Australasian
Association
of Writing
Programs

TEXT SPECIAL ISSUES

Number 63 October 2021

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

Seeing things as they are: Writing back to objects in unfamiliar localities

Claire Rosslyn Wilson

To cite this article: Wilson, C.R. (2021). Seeing things as they are: Writing back to objects in unfamiliar localities. In M. Saward and D. Wain (Eds.) *Writing through things 2: The thing as writing prompt*. TEXT Special Issue 63.
<https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.29727>

University of Canberra

Claire Rosslyn Wilson

Seeing things as they are: Writing back to objects in unfamiliar localities

Abstract:

This article reflects on the way objects can become part of the creative writing process in unfamiliar cultural contexts. I draw from my example of writing haiku in response to everyday objects found in Barcelona public space, but more than an analysis of form this article aims to address ways in which the thing-power of objects can train a poet to see more clearly in unfamiliar environments. Drawing from the research of political theorist Jane Bennett (2010) and her investigation of thing-power, as well as poets such as Francis Ponge and Elizabeth Bishop, the paper pushes past viewing objects simply as tools for human subjects and questions what happens when one explores the thingliness of objects themselves. By paying attention to local spaces through the prism of objects moving within those spaces, the paper explores ways in which creative practice can reflect on unfamiliar cultural contexts. Through my research I tested in what ways critical reflection through objects might encourage the writer to see things as they are rather than as they appear, question the influence of past experience, and enhance a receptivity to unfamiliar things.

Biographical note:

Claire Rosslyn Wilson is a PhD candidate at the University of Canberra where she is researching creative writing and the process of cultural adjustment. She co-wrote *Freelancing in the Creative Industries* (Oxford University Press, 2015) and is a co-editor of *Coolabah*, of the Transnational and Australian Studies Centre in the University of Barcelona. Collaborations and discussion welcome: clairerosslynwilson@gmail.com

Keywords:

Creative writing, thing-power, intercultural

Seeing objects

Learning to see clearly in an unfamiliar environment is deceptively difficult. More than just looking with an uncritical eye at the surface of things in order to obtain information, seeing tries to go deeper into what's really there. As art historian Bates Lowry posits, the act of seeing is a learned skill: 'We are not born with a knowledge of how to see, any more than we are born with a knowledge of how to speak English. We are born only with the ability to learn how' (1967, p. 13). This learning is made difficult by the limitations of perception, which is a fragmented process (Rogers, 2017) supplemented by past experiences and accumulated knowledge of the world to fill the gaps. Given this incomplete way of perceiving an environment, attention plays an important role in what is absorbed. Art critic John Berger argues that seeing is not just an unbiased, mechanical process but is formed by choices: 'We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice' (Berger, 1972/2008, p. 5). As theatre academic Simon Murray highlights, Berger called upon viewers to pay attention to the complexity of seeing: 'how we understand a picture is part of a huge and complex negotiation between *who* we are, *what* we believe, *how* we see the world, *where* we are in that world, *and* the image itself' (2017, p. 431; emphasis in original). It's not just about what one looks at, but also how. The ways one sees are made up of a mix of decisions, influences, beliefs and experiences that are not always apparent. This process of seeing, with choices often made at a subconscious level, can direct attention and therefore what information is taken in, allowing other information to pass unnoticed. As philosopher and psychologist William James observes, 'Millions of items of the outward order are present to my senses which never properly enter into my experience. Why? Because they have no *interest* for me' (1890/2007, p. 402; emphasis in original).

