shield as created by Homer. Focusing on the life that awakens in the molded matter, he quotes a number of lines that explicitly describe how the crafted figures themselves take on the motions that originate in the god's manual labour. Lines 573 to 578 are an excellent example:

> The *artisan made next* a herd of longhorns,
> *fashioned in gold and tin*: away they shambled,
> lowing, from byre to pasture by a stream
> that sang in ripples, and by reeds a-sway.
> Four cowherds *all of gold* were plodding after
> With nine little dogs beside them.
>
> (*Iliad*, 18.573–78, trans. Robert Fitzgerald, Bill Brown's emphasis)

3 The most striking example is probably the shield of Achilles reincarnated on the Roman *Iliadic Tablets*. Regarding the latter, see Squire 2011.

The quotation of these lines immediately precedes the paragraph in which Bill Brown summarizes the task of taking the ekphrastic animation beyond a mere metaphor, and towards the more delicate but perhaps more original realm, where life meets artifice. Here is the paragraph in question:

> The poem repeatedly clarifies that Achilles' Shield is at once a static object and a living thing, just as it marks and celebrates the phantasmagoric oscillation among forms and materials: the furrowed earth behind the plowmen may be "black," but it is also "gold,/all gold – a wonder of the artist's craft" (18.631–33). Homer's distribution of vitality extends beyond the immortal and the mortal – to the artifactual. This "wonder of the artist's craft" would seem to insist, then, on a kind of indeterminate ontology, in which the being of the object world cannot so readily be distinguished from the being of animals, say, or the being we call human being.
>
> (Brown 2015, 2)

Here we touch upon the question, debated already by ancient scholiasts, of where exactly the motion and sound take place: in the audience's mind or on the shield's surface?[4] This antithesis, however, is surmounted by the ekphrastic perspective, which relies on a sort of imaginative density, whose vitality embodies a perfect continuity between the described forging of the metal figures and the motion of imagining that espouses this forging. Hence the crucial insight: that "Homer's distribution of vitality" implies "a kind of indeterminate ontology." This insight leads to the suggestion that Homer is not aiming to undermine the opposition between linguistic and pictorial media, but intends rather to destabilize "the opposition between the organic and inorganic, the vibrant and the inert" (ibid., 3). Here, we can safely assume that the quoted lines, and the whole shield of Achilles, undermine both of these oppositions; and that, in both cases, they rely on the least determinate and most ambivalent capacity of human mind, namely imagination. At this point a caveat is in order: I will use this term and talk about the corresponding capacity against the background of

4 On whether Hephaestus' figures, and not only those on the shield, can – and should – be taken as literally animate, see the texts quoted and commented upon in Cullhed 2014, 214–17. On the metals in the quoted lines, see Dubel 2006, 169–70, and also Becker 1995, 140–41.

how it was understood by the ancients. Naturally, there is no exact terminological equivalent to "imagination" in ancient texts, and the variety of Greek and Roman views on *phantasia* and related matters is astonishing; but there certainly is a widely shared consensus that imagination, in all its forms, necessarily entails material processes. Even Aristotle, who is the only philosopher before late antiquity who claims that thinking *as such* is not a material process or a motion, repeatedly emphasizes that human beings cannot think without the support of imagination or *phantasia*, which supplies our minds with enmattered forms (see *De anima* 3.7, 431a14–17; or *De memoria* 1, 449b30–450a5).

I will therefore comfortably assume that imagination is a specific aspect of the matter's animation that occurs in our bodies, and more exactly in our bloodstream, that brings mental images from our chest to our head. This understanding implies a question that may strike one as naive – but we must not forget that we are chasing the "indeterminate ontology" of the shield of Achilles, and there is no ontology without the issue of location. My leading question concerns therefore the location of imagination as an inherently animating activity and, by extension, the location of animate mental images. The advantage of this double question is that it leads directly to Homer's account of how the shield of Achilles came to be. Obviously, this account offers no theory of imagination, but it anticipates several theories of the classical and Hellenistic periods, by placing the imagination's activity in the body's central area: the chest.