I was particularly interested in where one pays attention in the context of my process of cultural adaptation in Barcelona, during which time I implemented a creative practice of taking photographs of objects and writing haiku in the unfamiliar environment. The role of attention is of particular interest in unfamiliar cultural settings in which there is an overwhelming amount of new information to process, much of which doesn't fit into learnt patterns. What one sees is not necessarily what one expects from past experiences. This can jolt one out of routine ways of observing the world, but it becomes a complex space of trying to fit past experiences and expectations onto an unfamiliar context. As James states '*My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind*' (1890/2007, p. 402; emphasis in original). If what one notices is driven by personal ideology, social or cultural context and past experience, which shape a person's interests, then what knowledge is gained from observation is significantly shaped by the individual and their context. This becomes very relevant when past experience is at disharmony with a current cultural context. Psychologist Daniel Kahneman highlights that 'jumping to conclusions is risky when the situation is unfamiliar, the stakes are high, and there is no time to collect more information. These are the circumstances in which intuitive errors are probable' (2013, p. 79). According to Kahneman these intuitive leaps, that might be based on incomplete information, memories, past experiences or other

sources such as priming, can be checked through a more deliberate thought process that is slower, and more calculating and conscious.

The thing itself

The way one reads and understands objects can also be influenced by one's past experiences. As social scientist Wim de Muijnck (2013) explains, the effect of objects can be influenced by cultural expectations:

A person's repertoire of activities and experiences will for a good deal be shaped by his social environment and cultural background. He will have learned from others in which ways he can respond to specific things, and which responses are appropriate in which contexts... In this way, it may depend on the worldview and practices that are dominant in a person's culture which things this person will or will not be able to find significant. (pp. 1303-1304)

While responses to the objects in one's environment might seem very personalised, they are influenced by social expectations. Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed explains this social context in terms of the way one is 'supposed' to feel about certain objects, where there are assumptions that certain things must make one happy, observing that 'we become alienated – out of line with an affective community – when we do not experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are already attributed as being good' (2010, p. 37). Ahmed describes an example of the melancholic migrant who holds onto an unhappy object. She explains that 'once an object is a feeling-cause, it can cause feeling, so that when we feel the feeling we expect to feel we are affirmed' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 40). Sometimes, when adapting to an unfamiliar culture, such as in my experience in Barcelona, expectations about what one is meant to feel towards certain objects is disrupted. This disruption provides an opportunity to cross-examine the ingrained responses to certain objects, both from past cultural contexts and the unfamiliar one, which might have its own expectations around certain objects.

Close observation in creative practice has the potential to interrogate these layers of meanings and expectations held within objects. For example, Distinguished Professor of Creative Practice Jen Webb argues for close observation in poetry as a way to 'deliver phenomenological understandings and insights' which 'force the reader's attention on the thing itself, rather than on rehearsed ways of encountering that thing' (2009, p. 5). Literary theorist Anastasia Graf raises a similar point in the work of Elizabeth Bishop, especially with regards to Bishop's use of objects: 'The difficulty here is one of attention, of being quiet and still enough to see the object rather than one's reaction to it' (2005, p. 94). English professor Christine Wiesensthal (2016) applied an approach for close observation of objects to her creative writing classes, in which she used 'object exercises' as a pedagogical tool:

I first turned to things in an attempt to arrest my students: to make them stop. Stare. Touch. And yes, sniff. To pay attention to things... By placing the emphasis on embodied experience, 'object exercises' sharpen student writers' awareness of themselves (not their iphones) as the primary focalising device or filter through which the world is processed – an awareness prerequisite to any form of "attentional control". (p. 195)

According to Wiesenthal, through the prism of objects, the students became more aware of their placement in the world and the attention they paid to the things around them. It was a way of training and controlling their attention through close observation of concrete objects, becoming more aware of the ways in which they filtered information. I borrowed from this approach in the creative practice I outline in this paper, in that I shone the light on everyday objects themselves in an attempt to be more conscious of where I was directing my attention in the unfamiliar environment.

However, as Graf explains, the quietening of the self necessary in order to give attention to the object is a difficult process, in which the 'simpler the object, the more difficult the prolonged vigilance' (2005, p. 94). Bishop's poems, for example, remind the reader to keep an eye on the things themselves. As Graf argues with regards to the poem 'The Monument', 'Left face to face with the monument at the end of the poem, we must, Bishop cautions us, watch it closely. The difficulty is not discovering the best, or correct, interpretation; rather, it is declining to interpret at all' (2005, p. 94). Not only is it necessary to be conscious of one's own responses, which might well be formed by previous cultural experiences or assumptions, but also objects themselves can resist interpretation. This seemingly simple process of paying attention to things and sharpening awareness of oneself can be deceptively complicated, because entwined in this process is the difficulty of perceiving things clearly. Poet and essayist Francis Ponge (1899-1988) for example, in his effort to perceive the thingliness of things in his prose poems, not only presents the objects themselves, but also draws attention 'to the fact that they are presented' (Higgins, 1979, p. 28) by a human; the objects are not speaking for themselves, no matter how objectively they seem to be observed. Ponge counterbalances this human bias with, as translator Margaret Guion notes in an introduction to Ponge's work, 'a manipulation, a fundamental disrespect for words, etc. [to] give the impression of a new idiom that will produce the same effect of surprise and novelty as the object we are looking at' (Ponge, 1994, p. xii). Through his focused attention, as well as his use of language, Ponge was making the objects seem strange and unfamiliar, endeavouring to see them for themselves, but with the understanding that he would always be standing on the outside.

Thing theorists hint at this complex nature between objects and their function as human tools in the distinction between objects and things. Literary theorist Bill Brown argues that that one notices the thingness of objects 'when they stop working for us' (2001, p. 4), when they stop being used as merely tool for human action that is so familiar it fades into the background (such as a door handle or a cup). Political theorist Jane Bennett recognises the potential of these fluid states of being of objects as a way to challenge a human-centric perception of the world. She

highlights ‘the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle’ (Bennett, 2010, p. 6) in what she terms ‘thing-power’. She gives an example of being stopped in her tracks by a collection of items on the street that in themselves could be considered rubbish but that together created a combination that called out to her.

Bennett uses a practice of writing to search out this foreign thing-power, explaining that she aims to ‘enhance my receptivity to thing-power by writing about it, by giving an account of the thing-ness of things that might enable me to feel it more intensely’ (2004, p. 349). Bennett (2004) explains the purpose of this approach in the following way:

I pursue this project in the hope of fostering greater recognition of the agential powers of natural and artifactual things, greater awareness of the dense web of their connections with each other and with human bodies, and, finally, a more cautious, intelligent approach to our interventions in that ecology. (p. 349)

This is similar to Ponge’s approach to ‘speak not of or about these things but simply speak them ‘in terms of their own value and for themselves’’ (1994, p. xii) beyond their usual human-imposed value and significance. Both Ponge and Bennett sought to increase their sensitivity to things they didn’t initially understand or to things that could, due to their everyday nature, pass by unnoticed. This gap between what is seen, and a person’s understanding of that thing, is particularly important to acknowledge in an unfamiliar cultural context where everyday objects can have different meanings. I came across changing meaning of everyday objects in this study, where my assumptions or prior knowledge filtered into my interpretation of what I saw in the unfamiliar context. The photographs and haiku were my response to this challenge, which I used to question ‘rehearsed ways of encountering that thing’ (Webb, 2009, p. 5), since past knowledge can lead to assumptions or bias that are not useful in intercultural contexts.

When I was adapting to the unfamiliar context of Barcelona, I turned to objects as a way to train myself to navigate the overwhelming amount of information and to be attentive to where I was directing my attention. Objects are an interesting focal point in the exploration of the foreign as they have the capacity to be both close (in that they are tools we might use or handle every day) and also alien (one can never fully see from the perspective of an object). More than just aesthetic objects to write about in order to achieve, in a similar vein to Modernist poets, ‘moments of transcendent understanding’ (Olson, 2009, p. 3), close observation of both the familiarity and strangeness of objects became a way to implement, in Bennett’s words, a ‘more cautious, intelligent approach’ (2004, p. 349) to my intervention in this unfamiliar place. As Bennett (2010) directs, a person must:

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

By centring the non-human in an effort to bring attention to processes of othering, I sought to challenge my perspective through an encounter with that which I couldn't fully understand. It is this alien, thing-quality of objects that I paid particular attention to because 1) it trained me to look more carefully at my environment and 2) it encouraged me to consider perspectives that lay outside my field of knowledge.