On this account, it is the region around the heart that is the seat of higher vital functions, emotional and cognitive alike. Hence the view of imagination that is implied already in Homer, no matter how rudimentary it may be compared to the whole range of the later philosophical texts about imagining and its physiological basis.[5] The key point of this view is the difference between the *physiology* of imagination and its *phenomenology*. If we naturally imagine that we imagine things in our head, this is because the brain, which is the cooling organ, makes our blood cooler, thinner, and hence more transparent than it is in the rest of the body. Cooling the blood, the brain transforms the inside of our head into a screen (an IMAX of sorts) where our imaginations achieve an equilibrium of vividness and clarity that they could never have reached in the

5 The cardiocentric scheme of thinking and imagining was much alive throughout antiquity. Aristotle and the Stoics are its best-known proponents. In contrast, its later and most influential critic is Galen. For an introduction to this issue, see Tieleman 1996, 38–65; Tieleman 2002; Rocca 2003, 31–47.

turbulent and overflowing area of their origin. Mental images and all articulate thought, including poetry, originate in and around the heart, where the blood is too hot and thick to allow for clear and distinct representations – the heart is where we feel emotional, not where we feel that we think and imagine things clearly. This mismatch between the turbulent place where thinking and imagining originate, and the clarity of *certain* thoughts and imaginations, is then further reinforced by the fact that once we start to think and imagine things clearly, we leave behind all evident connection to the *location* of our thoughts and imaginations. In this situation, does it still make sense to enquire *where exactly* the shield of Achilles is, as a thing described and imagined? Is there even some "where," let alone some "exactly," to speak of?

Starting with this last sub-question, I would suggest that there is no "exact" location of the things as imagined; but there is an ontologically grey yet phenomenally vivid and overall vibrant area where the ekphrastic shield grounds an ever-expanding variety of different life forms. And if the borders of this area seem rather fuzzy, it is also because Homer enjoys playing with the ontological ambiguity of his great ekphrastic creation. However, even Homer starts *from where* the ekphrastic shield is imagined while it is being created: he starts from the chest of the divine artificer, Hephaestus.

It sounds trivial to remark that the creation of the shield of Achilles is the outcome of the visit that Thetis, the hero's divine mother, pays to Hephaestus, from whom she demands new armour for her son. Yet, from the ekphrastic point of view, the whole *mise-en-scène* of this visit is no less intriguing than the shield that will be described as both locally and ontologically contiguous with the god's previous creations, whose most striking feature consists, already, in them being internally animate material artefacts. It was rightly suggested that the artefacts Thetis encounters in the house of Hephaestus form a series, with a gradually increasing complexity corresponding to the life forms involved.[6] The first "wonder to look at" (θαῦμα ἰδέσθαι) that she observes are golden self-moving tripods (18.372–81); and it is while describing the construction of these automata that the poet first uses the formula, as articulated in Lattimore's modern translation, that the god is at work "in his craftsmanship and

6 See Francis 2009, 8, on tripods as "mechanical servants" that "give the audience a foretaste of an even more dramatic set of the god's creations." Francis grasps well the gradation, so to speak, from tripods to maidens, as well as the latter's more general ekphrastic importance (on which see also below).

his cunning." The original formula, used by Homer several times to describe the power of Hephaestus' art, is ἰδυίῃσι πραπίδεσσι – which literally means that the god is at work "with his visionary diaphragm." I borrow this great translation from the examination of this dative (locative or instrumental) by Françoise Frontisi, who offers a detailed overview of the poetic uses of *prapides*, a noun that designates a vital region of the chest, with an emphasis on the circulation of blood that is necessary for both the sensible and intellectual activity. It is a power of seeing, understanding, and imagining that is active in the lower chest and, in its location and function, seems to be very close to *phrenes*.[7] I will spare you the philological detail, but it is important to quote Frontisi's conclusion: "The chest of Hephaestus, sweating and puffing, is a vast image box [*une vaste boîte à images*], the seat of his creative inspiration, the organ of what will be, much later, the imagination" (Frontisi-Ducroux 2002, 479).

The god's visionary diaphragm will reappear in Homer's account once Hephaestus is ready to start his forging of the ekphrastic shield. In the meantime, we are given to understand that the god's power to create life extends beyond the tripods, whose only observable behaviour consists in local self-motion. The complexity of artificial life increases with the appearance of the god's two attendants:

> These are golden, and in appearance like living young women [ζωῇσι νεήνισιν εἰοικυῖαι].
> There is intelligence in their hearts [τῇς ἐν μὲν νόος ἐστὶ μετὰ φρεσίν] and there is speech in them
> and strength, and from the immortal gods they have learned how to do things [ἀθανάτων δὲ θεῶν ἄπο ἔργα ἴσασιν].
>
> (*Iliad*, 18.418–20, trans. Lattimore)

7 See Frontisi-Ducroux 2002. In contrast to *phrenes*, *prapides* is only used in poetry; it may relate to the diaphragm etymologically: see Sullivan 1988, 179–80 and 283–84. On *prapides* as the central place of thought, see also Padel 1992, 19–20. The formula ἰδυίῃσι πραπίδεσσι occurs in the *Iliad* five times, always to paint Hephaestus in his role of the supreme designer and craftsman. Three of these occurrences focus on his double capacity as the architect but also the builder of the Olympian dwellings of the gods (including his own); the fourth connects to the self-moving tripods; and the fifth, as we shall see, is reserved for the making of the shield of Achilles.