Two snapshots

While adapting to the unfamiliar cultural context of Barcelona I undertook a process of taking photographs of objects that called out to me and reflecting on these objects through writing haiku. Following Bennett's approach, I refer to objects here in an open sense, searching out the thing-power arising 'from bodies inorganic as well as organic' (2010, p. 6). I used photography as a tool, rather than writing directly to the objects in situ, as the photographs gave me a chance to reflect on the overwhelming amount of new information I was encountering. Jean Baudrillard observes the way photographs can turn down the noise and create a moment of calm in which an object can be observed without its usual movement, in what he refers to as the silence of the photograph: 'photographs return objects to a state of stillness and silence', where the 'the noise and violence around them' (1999, pp. 135-136) is detached from the image. This practice is similar to Brown's argument that 'photography provides a means of catching the shadows cast by ephemeral objects of our world, which we can then analyse later at our leisure' (2004, p. 24). As objects are constantly evolving and moving in the public space, photography was a way to pause this onslaught of information in order to unpack it. But photographs also served to see in more depth, searching out the shadows that are perhaps at first overlooked. This process creates a space for Kahneman's (2013) slow thinking, which serves to check the intuitive errors that can occur in unfamiliar situations.

I purposefully placed objects at the centre of my photographs. This centring of the thingness of objects, objects that are normally at the periphery, was intended to lend weight to their authority. It was not the beautiful sites nor the people of the city to whom I turned my attention, but to the potentially overlooked details. I kept the frames very tight, capturing the object and little else, in a similar approach to still life paintings or photographer Paul Strand's fragmented object photographs. As Strand observed in his practice of taking close up photographs of still life objects, it is possible to discover the thingness of an object that is normally hidden by its everyday, practical uses. By making the objects into fragments through his tight frames, Strand focused on the form and aesthetic over the function (Brown, 2003). It was a way of breaking down the associations one might already hold of an object and instead look first at the object for itself – what are its resonances and what is it doing?

Additionally, I was purposefully keeping some of the information on the outside of the frame, in a disorientating approach that sought to break away from rehearsed ways of seeing. I used this approach as a way of 'looking more closely' and 'sharpening my eye' (Schultheis & Frisinghelli, 2012, pp. 10-12). But I also wanted to draw attention to the potentially misleading

way of reading the context around an object in an unfamiliar setting. For example, an object bought in the museum shop, argues researcher Louise Green, holds ‘the aura associated with authentic archaeological artefacts’ (2008, p. 178) – it carries with it certain perceptions and values, such as judgements (and perhaps stereotypes) of what traditional craft is, the evocation of a Western tradition of studying foreign cultures and a perceived value given its placement in a recognised cultural institution. Discarded in the street, this craft object might be overlooked as junk. Where the object is encountered can influence the way a person reads or understands it, potentially projecting their own understanding of a certain context onto the object. By removing much of the context of the photograph I was warning myself to be careful of filling in the context with my own associations, which might or might not be relevant in this unfamiliar place.