These creatures complete the progression from the unfinished tripods to beings whose form is human and divine in equal measure, and whose life can hardly be described as only simulated. They *have* intelligence and speech, and thus the capacity for learning. In fact, they look like trial runs for the more famous Pandora, who will receive a full ekphrastic treatment from another poet, Hesiod. Intriguingly, their only difference from "living young women" is a material one: they are golden. The metallic *and* intelligent appearance of these maidens is important because it alerts us to the far-reaching possibilities of divine animation. In the same vein, but more generally, it reminds us of the amazing variety of the origins of human (and other) beings in ancient texts. That humans have always existed, that they evolved naturally as the universe was formed, and that they were formed in various places by various divinities are all equally valid options, sometimes found in one and the same author, or even in one and the same text. As a result, there is no definitive division between a natural life and an artificial life, since the latter can give birth to the former: their causal stories can not only meet, but literally interbreed.[8] Still, this does not mean that all life unfolds on the same plane – indeed, Homer maintains an uncertainty about the golden creatures who are "in appearance like living young women." Does this expression mean that they *look as if* they were alive, or that they *are* alive and, moreover, *looking like* young women? The difference would be crucial, if only we were able to draw a definite line between the two options.[9]

With this situation in mind, we can finally turn to the shield that the god will produce, again "with his visionary diaphragm" (18.482). It is precisely this *production* – as opposed to an observation – that has been at the centre of modern discussions of the shield since Lessing. Instead of repeating the latter's

8 The unnatural genealogies of humankind comprise not only technical artifice (in Hesiod and others), but also various couplings between the mortals and the immortals. This testifies to the remarkable indifference, in ancient texts, towards a unified account of human origin. Among the emblematic texts are Plato's *Critias*, where the Athenians are crafted by Athena and Hephaestus, whereas the inhabitants of Atlantis are sexually engendered by Poseidon (the Athenians are superior since craft, for Plato, always trumps sex); or the first book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where we count no less than four different origins of the human race. For more on different forms of mostly artificial life, see also Mayor 2018.

9 In the same way, Pandora is both a likeness of a virgin and a real virgin. Also, her diadem is decorated with crafted beasts "similar to living animals endowed with voice" (ζωοῖσιν ἐοικότα φωνήεσσιν) (Hesiod, *Theogony*, 584; trans G. W. Most modified); these beasts are exactly like the creatures on the shield of Achilles. On these aspects of Pandora, see Platt 2011, 111–13.

comments, we can point out that Homer's repeated emphasis on the shield's ongoing creation ("he forged," "on it he wrought," "then he made") maintains the feel of contiguity with Hephaestus' "image box." It is thanks to this contiguity that the ekphrastic shield progressively acquires its "thingness" – an expression used by Bill Brown in order to explain that the sustained material vitality of the shield will always be in excess of the ready-made and perceptible "object-hood" (see Brown 2015, 5). In the case of the shield of Achilles, this excess is also encoded in the subtle yet persistent tension between the brilliantly vivid evocation of a number of details in every particular scene and a striking lack of determination of the overall arrangement of the scenes on the shield; after all, Homer even avoids specifying the latter's physical shape. This lack is not due to a simple omission: it follows from the impossibility to imagine one thing that would coherently enclose all smaller things *including ourselves* as both its parts and its external beholders. With some difficulty, one may construct such a "one thing" theoretically, but Homer is not after theoretical cosmology. The opening lines of the shield, which establish the cosmic coordinates for what follows, are therefore less a true image of the cosmos than the invitation to espouse the motion of the god's imagination:

> He made the earth upon it, and the sky, and the sea's water,
> and the tireless sun, and the moon waxing into her fullness,
> and on it all the constellations that festoon the heavens,
> the Pleiades and the Hyades and the strength of Orion
> and the Bear, whom men give also the name of the Wagon,
> who turns about in a fixed place and looks at Orion
> and she alone is never plunged in the wash of the Ocean.
>
> (*Iliad*, 18.483–89, trans. Lattimore)