In writing back to the objects I chose haiku, in part because of its capacity to focus in on the small details of life in a brief and compressed form. As poet Gabriel Rosenstock explains, ‘The microscopic focus of the haiku reveals the inner order and beauty of existence, over and over again. All things come to life – including a crust of bread!’ (2009, p. 4). This attention to detail complemented the photography of objects, in which I was isolating fragments from the locality around me in order to see them better. As professor of Japanese literature and culture Haruo Shirane explains, ‘The haiku is often thought to be a snapshot...But the brevity of the hokku precludes the kind of detail or coherence normally associated with descriptive representation. The hokku and the successive verses can provide only fragments of the scene’ (2019, pp. 462-463). This approach reflected my aim of learning to see in a complex and unfamiliar environment, by focusing on the objects as they were and not attempting to make meaning out of them. Rosenstock emphasises that in haiku, ‘we discover, see and breathe, for a moment, those interstices, those fleeting moments of reality which are as substantial or as insubstantial as a rock, as ourselves’ (2009, p. 19). I was not trying to make sense of these moments of reality; I was simply endeavouring to capture a moment in a poem. Not only did these fragments serve to focus attention in an overwhelming environment, the process also sought to suspend meaning-making. As haiku expert Kenneth Yasuda (1957/2001) emphasises:

haiku has something in common with painting, in the representation of the objects alone, without comment, never presented to be other than what it is, but not represented completely as it is ... [the haiku poet] does not give us meaning; he gives us the concrete objects which have meaning, because he has so experienced them. (p. 9)

I used this concise nature of the form to focus on the things as I perceived them to be, rather than endeavouring to explain them in their context or in relation to my interaction with them. This is not dissimilar to poet Francis Ponge’s prose poems about objects, in which he wrote the object to life, in a way letting its presence speak for itself. However, in these haiku, in difference to Ponge’s approach, I avoided descriptive representation and instead sought to capture a moment in this more fleeting form. I had previously applied an approach more akin to Ponge’s, in that I selected objects and endeavoured to describe their details; however, I found that even though I was writing about the object I noticed extraneous details would find their

way into the poems, details that were more related to my experiences than the object itself. I attributed this in part to the length – I implemented a method of free writing, which inevitably took me away from the object, which in principle did not detract from the poem, but which did not meet the objectives of my research. When I instead tried to write more closely to the object and what I saw, it became a dull poem that was overly descriptive and lacked depth. The haiku encouraged me to keep my observations short, forestalling tangents or dull descriptions. But it also prevented me from making conclusions in this early stage of learning ways of seeing in an unfamiliar environment. As Rosenstock argues, ‘As the expression of a sensation instantaneously roused by the meaning of an apparently commonplace event offered by nature or by human experience, the *haiku* refuses an explanation of the cause – effect type’ (2009, p. 19). The haiku is pared down and brief, not arguing a point but rather presenting an image and letting intuition and the immediacy of the composition speak for itself. As Yasuda explains, there ‘can be no commentary, no conclusion; the concrete, sensuous material to be intuited must stand alone’ (1957/2001, p. 5). I did not want to rush into making potentially erroneous connections in an unfamiliar cultural context, and the haiku form, with its ‘lightness of touch’ and understated form (Bullock, 2013, p. 44), supported this aim.

Slippages

Writing the haiku in response to the objects in the photographs enabled a process of reflection on the slippages between observation and understanding; what was I missing? What was out of the frame and why? What was I (adventently or inadvertently) saying with the double juxtaposition of the image/poem and the two ‘images’ within the structure of the haiku? In reflecting on the productivity of these juxtapositions, I found the haiku cut particularly useful.

The element of the cut in the haiku is the juxtaposition of two poetic images, often using one word to make this pivoting from one image to another. As Shirane explains, a ‘key aspect of haiku was the ‘cutting word’ (*kireji*), which splits the poem in two and allows the two halves to reverberate’ (2019, p. 461). The cutting words force a breath in the poem, a pause that draws attention to the point where the two images meet. Rosenstock explains that the dynamic pause in haiku is not used as an escape, but rather ‘to allow ourselves to seep into the life of things...Haiku is a gentle way of coming to a stop’ (2009, p. 1). This coming to a stop encourages deeper reflection on the part of the poet, as a way to open up to new ways of seeing. The tangential relationship of the two images, or elements, in the haiku resists a direct comparison. Instead, the two rub against each other. This resistance to a simplistic ‘compare and contrast’ reading of the two elements echoes the difficulty of direct cultural comparisons. In both cases, observed elements simultaneously talked to and resisted each other, creating a dialogue in which hasty conclusions are avoided. Rather, the cut is where the poem pivots and changes direction, creating a moment of insight as it does so.