These lines do the same job as the title sequences of some movies or TV series (the title sequence of *Game of Thrones* is one notable example providing an introduction equivalent to Homer's shield of Achilles, including the forge, metals, and cities). In contrast to what will follow, these lines leave aside the shield's materiality and create instead a three-dimensional structure, a celestial vault that is in motion and apparently described in several stages of its diurnal and annual rotation. It is not a static image or a diagram, but a planetarium, a mobile structure that teases the imagination by superposing the skies of different seasons. On a smaller scale, this tension will be re-enacted in every

subsequent image on the shield, with its moving crowds, processions, armies, herds, and the repeated evocations of the slowly turning cycle of the seasons. These motions will be exercised by precise, internally animate figures, whose exact positions at any given moment it is nevertheless impossible to determine. Relying on language and voice as its equally material parts, this ekphrasis constantly reshuffles the products of our imagination, which starts to spontaneously move around the figures on the shield in much the same way as our blood flows through our chest, carrying around "our" mental images.

These observations presuppose that we can understand ekphrasis as activity and, in the case of the Homeric shield, as an internally animate re-enactment of this shield's generation – a re-enactment that exceeds the limits of simple visualizing: imagination is also about the creation of images that are naturally suffused with language and offer more than that which can be properly seen. Its permeability to words makes ekphrasis inherently dialogical, at least insofar as language and thought share some basic structure: that which ekphrasis makes us visualize is not simply given, but constantly negotiated and renegotiated. The main ekphrastic interest of the shield lies therefore in the excess of its vividness over its clarity – an excess that Homer keeps projecting into the matter that is being forged and progressively animated by Hephaestus. It is this vividness that carries on from one scene to the next: if there is an overall narration to be extracted from the shield, it is only the narration of its formation.

This last point qualifies – or at least complements – the influential interpretation of the shield as an image of the whole cosmos. This interpretation can be traced back to Heraclitus "the Allegorist," whose *Homeric Problems* start from the assumption that, in his fabrication of arms,

> Homer has included the origin of the universe in a grand creative idea. In forging the Shield of Achilles as an image of the revolution of the cosmos, he has shown by clear evidences how the universe originated, who is its creator, and how its different parts were formed and separated.
>
> (*Homeric Problems*, 43.1–2; Russell and Konstan 2005)[10]

10 I quote Heraclitus the Allegorist from Russell and Konstan 2005. I leave aside the (not entirely certain) allegorization of the shield of Achilles by Crates of Mallos. For more on the shield as a cosmic emblem, see Hardie 1985 and Hardie 1986, 340–42.

This also implies that line 485, about "all the constellations that festoon the heavens," carries a precise scientific meaning: "In this, Homer particularly teaches us that the universe (*kosmos*) is spherical. For just as a garland is a circular adornment (*kosmos*) of the head, so too the objects which girdle the vault of heaven, scattered all over its sphere, are plausibly called the garland of heaven" (ibid.).

A spherical universe would naturally map on a round shield so that the issue of the latter's shape is solved; but Heraclitus, who leads us away from the shield's materiality, does not proceed to enquire into the disposition of the shield's various parts. And indeed the spatial ordering of particular scenes *is* less important than the way each scene places us in the middle of an expanding event. The cosmic framework therefore does not play the role of some formal grid or box wherein the scenes on the shield would be simply contained. This is not to deny that the shield can be understood as what its modern readers will call "a total cosmic image" or "a cosmic icon."[11] However, the shield's cosmic dimension is clearly a background for a different kind of universality – one that relates to human actions and sufferings. The shield is not scientific, but eminently practical in building up an impressive inventory of not only human forms of life that appear everywhere, from peaceful vistas to war-torn landscapes. As this inventory stays on the universal level, without naming any particular city and its heroes (there is a comparison to Daedalus' labyrinth in Knossos, but it is just that: a comparison), it contains the seeds of various other – often politically charged – universes, of which a not negligible number will be realized by later ekphrastic practice, including other ekphrastic shields.