My questions at this point were: in what ways did the objects and haiku interact with one another and what did this exchange achieve in the unfamiliar cultural context? In the initial

drafts I found that the haiku too obviously described the objects. This was perhaps as a result to trying to make sense of my environment by focusing on what I saw rather than what I expected to see. It was a way of training my eye and the haiku was perhaps a casualty of this process. Yet I didn't want the haiku to be read as a caption to the photographed object.

In some cases I used a type of simile between the object and the poem or I used one half of the haiku to poetically add to the photograph while the other part suggested something that was outside the frame of the photograph – for example, 'a forest of white masts/rots,/a peddler wets feet and rests', where the peddler is not visible in the image. In this example (see Figure 1 for the referenced image) the photograph is one of luxury yachts, which are in a part of Barcelona that has many illegal vendors who have migrated (often living without papers) from parts of Africa and South Asia, catering to the mass of tourists to the area.

Figure 1: Barcelona boats, photograph by Claire Rosslyn Wilson

This photograph is from a beautiful part of the city and I when visited I recalled a colleague who used to work in Barcelona fondly remembering trips to the beach after work. I imagined her in this place, but I found her idyllic image was complicated by the work of the hawkers (and all that implied in the social framework of the city), the drunk tourists and the rubbish on the beach. The brief snapshot of the photograph and the haiku allowed me to hint at complex contradictions without rushing to explain them while I was still in the process of understanding them myself.

However, the resulting juxtaposition was more than a neutral recording of objects in a place. As I reviewed the final list of things I chose to photograph, it seemed that I was also responding to what I felt were pressure points in the city; not just socially, as in the above example, but also for my own sense of comfort (or rather discomfort) in certain spaces of the city. There are several images of the dense architecture with brief, contained glimpses of nature, which reflected the way I grappled with my feelings towards living in the city. This reflection on my own place in the city is perhaps in tension with my original aim with the photographed objects and haiku, that is of learning ways of seeing more clearly. As I reflected on which haiku were the stronger poems, and as I reduced the photographs to ones that were more aesthetically pleasing, I noticed that in several of them I had positioned my experience within the poem, however subtly. Did this interfere with the observation of place that I was trying to achieve? The objects in the photographs were still things that called out to me in my day-to-day routines in what Bennett refers to as thing-power, but was my final selection overly biased by my experience of getting to know the city? My priority at the editing stage was to make a strong collection of photographed objects and haiku, and many of the everyday objects weren't very engaging aesthetically. Additionally, I found that the haiku written about these objects didn't reverberate; they were stuck at the surface level (see for example the photographs in Figure 2). Was this because of the mundane nature of the object or was it because I was not able to get past its surface?

Figure 2: Selection of photographs taken in Barcelona which had a drafted haiku, but which didn't make it to the final selection

As I edited the haiku – deepening my use of the cut – I encountered this tension between close observation and letting my personal experience take over the poem. In the above example of the yacht/peddler for example, the cutting word ‘rots’ sets a tone to the poem and alludes to the moral decay of the super-rich. This word, chosen for poetic impact, is perhaps projecting my values about wealth and inequality onto what I saw. The masts and the peddlers are an accurate juxtaposition, even though they weren’t both present in the photograph, but the insight I was trying to achieve in the cut of the haiku took the poem in a different direction. This direction was informed by my overall observations in Barcelona, but it also drew on my own beliefs and background.