This kind of anonymous universality also implies two different instances of the *mise en abyme* (the shield's recursive effect): first in relation to the *Iliad* as a whole, and second in relation to the later accounts of ekphrasis in the rhetorical manuals or *Progymnasmata*. Concerning these explicit discussions of what ekphrasis is and what it is about, it is advisable to pay close attention to the broad range of objects recommended as suitable for vivid and evocative description. What is striking is that if we follow the list of topics established by Aelius Theon (in, probably, the first century CE), then all the elements of this list have their direct counterpart on the Homeric shield: the latter includes the ekphrases of

11 For "a total cosmic image," see Fletcher 2012, 215–17. The expression "cosmic icon" is from Philip Hardie's interpretation of the shield of Aeneas in Hardie 1986, 336–76.

persons (Ares and Athena), of events (war, peace, harvest), of places (cities, fields, waters, heavens) and times (the seasons). Besides, this mixed Homeric ekphrasis also contains a particular event of public legal dispute, one which makes sense, in advance, of rhetorical manuals such as Theon's own.[12] In all, if the Homeric shield is a materially embedded life, life imagined and produced by a god, it is also a blueprint for the *possible* worlds of human making – poetical *and* political. So, naturally, it did not escape the attention of Homer's interpreters that the very world of the *Iliad* can be understood, recursively, as a segment of the life suggested on the shield, regardless of the fact that the shield is produced within the *Iliad*.[13]

However, important as this recursion may be, it must not overshadow the life of the shield of Achilles beyond the literal limits of its original ekphrasis in Book 18. In time, this life unfolds in two different registers. On the one hand, the shield of Achilles becomes the blueprint for a series of other ekphrastic shields, including those that will fundamentally revise Homer's version. On the other hand, more rarely yet no less strikingly, the shield of Achilles will be re-described as a thing that possesses an inherent agency, irreducible to the motion of the figures on its surface. This too will happen in two entirely different ways. Homer himself will project the shield on the battlefield and emphasize its explosive impact. Much later, in contrast to this most public appearance, the shield will experience its own private drama and express its feelings in the voice of Hellenistic epigrams. These contrasting appearances of the shield instantiate perfectly the play of scale which is one of the motors of the ekphrastic tradition. Let me offer a brief glimpse of what happens in the poems in question.

In the *Iliad*, the shield acquires a power of its own, which almost resembles a sort of *impersonal* agency. In Book 18, Hephaestus produces the shield not as armour that would save Achilles' life, but as a wonder that will alleviate the hero's present sorrow: it will be a marvel admired by many men, says Hephaestus to Thetis, and we understand that the artificially created life is not only a summary of the partly natural and partly artificial human condition, but also a consolation. However, no one except, possibly, Achilles is described as

12 I cannot deal with this recursion in detail, but it should alert us to the complexity of the relation between rhetorical guides to ekphrasis and the broader (and older) poetic practice that we now design by this term. On Theon and *progymnasmata*, see, at least, Heath 2002/3; for the role of ekphrasis in *progymnasmata*, see Webb 2009.

13 An already classic example of this reading is Taplin 1980.

contemplating the shield or wondering about its execution and meaning. Achilles himself takes a long look at his new and "intricate" armour but, at 19.15–20, this only rekindles his anger, so that "his eyes glittered terribly under his lids, like sunflare" (19.17).[14] When the shield reappears later on in Book 19, it does so in full combat mode, where all detail disappears behind the shield's radiance. From being a cosmic icon, the shield is now transformed into a cosmic beacon, similar to the Moon or a burning fire. Hence the comparison of its effect to the light moving across open water (I will only quote the raising of the shield at 19.373–80, but the whole arming sequence is a perfect ekphrasis of action):

> [Achilles] caught up the great shield, huge and heavy
> next, and from it the light glimmered far, as from the moon.
> And as when from across water a light shines to mariners
> from a blazing fire, when the fire is burning high in the mountains
> in a desolate steading, as the mariners are carried unwilling
> by storm winds over the fish-swarming sea, far away from their loved
> ones; so the light from the fair elaborate shield of Achilles
> shot into the high air.
>
> (*Iliad*, 19.373–80, trans. Lattimore)

While Achilles flies at the enemy, resplendent in his new armour, his starlike appearance also eclipses any particular design on the shield, which becomes one huge reflector, impossible to contemplate for those who face it.[15] On the battlefield, the shield therefore angers or terrifies. As a result, the only gaze that we are reasonably certain has contemplated the detailed finish of the shield's surface is that of Thetis, who was a witness to its fabrication (not incidentally, it

14 On this emotion, see Goldhill 2012, 102–3.

15 Cf. Frontisi-Ducroux 2002, 470: "Bien des éléments du texte contribuent ainsi à donner l'impression que cet ouvrage surhumain est quasi insupportable à la vision humaine, comme peut l'être le divin lui-même." Scully 2003, 29–47, reads the shield from precisely this perspective. Cf. also Goldhill 2012, 103, on the reaction to the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad*: "the pattern of focalisation excludes the heroic characters of the epic (unlike in Virgil). Neither Achilles, nor any other hero, looks at the imagery and seeks for or finds any meaning there. In Homer, ekphrasis is not a scene of recognition." Goldhill shows that many later (and learned) ekphrases will engage the issue of recognition with an eye on its inherent and often complex temporality.

is her gaze that takes the place of Hephaestus' projective imagination in Auden's modern version of the shield, where the Homeric rhythm of "then he made" gives way to the repetition of "she looked over his shoulder").

This situation makes us wonder about the complicity between the ekphrastic gaze and the divine gaze – a complicity that perfectly conforms to my previous suggestion that we are invited less to simulate an act of actual seeing than to imagine what the god imagines: there is more of an emulation than a simulation in such an imagining.[16] This emulation of the divine imagination by the ekphrastic imagination is what enables us to lend some degree of transparency to things whose creation retains some opacity, insofar as it surpasses the power of human craft. Hence the play with various *degrees* of transparency, and with transparency and opacity in general, that will be a favourite instrument of all ekphrasis.

At the same time, the *Iliad* itself opens the shield to a more troubled destiny. On the battlefield, this hand-held polymetallic entity with animated figures is not calmly scrutinized, but fiercely attacked. The second and much shorter Homeric chapter regarding the history of this shield is indeed, quite unexpectedly, about it being damaged. It is first attacked by Aeneas, who strikes "the terrible grim shield" and frightens Achilles by his mighty blow (20.259–63). Homer chooses these lines to say more about the body of the shield: in Book 18, we learned that the shield's body was composed of five folds made of bronze, tin, and gold, with added silver (18.474–81). Now, in Book 20, we are reassured that the divine gift will not break, since it has two folds of bronze on the outside and two of tin on the inside, and between them a single layer of gold. And it is precisely the layer of gold that holds fast against Aeneas' blow (20.266–72). Clearly, not to break is not the same as not to be damaged: again, at 21.165, the spear of Asteropaios also breaks through the two external layers and, once more, stops only when it hits the gold. Since ancient times, these verses have been found to

16 Cf. Lovatt 2013, 173–74, who points out the "association between the divine gaze and the ecphrastic gaze" and remarks, on the Vulcan-made shield of Aeneas, that "[t]he ecphrasis of the divine shield represents the ultimate god's-eye view of epic poetry." This perspective, connected as it is to Hephaestus' manual effort, is important since it precludes the ekphrastic imagination from turning into the "acentral imagining" that is "done from no-one's point of view" and is "likely to be purely visual." These expressions are from Wollheim 1986, 60. On central and "acentral" imagining, see, e.g., Giovannelli 2008.

be puzzling and often excised: not only because gold is not capable of assuming this impenetrable role, but also because, if we disregard this physical fact, the divine gift would be disconcertingly easy to ruin, at least in its carefully wrought external aspect.[17] In any case, the ekphrastic tradition will not take the blows of Aeneas and Asteropaios into account: the later variations on Homeric ekphrasis assume that the shield, as though a self-healing organism, survives and lives on in its restored original form.

As I have said already, this survival and afterlife are rich in ekphrastic options that enable the shield to travel around the ancient world. From among the relevant material, I will only evoke the version that gives the shield of Achilles the capacity to feel and express emotions. This account is realized in one of the three epigrams that are dedicated to the shield of Achilles and contained in Book 9 of the *Palatine Anthology*. More than tangential to the issue of ekphrasis, these epigrams and their editorial context are revelatory in terms of the shield's life, independent of its carefully wrought design. The three epigrams in question (9.115, 9.115b, 9.116) offer no description of the shield's surface, but instead relate its fortune after the *Iliad*. This starts with the quarrel over the arms of Achilles as reported at the beginning of the *Little Iliad*, when Odysseus, with the help of Athena, obtains the equipment to the detriment of Ajax. In the *Little Iliad*, Odysseus then departs for Scyros to meet Achilles' son Neoptolemus, whom he gives his father's armour before they both return to Troy.[18] In the epigrams, Odysseus' voyage to Scyros ends in a shipwreck; as a result, almost providentially, the shield of Achilles washes up on the shore of Salamis, at the tomb of Ajax, whose death followed from the unfair judgment.[19] Epigram 9.115 thus connects the shield to the concept of poetic justice:

17 See already Aristotle, *Poetics* 25, 1461a33–35. On the history of these doubts, see Edwards 1991, 323. For a detailed ancient discussion, see Porphyry, *Homeric Questions on the Iliad*, Y 259–72; cf. also Cirio 1980–1981.