While editing more tension into the cut, I needed to let my imagination off the leash of strict observation of my environment to create more interesting use of the cut in the haiku, potentially taking the resulting poem further from what I observed. This might be inevitable, as a creative response cannot be a neutral telling of facts, nor would one want it to be. It might be in this creative leap that one can capture the essence of a place that can’t be captured in a photograph. However, presenting the objects, in the words of Yasuda (1957/2001), as they were but not *completely* as they were, was a delicate balance. Perhaps one could argue that I need to perfect my haiku craft, but what I found interesting in the context of the research was the way the objects seemed to recede in the haiku.

Writing back to objects

In this creative experiment, did the object become no more than a writing prompt? Did the objects really increase sensitivity to what I couldn’t understand, in Bennett’s context of writing about objects, or was I responding to my reaction to the object more than the object itself? While the process of looking out for objects and putting them at the centre of the work helped me observe things I might otherwise have overlooked, I had more trouble disentangling them from my own experience of making sense of my environment. The thing-power of the objects was perhaps retained more in the photographs than in the responding haiku.

Through the research I found writing around objects to be a slippery process in which it was easy to lose sight of the object itself. Ponge alludes to the shiftiness of objects in relation to the writing process when he writes that he will ‘never sacrifice the object of my study in order to enhance some verbal turn discovered on the subject, nor piece together any such discoveries in a poem’ (1948/2008, p. 3). Instead, he insists on going ‘back to the object itself, to its raw quality, its *difference*’ and if the poem loses its way, to ‘constantly immerse my eyes and mind in [the Loire]. Any time they dry up over an expression, dip them back into the waters of the river’ (Ponge, 1948/2008, p. 3). As I reviewed the haiku and photographs, I reflected on my treatment of the objects and evaluated whether I was bending them to my own uses. Ponge puts the rights of the object over that of the poem, and yet he posits that the poetic form still has a role by producing ‘a play of mirrors that can reveal certain persistently obscure aspects of the object. The reciprocal clash of words, the verbal analogies are *one* of the means for studying

the object in depth' (1948/2008, p. 4). As I wrote to the objects, I did observe them with more intention, responding not just to their physical appearance, but also to the way they might potentially interact with the space, people and objects around them. Writing to the objects was one way of exploring both their familiarity and strangeness in temporary fragments. As we each changed and evolved, these fragments also developed.

Writing to objects is a useful exercise – I found it highlighted the intrusion of past experiences or set ideas as the object's thingness receded and my 'observations' took over. This is not necessarily something to be avoided in a poem, but being more aware of the border between objective observation and the projection of beliefs is useful when writing across cultures. Exploring this border – through the place of the object, the way an object recedes or pushes back in a poem – can lead to reflection upon the way one might interact with cultures one doesn't yet understand. Is the unfamiliar culture receding under a projection of firmly held beliefs or biases?

By writing to objects that can't speak back, one can perhaps aim for a 'self-reserved lingering over the objects of observation that recognises both the richness and the limits of the endeavor' and recognise that 'an understanding, acquired in the presence of the Other, cannot be monologic, although the response must belong to us rather than to objects' (Graf, 2005, pp. 92-93). It is not the objects themselves that are speaking, but rather the poet is reflecting through the encounter with the object; seeing themselves against the boundaries of the object. This is not to say that it is a purely ego-centric enterprise that uses the object merely as a writing prompt. Rather, it is a chance to confront the unknowable and turn down one's own response in order to listen as deeply as possible. For example Graf argues that Bishop's poetry, an 'act of deference, of speaking only through and with, not over, objects, is the vision of care for the world that the works of Bishop...create' (2005, p. 94). This act of not speaking over objects, of not using them merely as tools or as a reflection of human relationships, echoes Bennett's approach to observing the ways in which non-human actants behave in the world. Quietening the self, and underlining the limitations of the narrator's point of view, provides a space in the poem to question perceptions of place. Where does the encountered place end and the poet (with their assumptions and biases) begin?