18 For the iconography of Odysseus giving the arms of Achilles to Neoptolemus, see the tondo of the Douris' red figure cup in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (ca. 500–480 BCE). Typically, the design of the shield bears no likeness at all to the shield described by Homer.

19 The same story is reported in Pausanias 1.35.4: "About the judgment concerning the armour I heard a story of the Aeolians who afterwards settled at Ilium, to the effect that when Odysseus suffered shipwreck the armour was cast ashore near the grave of Ajax" (trans. W. H. S. Jones).

> The shield of Achilles that had drunk the blood of Hector,
> Was gained through the wrong judgment by the son of Laertes;
> But when he suffered shipwreck the sea robbed him of it, and
> floated it ashore
> By the tomb of Ajax, and not in Ithaca.
>
> (*Palatine Anthology*, 9.115, trans. W. R. Paton modified)

The horizon of the injustice committed and rectified shows the shield as a triple survivor: both Achilles who bore it in battle and Hector whose blood the shield "had drunk" are dead, and so is Ajax, who should have inherited it. In the *Iliad*, the shield of Achilles is always expansive, whether as embracing the whole universe, or as emitting a blinding light on the battlefield. Here, in stark contrast to this glory, the shield is lonely and diminished, cast ashore in a landscape that suggests desolation.[20] Epigram 9.116 then zooms in on the shield itself:

> The shield cries aloud and beats against the tomb,
> Summoning you, its worthy bearer:
> "Awake, son of Telamon, the shield of Achilles is yours."
>
> (*Palatine Anthology*, 9.116, trans. W. R. Paton)

The connection to 9.115 is obvious: to say that the shield "had drunk the blood of Hector" is to personify it in a usual poetic manner; but the consumed blood also renders the shield alive and capable of speech (remember the *Odyssey* and the afterlife of souls in the underworld). The shield uses this capacity to lament its post-Iliadic fortune, and it does so in a way that is both genuinely funny and deeply sad. In this laconic tragicomedy, the most glorious ekphrastic object turns into an unseen castaway, one among the many speaking objects that inhabit the epigrammatic world, including other speaking shields.[21] A certain poetic equalization is at work here – all the more so because the shipwreck is another epigrammatic theme *par excellence*. Clearly, this very particular shield is still an *implied* ekphrastic object, but it is reimagined through the change of

20 Epigram 9.115b maintains the narrow perspective on the issue of justice, praising Poseidon, whose just action reversed the original judgment of the arms and brought the shield's glory to Salamis, to the tomb of Ajax.

21 See *Palatine Anthology* 6.124, 6.125, 6.127, 6.178, 6.264.

scale that throws it into an open maritime landscape: suddenly, the universal ekphrastic icon turns into an actor abandoned in the world at large.

As with all epigrams, what we appreciate is the art of achieving the greatest effect with the minimum words. Hence the importance of creating an atmosphere that surrounds what is said. Something similar is also true of ekphrasis, since the latter achieves its effect of palpability by suggesting sensible qualities that derive not only from linguistic meaning, but also from the materiality of the voice (or the writing) and from how we literally *feel* particular words. The quoted epigram relies on this palpability as it leads us from the large to the small, and offers its own concise description of an action.[22] Indirectly but logically, we are reminded that ekphrasis and epigram exploit the opposite sides of poetic closure: having originated in inscribed verse, the epigrammatic brevity implies a precise physical size of the object evoked; the ekphrastic instruction, on the other hand, can make any object expand in our imagination, regardless of its physical size. This polarity implies that these two different strategies converge through a shared interest in scale.[23]

There is a lot to be said regarding scale and animation, and also the imagination's own handling of scale as independent of the natural size of things (reading or hearing the shield of Achilles, we do not imagine the figures on it as corresponding to the size of an actual shield). As I am unable to develop this line of enquiry here, I would instead like to remark upon the agency of the shield in the quoted epigram, which is exemplary of a broad range of epigrams in which material things are animated by an inherent power of voice, which belongs as much to these things as to the poems that let them act upon us. This performative model is also assumed in the epic ekphrasis, whose performance by human voice takes on itself the voices of the animate matter of the shield. If it is true that "the voice is the site of perhaps the most radical of all subjective divisions – the division between meaning and materiality" (Silverman 1988, 44),[24] then

22 I cannot digress into the ekphrastic epigram and its inherently paradoxical nature. Squire 2010, 592n10, lists a number of important references, including Chinn 2005 and Prioux 2007. Vitry 1894 offers a still useful catalogue of ekphrastic epigrams.

23 On the "semantics of scale" in Hellenistic art and poetry, see Squire 2016b. My reading of the epigrams on the shield of Achilles is very close to Squire 2011, 335–36n78, which emphasizes how this shield, projected in the epigrammatic medium, "figures the ambiguous ontology of epigram between inscribed physical monument and anthologized literary fiction."

24 Quoted in Fredrick 1999, 70.

the poetic performance is a balancing act that strives to hold both sides of this division together,[25] with a special feeling for those moments where materiality prevails and thereby the possibilities of sense become all the richer – and more ambiguous as well.

In our case, these possibilities are enriched by the independence of the shield's own epigrammatic voice, which does not arise from any of the figures on the shield to whom Homer ascribes a voice in the *Iliad*. Here, the shield's animation is understood as inherent to the whole artefact as a single thing, which implies yet another instance of recursion or *mise en abyme* in relation to the "original" Homeric ekphrasis. Moreover, the shield expresses here its own view about who its rightful owner should have been, which is a remarkable instance of counterfactual imagination.[26] This further confirms that only *looking at* a silent shield would never tell us all there is to know about it. The epigram really suggests an agency that may go beyond the god's original design, and yet it still develops the implications of his animating craft that can make nature artificial and artifice natural.

The Greek and Roman ekphrastic tradition will take this agency in different directions, whether by elaborating new versions of the shield of Achilles (as Euripides, the author of *Ilias Latina*, Philostratus the Younger, or Quintus of Smyrna will do) or by creating new ekphrastic shields (those of Heracles, of Aeneas, of Theseus, or of Dionysus, among others). What these shields and many other ekphrastic creations share is the irreducibility of their animate and animating mode to something which would be alive in only a borrowed or metaphorical sense. The "kind of indeterminate ontology" with which we started will underlie this whole tradition where imagined figures become, quite literally, *matter* for further imaginations. As Michael Squire puts it, the ekphrastic tradition will work in the wake of the Homeric object that "slips *between* different ontological registers" and "is now raw matter, now worked image" (Squire 2011, 337). In this respect, I wanted to emphasize that this oscillation can only be efficient insofar as ekphrasis works its magic by relying on a real contiguity between the raw state of material imagination and its elaborate creations. The

25 Cf. Valéry 1960, 637, regarding poem as "hésitation prolongée entre le son et le sens."

26 Concerning the counterfactual imagination, see the epigram by Antipater of Sidon 7 GP (*Palatine Anthology* 7.146), where the personified Virtue sits at the tomb of Ajax and, mourning the outcome of the quarrel between Ajax and Odysseus over the arms of Achilles, imagines what the armour itself might say about it. See Harder 2007, 413–14.

great art historian Erwin Panofsky asserts, in a footnote to his interpretation of Disney cartoon animations, that to animate means to "endow lifeless things with life, or living things with a different kind of life" (Panofsky 1959, 23n1). In its original Homeric form and its long afterlife, the ekphrastic shield of Achilles fulfils both of these interpretations – reminding us that to limit life to only certain realms of being is not a natural but an artificial gesture.[27]

27 This chapter overlaps partly with some passages from Thein 2022. This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund project "Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World" (reg. no.: CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000734).

Navigating Poetry as Object and Object as Poetry: Optatian Porfyry and the Ancient History of *Dinggedichte*

MICHAEL SQUIRE

As critical term, *Dinggedicht* is an unabashedly modern invention. Coined by Kurt Oppert in 1926, and used to characterize work by the likes of Eduard Mörike, Conrad Ferdinand Meyer, and Rainer Maria Rilke (Oppert 1926), the phrase sought to diagnose a modernist turn in poetic form and voice – a new devotion to material objects, bound up with a new concern for the subjectivity of the speaking poet. Just as *Dinggedicht* is a recent denomination, applied to the work of relatively recent poets, it can be easy to assume that the term describes a modern literary phenomenon. Approached from the perspective of twenty-first-century "thing theory," *Dinggedichte* have even been associated with particular aspects of modern-day cultural life: a dissatisfaction, for example, with our day-to-day interactions with the world around us (in turn bound up with a late capitalist moment, or else with a changed ecological sensitivity); a new aesthetic or empirical awareness, premised on changed sorts of material or sensory engagement; an interest in redefining the relationships between human subjects and inanimate objects; and a new sense of the materiality of language – a self-conscious attentiveness to the physical objecthood, indeed the very "thingness," of poetic form.[1]

1 See in particular Brown 2001; further developed in, e.g., Brown 2015 and Stout 2018.