Perhaps my perception of objects was imperfect, and my understanding of the place they inhabited incomplete, but it was through explorations of this inadequacy and partial perception that I came to have a better understanding of my limits of knowledge. It is not possible to see entirely from an object's (or another person's perspective), but it is through a reflective process of writing to objects that one can learn to quieten the self and pay attention to things that aren't easily understood.

Works cited

- Ahmed, S. (2010). Happy objects. In M. Gregg & G. J. Seigworth (Eds.), *The affect theory reader* (pp. 30-51). Duke University Press.
- Baudrillard, J. (1999). *Photographs 1985 - 1998*. Neue Galerie Graz.
- Bennett, J. (2004). The force of things: Steps toward an ecology of matter. *Political Theory*, 32(3), 347-372. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4148158>
- Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things*. Duke University Press.
- Berger, J. (2008). *Ways of seeing*. Penguin. (Original work published 1972)
- Brown, B. (2001). Thing theory. *Critical Inquiry*, 28(1), 1-22. <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0093-1896%28200123%2928%3A1%3C1%3ATT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-4>
- Brown, B. (2003). *A sense of things The object matter of American literature*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Brown, B. (Ed.) (2004). *Things*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Bullock, O. (2013). The breath of haiku. *English in Aotearoa*, 79, 44-48. <https://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=374171251850790;res=IELHSS>
- de Muijnck, W. (2013). The meaning of lives and the meaning of things. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 14, 1291-1307. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-012-9382-y>
- Graf, A. (2005). Representing the other: A conversation among Mikhail Bakhtin, Elizabeth Bishop, and Wislawa Szymborska. *Comparative Literature*, 57(1), 84-99. <https://doi.org/10.1215/-57-1-84>
- Green, L. (2008). The social lives of handmade things: Configuring value in post-apartheid South Africa. *Social Dynamics*, 34(2), 174-185. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02533950802280048>
- Higgins, I. (1979). *Francis Ponge*. Athlone Press.
- James, W. (2007). *The principles of psychology, Volume 1*. Cosimo Press. (Original work published 1890)
- Kahneman, D. (2013). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Lowry, B. (1967). *The visual experience: An introduction to art*. Prentice-Hall.
- Murray, S. (2017). A conspiracy of orphans: John Berger and the art of creative attention. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 27(3), 429-432. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2017.1372962>
- Olson, L. (2009). *Modernism and the ordinary*. Oxford University Press.

- Ponge, F. (1994). *Selected poems: Francis Ponge*. C. K. Williams, J. Montague, & M. Guiton (Trans.), M. Guiton (Ed.). Wake Forest University Press.
- Ponge, F. (2008). *Mute objects of expression*. L. Fahnestock (Trans.). Archipelago Books. (Original work published 1948)
- Rogers, B. (2017). *Perception: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Rosenstock, G. (2009). *Haiku enlightenment*. Cambridge Scholars Publisher.
- Schultheis, F., & Frisinghelli, C. (Eds.). (2012). *Picturing Algeria Pierre Bourdieu*. Columbia University Press.
- Shirane, H. (2019). Haiku. *New Literary History*, 50(3), 461-465.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2019.0043>
- Webb, J. (2009). *Poetry and knowing, margins and mainstreams*. Paper presented at the 14th Annual Australasian Association of Writing Programs Conference, Hamilton, New Zealand.
<https://aawp.org.au/publications/the-margins-mainstreams-papers/>
- Wiesenthal, C. (2016). Material culture and creative writing pedagogy: A case for 'garbage land' (in real time and space). *New Writing: International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, 13(2), 194-203. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14790726.2015.1117497>
- Yasuda, K. (2001). *The Japanese haiku*. Tuttle Publishing. (Original work published 1957)

Acknowledgements

The research for this paper was developed as part of the author's PhD at the University of Canberra, and thanks goes to supervisors Distinguished Professor Jen Webb, Dr Jennifer Crawford and Dr Paul Munden. This research is supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship.