Literature in a Material World: An Introduction and Four *Object Lessons*

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In 1985, Madonna, queen of pop, sang to the world that she is a "material girl" and that we all are living in a "material world". The meaning of the pop song seems straightforward and clear: Madonna's persona in the song prefers material wealth ("cold hard cash") above vague promises and sentiments ("romance"). Interestingly however, in the comment section to the official music video on YouTube user @nicolealexandra1392 attributes Madonna's famous lines to Karl Marx. Obviously, this is a joke; still, the attribution makes some sense. Could it be that the song is not so much a celebration of consumer culture and economic logic (in the Reagan era), yet precisely a materialist critique that reveals the historical and material conditions underlying notions of romantic love?

The picture is further complicated by the music video, that adds another layer to the interpretation. In the video, not the suitors offering expensive jewels succeed in securing the love interest of the protagonist, yet rather a humbler character who offers her a modest bouquet of daisies. What does that signify? That the "material girl" is not so materialistic after all? That true love ultimately transcends material concerns, and that the romantic ideal is ultimately saved? Or should we also consider a far more cynical reading: that the "romantic" guy in the music video is portrayed as a more cunning "player" (or "lier", to use the words of the song), who even manages to seduce an "experienced" girl? Someone who is more subtle and more refined in veiling the material conditions of love?

Literary scholars who are interested in the material dimension of their study object could learn at least two important lessons from the case of Madonna's pop song. Firstly, their interest is not new at all, in spite of what labels such as *the material turn* or *new materialism* might suggest. They rather find themselves embedded in a long and heterogeneous tradition of writers, artists, thinkers, researchers who have *turned* to the "material world", ranging from (at least) Karl Marx to Marilyn Monroe – whose performance of *Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend* in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) has inspired Madonna's music video – and beyond. It goes without saying that the motivations behind the ever-returning interest in the material, and the methods deployed, be it artistic or

academic, differ widely. Still there is some common ground, since paying attention to the material is always somehow a *scandal*, a challenge and provocation towards a naturalized, yet often unvoiced doxa that privileges ideas over things, the spiritual over the material, meaning over matter, culture over nature, the human over the non-human.

Secondly, Madonna's lines, as explained above, make abundantly clear that definitions of the "material", as well as the attributes, features, meanings associated with it, may vary considerably. Seemingly self-explanatory utterances such as "I am a material girl" and "we live in a material world" may carry different and even contradictory significations, ranging from the glorification of capitalist consumer culture to a radical denunciation and critique of it in the tradition of an *old* materialism paying attention to the historical and material conditions of cultural phenomena. Alternatively, the two famous lines can also give rise to *new* materialist readings that question the ontological divisions between humans and things. As a "material" being, the girl in the song is made of the same "stuff" as the world she lives in. She is part of the network that connects objects to subjects in very fundamental ways. She not only uses objects, but is used, defined, determined, and constructed by other objects as well. She is an *assemblage*.

Notwithstanding the vastness and heterogeneity of the materialist endeavor, and the apparent difficulties of definition and delimitation, scholars such as Plate (2020) and Ryan and Weisheng (2024), to name but a few recent contributions, have published insightful overviews of what these materialisms might signify for literary studies today. Plate emphasizes (yet also nuances) the distinction between an *old* and a *new* materialism and points to influences from "material culture studies, book and print culture studies, and comparative textual media studies" (2020, 1), alongside Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory (2020, 4) and posthuman modes of thought in general (2020, 16). These influences congeal into different shapes in literary studies today, ranging from for instance a "(re)emergence of archival research and genetic criticism" to the "call for new, haptic, sensory, and intra-active new materialist modes of reading", taking into account the multimodality of literary texts (2020, 12). Overall, she claims, these new materialisms, diverse as they are, share an ethical dimension (in that they de-center the subject) and raise ontological questions (rather than epistemological or linguistic ones (2020, 16)).

Ryan and Weisheng, for their part, rather stress the continuity in materialist thinking across different schools and directions. They present a more concrete and hands-on object-oriented narratological approach, that, as they claim, is informed by three or four broad and interconnected strands of the materialist tradition in modernity, viz. (1) the "phenomenological and ontological approach to objects" (exemplified by Martin Heidegger), (2) the "Marxist-sociological/semiotic approach" (represented by Karl Marx, of course, but also by French sociologists and semiologists

like Jean Baudrillard and Roland Barthes), (3) "the material turn, or new object philosophy" (based on notions such as the decentering of the subject, the agency of things, flat ontology and network thinking), and (4) "thing theory, material culture studies and object-oriented literary criticism" (typically exemplified by Bill Brown's seminal work on thing theory, but this is only "one among many recent attempts to explore the importance of material things in human culture as well as in planetary life" (2024, 19)).

Typologies like Plate's and Ryan and Weisheng's show that materialism in literary studies is a many-headed monster. Rather than privileging one of the many materialist approaches, or theoretically discussing similarities and differences, antinomies and overlaps, we would like to present four vignettes that each deal with a case of literary materiality in different episodes of the history of Dutch literature and culture. These vignettes can be read as *object lessons*; they take their cue from one particular (real or imagined) object (a chair, a sword, a picture on a vase, a giant book) that tells us something about the functioning of objects and materiality in broader networks of storytelling, meaning making, literary production, circulation and reception. An Faems zooms in on the narrative functions of illustrious objects such as the Round Table and the Perilous Seat in Middle Dutch Arthurian romance. Lieke van Deinsen shows how a few lines of eighteenth-century poetry engraved in a sword add new layers of meaning to mute objects and grant them a role in an emerging remembrance culture surrounding the seventeenth-century national hero Johan van Oldenbarnevelt. Pieter Verstraeten argues that the short quasi-naïve poem "Marc groet 's morgens de dingen" by the interwar avant-garde poet Paul van Ostaijen hides a profound poetical reflection on the nature of things and their relation to the subject, to images, to literary language. Linde De Potter uses the remarkable giant "book" *Love Song*, a 1963 collaboration between the Flemish poet Hugo Claus and the Dutch painter Karel Appel, as a starting point to develop a model of reading that takes the material and multimodal dimension of texts into account.

Vignette 1: A Round Table and an Empty Seat

When one thinks of medieval Arthurian romance, the notion of the quest immediately comes to mind: knights undertaking journeys in search of objects. A chessboard, a coronet, the Grail – to name just a few examples from the European and Middle Dutch Arthurian tradition.[1] The desire for the object initiates a series of adventures that, for the knight(s) involved, are frequently accompanied by increasing self-knowledge and personal development. In addition, they discover

[1] In respectively the *Roman van Walewein*, *Torec* and the *Queeste vanden Grale*.

their position within the Arthurian community. The ultimate quest, the search for the Grail, relativizes these worldly concerns and introduces a distinctly spiritual dimension.

Extraordinary objects that serve as catalysts for narrative action are certainly ubiquitous in the enchanted world of Arthurian romance. Yet objects also play a structural role within the setting of Arthur's court itself. One object in particular is inextricably associated with Arthur and his court: the Round Table. This table, at which no one may claim the seat of honour and where all places seemingly carry equal status, represents a powerful ideal: no individual holds greater inherent importance than another.

Within the romances, the Round Table functions as a symbol of Arthur's court: it has even lent its name to the fellowship of Arthurian knights. The Knights of the Round Table exert considerable attraction on knights from outside the court, many of whom aspire to be admitted to this select fellowship. Yet the table has captured the imagination far beyond the fictional world as well, together with the ideal it embodies. This is evident, for instance, from the thirteenth-century physical example that can still be viewed in Winchester today, as well as from the round-table discussions organized by a wide variety of associations.[2]

However, to identify the Round Table solely with equality is to overlook the fact that there is indeed one seat that distinguishes itself from all the others: the perilous seat, or the *vresselijc sitten* in Middle Dutch. As the name suggests, this is a dangerous place, one that constitutes an adventure in its own right. Certain adventures in the Arthurian tradition are intended for only a single knight or function to affirm his exceptional status: even if several knights attempt to complete the challenge, they will invariably fail until the chosen knight undertakes it and succeeds alone. A well-known example is the sword in the stone, which many attempt to remove, but which only the young Arthur can draw effortlessly from its setting. The *vresselijc sitten* serves a similar narrative purpose: only the knight destined to bring the Grail quest to a successful conclusion may sit in this seat.

The perilous seat is part of the broader European Arthurian tradition. The motif is developed in Old French literature, notably in the *Lancelot-Grail* cycle, which was translated into several languages during the Middle Ages. The discussion that follows is based on the Middle Dutch tradition.[3] It aims to examine the narrative functions of the perilous seat in this tradition.

Anyone wishing to study Middle Dutch Arthurian literature cannot avoid engaging with another significant object: the *Lancelot Compilation*, an exceptional manuscript dating from ca. 1320–

[2] See Schmolke-Hasselmann (1982) and Micha (1976) on the origins and development of the Round Table in Old French literature.
[3] An overview of the Middle Dutch Arthurian tradition in Besamusca and Brandsma (2021).

1330. It contains ten Arthurian romances comprising more than 87,000 lines in total.[4] In the first text preserved in this manuscript, the *Lanceloet*, the *vresselijc sitten* is mentioned for the first time in line 15,249. Lanceloet has arrived at the castle of King Pelles, where he witnesses a ritual in which the Grail plays a central role. A dove carrying a censer enters the room, filling the space with a sweet fragrance. All those present kneel, and servants lay a table. After some time, a beautiful maiden appears, carrying a chalice. As she walks around the table, exquisite food miraculously appears upon it. The maiden is the daughter of King Pelles. That same evening, Lanceloet begets a son with her, believing – after drinking an enchanted potion – that he is lying with Queen Genevre. The romance immediately reveals the name of the son, Galaat, and links it to a flash forward:

> Den besten riddre die wesen mochte
> Ende die ten inde brochte
> Nader historien tale
> Davonturen vanden Grale,
> Die in dat Vreselike Sitten sat
> Vander Tafelronde, bedi in dat
> Ne sat noit ridder sonder hi,
> Hine moeste sterven ocht messcien daer bi.
> (*Lanceloet*, ll. 15245–15252)

Three aspects of this passage merit attention. First, narrative suspense is subordinated to clarity: it is immediately revealed that the knight conceived here will ultimately bring the Grail quest to its successful conclusion. Second, completing the Grail quest and safely taking one's place in the *vresselijc sitten* prove to be inseparably linked.[5] Third, the boundaries of the individual romance are crossed without hesitation. After all, Galaat will take his seat at the Round Table not in the *Lanceloet*, but in the *Queeste vanden Grale*, while the origins of the Round Table and its perilous seat are explained in the *Boek van Merline*. Foreshadowing of this kind thus helps to ensure cohesion among the various parts of the extensive cycle and prevents the audience from losing its way amid the seemingly endless succession of adventures. The verb tenses further indicate that the audience is assumed to be familiar both with the broader contours of the Arthurian tradition and with the specific characteristics of the *vresselijc sitten*.

[4] https://www.kb.nl/ontdekken-bewonderen/topstukken/lancelotcompilatie.
[5] See also the next citations and *Queeste vanden Grale*, ll. 4625-4646.

That the seat is dangerous becomes clear not only from its name, but also from what occurs when an overconfident knight is bold enough to sit in it. In line 31,380 of the *Lanceloet*, there is great joy at Arthur's court because, exceptionally, all 101 knights of the Round Table are present. The joy, however, is short-lived. Lanceloet, who is seated next to the *vresselijc sitten*, sees a text appear on the seat:

> […] "Op desen dach heden hiere
> Moete sterven Brumalt die fiere;
> Ende ne sterft hi niet, ons bedrieght
> Merlijns profechie ende lieght."
> (*Lanceloet*, ll. 31398–31401)

After the meal, an unknown knight dressed in white appears, weeping uncontrollably. He turns to Lanceloet and declares that he will prove braver than Lanceloet has ever been, for he will indeed sit in the *vresselijc sitten*. The knight takes his place on the seat and hands Lancelot a letter, instructing him to read it aloud if the knight should truly die. He then cries out to Arthur that he is dying because of his pride. His death is spectacular:

> Hi begonste crijschen so suare,
> Dat sijs alle waren in vare.
> Doe quam daer een vier stormelike,
> Daer si toesaghen ghemeenlike,
> Ende gaf van boven enen val,
> Ende verbernde den ridder al,
> Dies hen allen wonderde tien stonden,
> Want sire vleesch no been ne vonden.
> (*Lanceloet*, ll. 31476–31483)

The letter reveals that the unfortunate knight was named Brumalt, a nephew of King Claudas. At Claudas's court, people spoke of Lanceloet as the bravest knight in the world, yet Brumalt objected to this, for he knew that Lanceloet had never dared to sit in the *vresselijc sitten*. Brumalt believed himself courageous for having taken his place there. Arthur's judgement is severe: Brumalt was

driven by folly. The seat is, after all, reserved for a truly exceptional knight, whose name will appear upon it when he arrives at the court.[6]

The *vresselijc sitten* encompasses multiple layers of meaning. It is a physical object, a chair at the Round Table. Whoever sits in it disappears instantly. It is also a symbolic position at the Round Table, a forbidden place. To some, as to Brumalt, it appears as an adventure. In reality, the seat functions as a test of selection, revealing who the greatest knight of all time will be. Whenever the *vresselijc sitten* is mentioned over the course of the cycle, it serves as a foreshadowing of Galaat and of the Grail quest. The seat itself also possesses prophetic powers, for changing inscriptions appear on its back, such as, in this case, the announcement of Brumalt's death.

Not only the *vresselijc sitten* itself constitutes an exceptional place at the Round Table, the seats adjacent to it share this status as well. Near the end of *Lanceloet*, Perchevael arrives at Arthur's court. After Arthur has knighted him, a lady of the court invites him to take the seat to the right of the *vresselijc sitten* (*Lanceloet*, ll. 35988–36000). Those present regard the event as a miracle.

Thus, not all seats at the Round Table are of equal standing. The democratic ideal associated with the table is largely a modern fantasy (Schmolke-Hasselmann 1982). The emergence of the Round Table within Arthurian literature is, on the one hand, politically motivated, and on the other, deeply rooted in the history of salvation. This becomes evident in the *Historie van den Grale*, Jacob van Maerlant's Middle Dutch translation of Robert de Boron's Old French *Joseph d'Arimathie*. There, the Round Table is presented as the third in a sequence of three tables. The first is the table of the Last Supper. The second is a table upon which Joseph of Arimathea places the Grail, "dat selve vat / Dar God zijn leste mael uut at" (*Historie van den Grale*, ll. 798–799).[7]

Not only the Grail, but also an empty seat links the table of the Last Supper and Joseph's Grail table. Joseph is travelling through the desert with his followers when a voice from heaven commands him to set a table and place upon it the Grail and a fish. "Dan zaltu in mynen namen zitten / Alzo als ick up de witten / Donredage ter tafelen zat" (*Historie van den Grale*, ll. 668–670). One seat at the table, however, must remain empty: "Unde de zal beduden dat / Dat Judaes zine stat verloes" (ll. 675–676). The Grail distinguishes the faithful followers from the unfaithful: the former are filled with sweetness and receive all that their heart desires, whereas the latter experience nothing.[8] Thereafter, the two groups part ways. One hypocrite, named Mozes, nevertheless wishes to remain among the chosen under false pretences. A voice from the Grail informs Joseph that the

[6] Brumalt's fate is later reported at the court of King Claudas: ll. 32123–32143. Other references to Brumalt occur in ll. 32350–32353. A foreshadowing of the knight who will be able to sit in the *vresselijc sitten* appears in the account that Lanceloet gives of his adventures at court, ll. 32506–32509.

[7] The spelling in the citations from *Historie van den Grale* and *Boek van Merline* has been normalized.

[8] Lanceloet experiences a similar Grail ritual in the first example.

empty seat will determine the extent of Mozes's sincerity. Mozes sits down and "Ton eirsten dat he was zitten gaen / Dar sanck he neder alzo saen / Men mochte nicht gemerken dat / Dat he to der stede ie sat" (ll. 950–953). However laconic the description of Mozes's disappearance may be, those present are deeply disturbed by it.

The interconnectedness of the three tables also becomes evident in Maerlant's *Boek van Merline*, the continuation of the *Historie van den Grale*, in which the origin of the Round Table is explained.[9] It is the wizard Merlin who proposes to Uter Pendragon, who will later beget Arthur, that a Round Table be constructed in Cardoel. In honour of the Trinity, Merlin designs a table modelled on the table of the Last Supper and the Grail table. It is put to use during a court assembly. Merlin invites fifty outstanding knights from all corners of Uter's realm to take their seats at this table. Through Merlin's cunning influence, they become friends and they decide to remain permanently at the court. In this account, the Round Table functions as a political instrument to bind Uter's knights to his service.[10]

One seat at the new table remains empty. Merlin explains to Uter that this place will not be taken during his lifetime, and that the one chosen for it has not yet been born or conceived. Opponents of Merlin, who do not believe his prophecy, wish to put the adventure to the test. A young man dares to try. He sits down and

> Do sanck he neder in derre manier
> Als een loet in een vuer.
> Noch cristen mensche, dat zecht men my,
> En was zo snel versonken ny.
> De lude de dat zegen gescheen
> Worden versaget alle myt den.
> (*Boek van Merline*, ll. 7253–7258)

The audience therefore already possesses substantial background knowledge by the time the Grail knight finally appears at Arthur's court in the *Queeste vanden Grale*. In the *Lancelotcompilatie*, the *Queeste* is preceded by what is likely an originally Middle Dutch romance, the tale of the black knight Moriaen. At the conclusion of the *Moriaen*, the narrative voice announces that Walewein, Lanceloet, and Perchevael return to Arthur's court after the lavishly celebrated wedding of Moriaen's parents in Moriane. It is nearly Pentecost, and Arthur's feast day will be exceptionally splendid:

[9] The *Boek van Merline* is a translation of Robert de Boron's *Merlin*.
[10] *Boek van Merline*, ll. 6940–7320. The history of the Round Table is repeated in *Queeste vanden Grale*, ll. 3237–3362.

Dor Galaets wille, Lanceloets soene,
Want te hove soude comen di gone
Ende soude riddere werden also wale.
Hier af liep groet die tale,
Dat hi dat grael winnen sal
Ende daventuren groet ende smal
Die ter tafelronden behoren toe.
Hi soude oec sitten, seidemen doe,
Int vresselijc sitten, wetet dan,
Daer noit in dorste sitten man.
Om dit te siene, hebbic vernomen,
Sal menech man te hove comen.
(*Moriaen*, ll. 4665–4676[11])

The *Queeste vanden Grale* opens with this feast day. On the seats surrounding the Round Table, the knights can read the name of the one to whom each place belongs.

Doen si ten vresseliken sitten quamen,
Ende si oec die waerheit vernamen,
Dattere letteren an gescreven stonden,
Die si aldus sprekende vonden:
"CCCC ende LXIIIJ jaer
Selen wesen leden vorwaer,
Dat Onse Here int graf lach,
Dat sal vinden opten tsinxendach
Dat vresselijc sitten enen man,
Die hem sal onderwinden dan
Dat hi daerin sal sitten gaen."
(*Queeste vanden Grale*, ll. 119–129)

At Lanceloet's request, the inscription is covered with a silken cloth. When Arthur then wishes to begin the meal, a servant announces that a stone has drifted across the water. The stone is made

[11] The spelling has been normalized.

of marble, and a precious sword is set within it. Golden letters declare that only the greatest knight ever will be able to draw the sword from the stone.



Galaat seated on the perilous seat, in a French manuscript of *Tristan de Léonois*. The unknown artist has added a clarifying inscription labeling the seat itself, rather than the knight destined to occupy it: cest le siege p[er]illeux. BnF, Français 101, f. 204r.

While Arthur and his knights are eating, the windows and doors close of their own accord. An old man appears, accompanied by a knight without sword or shield. The man announces to Arthur that the knight he brings is a descendant of the biblical King David and of Joseph of Arimathea, and that this knight will bring all adventures to their completion. The old man then leads the knight to the *vresselijc sitten*, lifts the silken cloth, and sees that it is Galaat's seat. He invites the knight to sit down.

> Ende alse die ridders sagen dat,
> Dat Galaat in dat sitten sat,
> Dat langen tijt sere ontsien was,
> Hen allen hadde groet wonder das,
> Om dat hij was soe jonc een man,
> Wanen hem sulke gracie quam an.
> (*Queeste vanden Grale*, ll. 353–357)

For Galaat, the *vresselijc sitten* is not an adventure but a revelation of his chosenness. Precisely because he is able to withstand the *vresselijc sitten*, those present regard him as the greatest of the knights of the Round Table. It is therefore no surprise that Galaat is subsequently able to draw the miraculous sword that has washed ashore from the marble stone without the slightest effort.

The *vresselijc sitten* is much more than a physical seat. It combines different narrative functions and meanings. It invites foreshadowing, anticipating the coming of Galaat. It also functions as a device of prophecy due to the inscriptions that appear upon it. It constitutes a (warning) adventure and, ultimately, transforms into an instrument for revealing Galaat's identity. Moreover, the *vresselijc sitten* operates as a connecting element on several levels. By appearing in multiple texts, the motif links narratives across the boundaries of individual romances. Time and again, the seat is said to herald the best knight ever and the ultimate adventure. In doing so, it unites – and transforms – the worldly context of Arthur's Round Table, of which it is a part, with the spiritual dimension of the Grail quest.

Vignette 2: A Sword

Wandering through the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, you pass by Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, Vermeer's *Milkmaid*, and countless other masterpieces. Yet one display case stands out amid this aesthetic splendor. In Gallery 2.5 – one of the rooms devoted to the seventeenth century, the heyday of Dutch culture – a modest assemblage of seemingly ordinary objects catches the eye: a few old walking sticks and, most strikingly, a plain, rather ungainly late sixteenth-century executioner's sword.[12]



Anonymous, Executioner's sword said to have been used to behead Johan van Oldenbarnevelt including an eighteenth-century engraving, Germany, late sixteenth century, iron, 110 x 22.6 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. No. NG-NM-4245.

[12] The remarkable history of this sword has been described in detail in Van Deinsen and De Hond (2018).

What is this unappealing object doing among the artistic treasures of the Netherlands' national museum? Look closer and you discover that there is more to this sword than appears at first sight. It bears an inscription – a poem in Dutch – which reads:

> Stokoude schuldeloze helt,
> Rampzalige Oldenbarnevelt,
> Dit zwaard sloeg door uw hals den Staat
> Een diepe wonde in zynen Raadt,
> Toen op het Haags moortschavot
> Uw dierbaar leven wierd geknot.

Through the interplay between the words and the object, the sword acquires additional meaning. What we see here is not just any weapon but the very sword that beheaded Johan van Oldenbarnevelt and struck a deep wound in the Dutch political order. The verses recall one of the darkest chapters in Dutch history: after what was widely regarded as a political show trial, the Land's Advocate, the political leader of Holland and head of the States, was executed on 13 May 1619 at the initiative of his rival, Stadtholder Prince Maurits of Orange, on the Binnenhof in The Hague, the political heart of the Dutch Republic. Oldenbarnevelt's death was met with widespread shock and outrage, inspiring countless poets to denounce this act of political injustice.

A striking number of literary responses focused on objects associated with Oldenbarnevelt. Among the most famous is the canonical *'t Stokske* by the renowned Dutch poet Joost van den Vondel, in which Oldenbarnevelt's humble walking stick became a powerful emblem of resistance. Such items were transformed from mundane objects into carriers of meaning – relics of a political martyr who had given his life for the patriotic cause. No longer passive witnesses to a static past, they assumed an active role in the process of remembrance, becoming – to borrow Pierre Nora's influential conceptual framework – *lieux de mémoire*, or more specifically *objets de mémoire*. To understand how such narratives become attached to objects, they can be approached through an object-biographical lens, a concept introduced by Igor Kopytoff in his seminal essay "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process", published in *The Social Life of Things* (1986). Since then, the concept has inspired a wealth of scholarship.[13] Object biographies trace the shifting meanings and "lives" of things, viewing each as embedded within multiple, and sometimes contradictory, contexts. Their significance arises not only from their material presence but also from the stories, histories, and associations they accumulate over time.

[13] For a critical evaluation of the term, see Hahn and Weiss (2013).

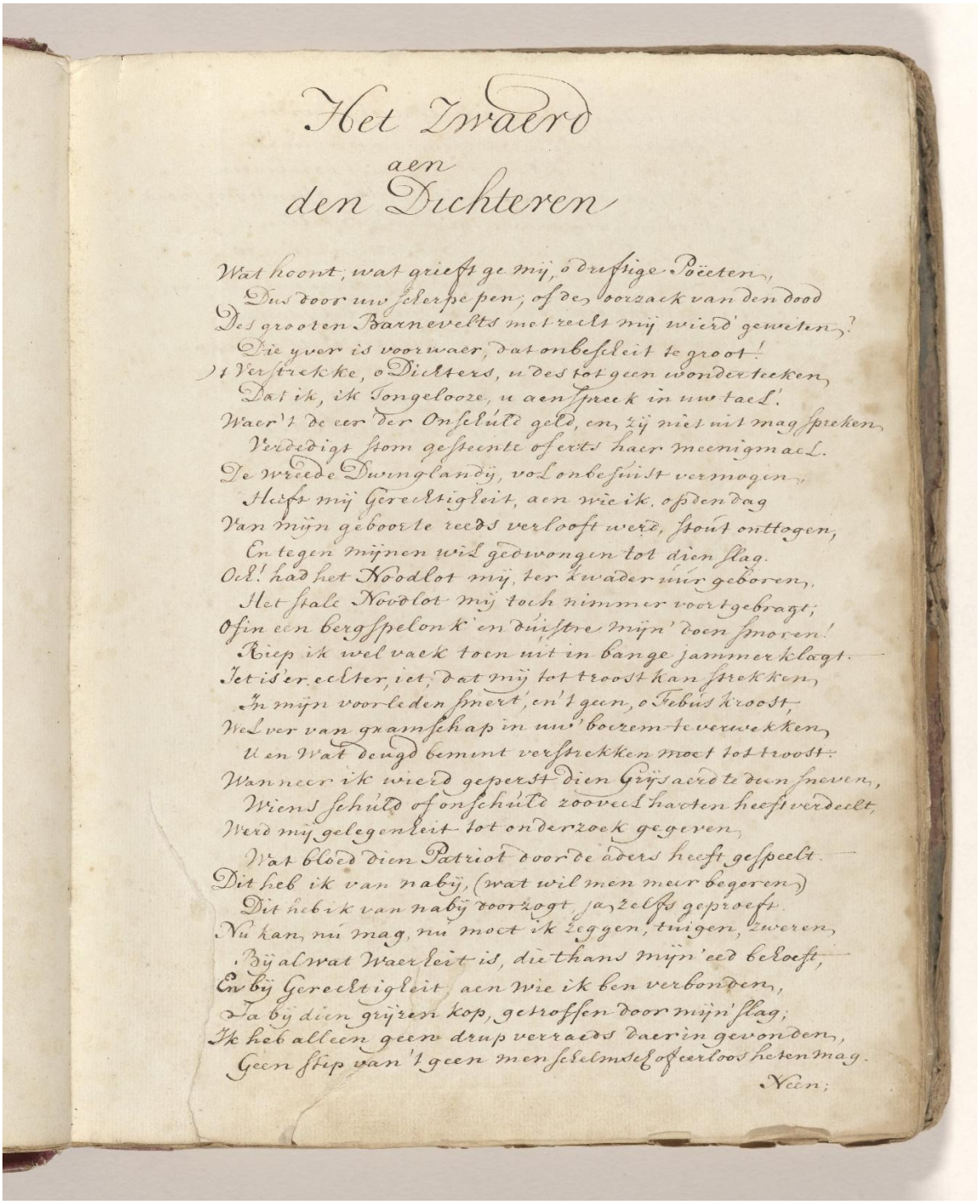
The sixteenth-century sword presents an especially intriguing case. The poem that irrevocably linked the object to Oldenbarnevelt's death was clearly engraved in a much later, eighteenth-century hand. In all likelihood, the maker was the Dordrecht glass engraver and poet Frans Greenwood, who, according to a letter still preserved with the object, acquired the sword around 1740 from Maximiliaan van Berchem, the husband of his niece. In the letter, Maximiliaan recorded the sword's provenance as told to him by his father, assuring Greenwood that "alle blijken zijn dat het Echt is" ("all the signs are that it is genuine", *Greenwood album*, [5r]). The sword, he explained, had entered the family through his maternal grandfather, a colonel in the States army, who had purchased it from the estate of a Hague burgomaster – whose name, by then, had already been forgotten. What had not been forgotten, however, was the great effort made by the burgomaster's family to reclaim the sword – apparently sold by mistake – because it was considered to be of such value. Needless to say: their attempts proved fruitless.[14]

In Greenwood's possession, the sword's status as a tangible reminder of the death of the patriotic hero Oldenbarnevelt was greatly intensified. In the 1740s, in the final years of the so-called Second Stadholderless Era (1702-1747), debates between the pro-Patriot and pro-Orangist factions flared up once again, and for Greenwood the sword served as material proof of his political sympathies. By engraving the lines, he not only asserted the sword's authenticity but also provided viewers with an explicitly interpretative and overtly pro-Republican framework in which to understand the relic: Oldenbarnevelt was a "guiltless hero" unjustly executed on a "murderous scaffold", Greenwood subsequently displayed the sword in his art cabinet. He invited the many visitors to follow his example and compose a poem about the weapon. To this end, he started an album and circulated it between 1743 and 1745 to his poet friends, including some of the most prominent writers of the day. In total, more than fifty poems were written about the sword, forty-seven of which are preserved in the Greenwood Album, now also held in the Rijksmuseum.

The poems demonstrate how literature can animate an object and inscribe it with new meaning. Greenwood's poet friends, sharing his patriotic and pro-Republican sympathies, placed the sword firmly within a narrative warning of the dangers when a kingly sovereign held unchecked power. Many employed a range of literary techniques, bringing the past vividly to life. Strikingly, the poets gave voice to people and objects that would normally have remained silent. In a poem by the Rotterdam merchant and poet Nicolaas Versteeg, Oldenbarnevelt himself speaks. Briefly returning from the grave, he confronts the executioner's sword, yet he offers no reproach to the weapon, the executioner, the judges, or even Prince Maurits. In retrospect, he sees their actions as serving the fatherland: through them, he exchanged fleeting life for eternal dedication to freedom.

[14] For a detailed account of the provenance of the sword, see Van Deinsen and De Hond (2018), 207–211.

More than a century later, he observes approvingly, the very sword that ended his life had become a symbol of ultimate freedom and justice in Greenwood's cabinet.



Het Zwaerd
aen
den Dichteren

Wat hoont, wat grieft ge mij, ô drufige Poëeten,
Dus door uw scherpe pen, of de oorzaek van den dood
Des grooten Barnevelts met reeht mij wierd' geweten?
Die yver is voorwaer, dat onbeseleit te groot!
't Verstrekke, ô Dichters, u des tot geen wonderteeken,
Dat ik, ik Tongelooze, u aenspreek in uw taeL.
Waer't de eer der Onschúld geld, en zij niet uit mag spreken
Verdedigt stom gesteente of erts haer meenigmaeL.
De wreede Dwinglandij, vol onbeschaemt vermogen,
Heeft mij Gerechtigheit, aen wie ik, op den dag
Van mijn geboorte reeds verlooft werd, stout ontrogen,
En tegen mijnen wil gedwongen tot dien slag.
Och! had het Noodlot mij, ter zwaêrder uur geboren,
Het straf Noodlot mij toch nimmer voortgebragt;
Of in een bergspelonk' en duistre mijn' doen smoren!
Riep ik wel vaek toen uit in bange jammerklagt.
Iet is er echter, iet, dat mij tot troost kan strekken,
In mijn voorleden smert, en 't geen, ô Febus kroost,
Wel ver van gramschap in uw' boezem te verwekken,
U en Wat deugd bemint verstrekken moet tot troost:
Wanneer ik wierd geperst dien Grijsaerd te doen sneven,
Wiens schuld of onschuld zoovecl haeten heeft verdeelt,
Werd mij gelegenheit tot onderzoek gegeven,
Wat bloed dien Patriot door de aders heeft gespeelt.
Dit heb ik van nabij, (wat wil men meer begeren)
Dit heb ik van nabij voorzogt, ja zelfs geproeft.
Nu kan, nu mag, nu moet ik zeggen, tuigen, zweren,
Bij alwat Waerheit is, die thans mijn' eed beroeft,
En bij Gerechtigheit, aen wie ik ben verbonden,
Ja bij dien grijzen kop, getroffen door mijn' slag;
Ik heb alleen geen drup verraeds daerin gevonden,
Geen stip van 't geen men selfmoord oft eerloos heten mag.
Vaen;

Frans de Haes, 'Het Zwaerd aen den Dichteren', in: Frans Greenwood's Album, 1743. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, no. NG-NM-4282-19(r).

Perhaps most illustrative of literature's performative power are the poems in which the sword itself is given a voice. In a contribution by Frans de Haes, the "tongueless" sword is granted the opportunity to tell its side of the story. It recounts its tragic life as a weapon, compelled to

strike the fatal blow against its will. This dubious privilege also allows the sword to judge the guilt or innocence of the Land's Advocate first-hand: having examined Oldenbarnevelt's blood, it found no drop of treason in it. In the final lines of the poem, the sword reflects on the role of poets in telling its story, underlining the power of literature to give objects a voice and narrate their significance.

> Dit zal ik eeuwiglijk getuigen en vertellen
> Ja ik smeek, Dichters, u die voor mijn reden wis
> Mijn getrouwste vrienden werdt, laet mij uw kunst verzellen
> En strekken tot een steun van mijn beleidenis.
> Eischt iemandt voor de zaek nog klaerer schets of teeken
> Hij kan mij zelfs aen huis van Greenwood zien of spreeken

After Greenwood's death, the sword passed into the hands of a patriotic family and was eventually donated, along with the album, in 1878 to the Nederlandsche Museum voor Geschiedenis en Kunst, a precursor of the current Rijksmuseum. In the young nineteenth-century kingdom of the Netherlands, the sword became part of a new chapter in the national memory culture surrounding the Revolt period, transforming from a Republican relic into a national emblem of struggle and heroism. As part of the national museum, it assumed a new role in the collective memory of the Dutch nation and its ongoing quest for independence.

Since the reopening of the Rijksmuseum in 2013, the sword has taken on another layer of significance – that of an *objet de mémoire*. On display, it is flanked by not one but two walking sticks, presumably those that supported Oldenbarnevelt to the scaffold, signaling at a glance that what matters is not the authenticity of these objects but their role in memory culture. By now it is almost certain that the sword is not even the "real" sword used to execute Oldenbarnevelt.[15] But that does not diminish the tale; if anything, it demonstrates how the power of literature and poetic imagination can surpass reality itself. It transformed the iron sword into a cultural icon.

Vignette 3: A Boy with a Bike on a Vase with a Flower

Every contemplation on the relation between literature and materiality, between *les mots* and *les choses*, needs to take its cue from at least some kind of working definition of these two opposing

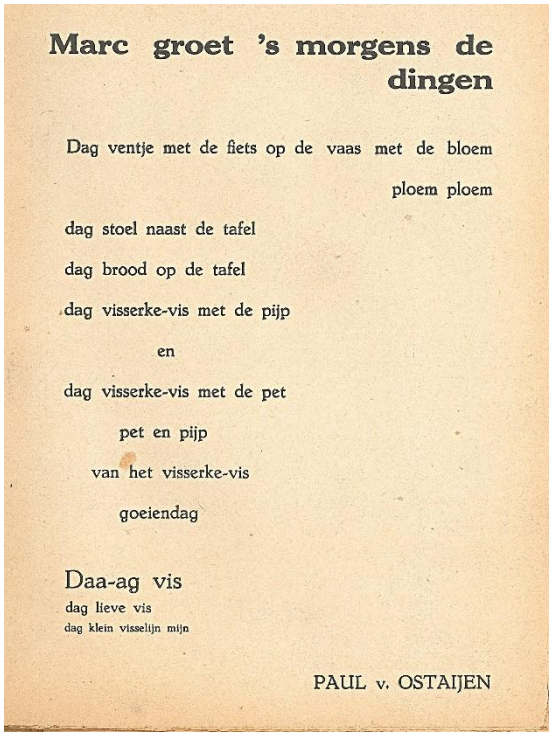
[15] Van Deinsen and De Hond (2018).

realities. From this obvious observation a whole field of intricate difficulties arises, since it is no easy task to define such a thing as "matter" or "thing". Bill Brown was right to point out that we really need a *thing theory* (Brown 2004, 2015). Such explicit or implicit thing theories, however, sketch totally different pictures of that complex and confusing semantic network of matter, object, thing, artifact, reality, physical world, non-human (whether or not in relation to subject, idea, meaning, image, representation, phenomenon, virtuality, spirit, culture, human).

Interestingly, literary fiction functions as one of the sites par excellence in which definitions and conceptualizations of that all too ordinary yet mysterious realm of things are invoked, thematized, produced, challenged, compared, negotiated. This is one of the main questions of Marta Caraion's impressive book *Comment la littérature pense les objets*: "que font les objets? que font-ils à la littérature? et que fait la littérature à la pensée des objets?" (Caraion 2020, 21). She underlines "l'importance de la littérature pour une théorie de l'objet".

Whereas Caraion focused on the nineteenth century novel, I want to look for a thing theory in the work of the early-twentieth-century Flemish avant-garde poet Paul van Ostaijen. Central to my argument is the famous and quasi-naïve small poem "Marc groet 's morgens de dingen" ("Marc greets things in the morning"[16]), which, as the title already suggests, can be read as a meditation on the nature of things and the relationship between the subject (Marc) and the objects (the things he says hi to).

The poem, written in 1924 and first published in the avant-garde periodical *De driehoek* in 1925, reads basically as an enumeration of a set of things in the most general and indefinite sense, including humans (a boy/fisher), animals (a fish), plants (a flower) and a series of everyday artifacts (a bike, a vase, a chair, a table, a cap, a pipe). All of the interpretations I know of take for granted that these "things" are noticed and greeted by a child or childlike persona (the Marc mentioned in the title). There are many good reasons for this assumption given the obvious naivety – greeting lifeless objects such as a chair is not something grown-ups usually do –, the use of affectionate diminutives (ventje, visserke, visselijn), of simple monosyllabic words (dag, fiets, vaas, bloem, stoel,



Marc groet 's morgens de dingen

Dag ventje met de fiets op de vaas met de bloem
ploem ploem
dag stoel naast de tafel
dag brood op de tafel
dag visserke-vis met de pijp
en
dag visserke-vis met de pet
pet en pijp
van het visserke-vis
goeiendag

Daa-ag vis
dag lieve vis
dag klein visselijn mijn

PAUL v. OSTAIJEN

"Marc groet 's morgens de dingen" by Paul van Ostaijen, first published in the constructivist avant-garde magazine *De driehoek* (The Triangle), co-directed by Jozef Peeters, Duco Perkens (Edgard du Perron) and, in an early phase, also Paul van Ostaijen himself.

[16] English translation by James S. Holmes (Van Ostaijen 1982).

brood, pijp, pet), the play with sounds resembling the nonsense associations of typical children's songs (visserke-vis, visselijn mijn).

At first sight, however, not all these "things" are ontologically equivalent in the fictional world of the poem. The boy and his bike, introduced in the first line, for instance, are no real entities in this world, but mere images, as they are depicted "on a vase". The reference to the fisher, with cap and pipe, in lines 5 to 7, should probably be read as a further description and elaboration of this initial image (although we cannot be absolutely certain about that). Anyway, the small poem not only describes "things" in the more restricted sense of material objects or artifacts, but seemingly also human beings, animals and plants, of which the boy/fisher and the fish are probably no living beings but instead *images* of living beings.

It is not surprising, then, that classical interpretations of the poem seem to highlight the image-like nature of the depicted world. Bogman (2008), for instance, on the basis of biographical sources, reconstructs the genealogy of the poem. He interprets it as a more or less literal transcription of the words produced by the real-world Marc Jespers, the two-and-a-half-year-old son of Van Ostaijen's friend, the painter Floris Jespers. When Marc gets up and notices his father's paintings around, he starts to name and greet what he sees. In other words, if we follow Bogman's reading, Marc is not so much greeting things (as the title suggests), yet rather images of things: "Wat Marc dus onder andere groet, zijn schilderijen. Waarschijnlijk schilderijen van zijn vader. Het 'visserke' is geen mannetje dat hij eventueel door het raam ziet, maar een geschilderde visser" (Bogman 2008, 43). Bogman even tries to identify the paintings by Jespers that could have been sources: *Matroos met bloem*, *Vaas met bloemen*, *De fietser*, *Manneke met de pijp*, *Stilleven met vis* (Bogman 2008, 43–4). Even apart from the biographical backstory, the subjects and the titles of these paintings, combined, show a remarkable similarity with the things that are mentioned in Van Ostaijen's poem.

This image-based line of interpretation got a new impulse when the Flemish poet Didi de Paris unearthed a curious postcard sent by the French poet Alfred Jarry and his friend Eugène Demolder, a Belgian painter (Leen 2021; De Ridder 2023, 745–6), depicting a fish with a cap and a pipe, riding on a bicycle. The postcard belongs to a long-standing tradition of using images of so-called "April fish" in the context of April Fool's Day. It is tempting to consider this postcard (or other instances of the same type) as another possible visual source for Van Ostaijen's poem. Here again, the poem is interpreted in an ekphrastic vein, as a poem about images rather than things. (Although, in the latter case, the images are borrowed from popular culture, rather than from avant-garde painting.) Such approaches are seemingly in tune with other examples of ekphrasis in Van Ostaijen's poetry, such as the passage in the "Holle haven" section in *Bezette stad* (1921), which

describes another painting (or mesh-up of paintings) by Floris Jespers, or the posthumously published poem "F. Jespers schildert een Haven" (1928).

Still, however, such ekphrastic interpretations, that capitalize on the relation between preexisting images and the words of the poem, seem to overlook the fundamentals of Van Ostaijen's poetics, as expressed through his poems and in his critical writing. Time and again he shows his suspicion towards the image (het *beeld*), in the two senses of "(visual) impression or representation" as well as "literary figure". In his seminal essay "Gebruiksaanwijzing der lyriek", published in 1927, we read for instance: "de metafysiese bekommernis van de dichter mag niet zo geïnterpreteerd worden dat zij hem zou toelaten de woorden enkel als beelden van de fenomenen te gebruiken" (Van Ostaijen 1927, 378). Words are more than just images. A poem such as "Marc groet 's morgens de dingen" offers a much more profound reflection on the relations between words, things and images.

A closer look reveals that in the world of young Marc all things are dealt with on the same plane, irrespective of their ontological status in the real world. Images (the "boy on a bike", depicted on a vase), material artifacts (the vase, the chair, the table, the bread), humans (the fisher), animals (the fish), plants (the flower) are all greeted with the same intensity, enthusiasm, love, as if they were all living beings. The childlike mind works as a kind of *ontological leveler*, erasing established perceptual categories and hierarchies that differentiate between the human and the non-human, the cultural and the natural, the living and the non-living, the representation and the thing it stands for. Borrowing the notions of *object-oriented ontology*, one could say that Marc offers the reader a mild version of a *flat* or *tiny* ontology, in which "all things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally" (Bogost 2008, 11). A mild version because of the fact that all in all the range of variation, the *inequality* of these *equally* existing things is quite limited, since most of the things in the poem are still basically everyday human-scale utensils that fit within a living room. Still, from Marc's perspective it makes no real difference whether the fisher introduced in the fifth line is the same figure as the boy in the first and hence merely an image on a vase, because in his childlike perception there is no real difference between a picture and a living being. Pictures can become alive, just as lifeless material things can be greeted and thus become animated. One could argue that the compound "visserke-vis" (translated as fisher-of-fish by Holmes) is the most central word in the poem – it is repeated trice. Admittedly, this curious word form could be read as nothing more than a simple sound association based on "visserke", or as a condensed form of a short sentence (the fisher fishes for fish). Still, as a compound it combines in one word both the human and the non-human, the subject and the object and as such forms a kind of *trait d'union* between the boy in the

first stanza and the fish in the last. The "visserke-vis" is both boy and fish – a potential connotation that is lost in the English translation.

Adopting the gaze of the child, which makes no difference between the living and the non-living, Van Ostaijen's poem seems to touch upon the *thingness* of things, understood as that strange something which lies outside the subject-object relation and outside the realm of established perceptual and cognitive categories, distinctions and hierarchies. It is the thingness Bill Brown conceives of "as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects – their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence" (Brown 2004, 5). It is interesting to note that such a thing (understood not as a synonym yet as an antonym to the object) is often conceived as a kind of *absence*. To paraphrase Kant: things, as they are "an sich selbst" are for us "unbekannt". For the child Marc, on the contrary, there is no absence or no distance between het subject and the thing. He joyfully greets them (as if they can greet back), and by greeting them, naming them, they become all equally present and alive.

This is the power of a childlike imagination. This is also the power of a specific kind of poetic language. It is quite obvious that "Marc groet 's morgens de dingen" is not only a poem about images and things, but also a poem about words. It uses several strategies to foreground the *wordness* of words. First, by ostensibly playing with words and their constituents (letters, sounds, syllables) in different combinations and constellations, based on procedures of repetition, analogy, variation, contrast, combination, extension, analysis. Second, the wordness of words is further highlighted by the fact that words are combined in word groups but *not* in full-fledged sentences – apart from the title, verbs are remarkably missing. Third, also the unconventional page layout is used to isolate, combine and foreground words and word groups. Finally, the word as an essential unit is highlighted by the predominant use of simple and monosyllabic words, that may remind the reader of books for early readers or the "structural" reading methods that had come to dominate primary reading instruction in Flanders and the Netherlands since the end of the nineteenth century. It is as if the specific word use in the poem forces the reader to learn how to read all over again. From this new beginning, the reader can begin to see the things from a new perspective, in a new light, just like the child.

It is no coincidence that the word vis (fish) plays a central role in Van Ostaijen's writing on poetry. Such simple and essential words, he claims on several occasions, somehow have the power to become more than just secondary representations. In the beforementioned essay "Gebruiksaanwijzing der lyriek", for instance, he writes that "geen enkel gedicht rond het fenomeen 'vis' [hem] ooit machtiger zou kunnen zijn dan dit woord 'vis' zelf" (Van Ostaijen 1927, 55). It is the task of the poet to use this power, the "resonance" of such words, by combining them

into the poem according to specific rules of combination, and by doing so, exploiting their potential for "sensibility", loading them with "unconscious affects" (Van Ostaijen 1927, 58). In this way, the opposition between the subjective ("sensibility", "affect") and the objective (the realm of things) is somehow dismantled, and a kind of poetry arises that keeps the phantasm alive of penetrating into the heart of *things*. In Van Ostaijen's words: "mijn woord gaat in het fantasma der dingen". Or still: "in de processus van het woord wordt de ontwikkeling van het fantasma van het ding gered" (Van Ostaijen 1927, 60).

Against this light, the small poem "Marc groet 's morgens de dingen", which has become an absolute evergreen in Dutch literature, is not so much a representation of preexisting images or objects (be it a set of paintings by Floris Jespers or a popular image of an anthropomorphic April fish). It is rather an attempt to think beyond the image-thing and subject-object opposition and tries to catch a glimpse of the unknowable realm of *things*. Even though the poet knows that this endeavor can only remain a poetic, probably even infantile phantasy.

Vignette 4: The Largest Book in the World

That the field of literary studies has embraced materiality in the past decades, is stating the obvious (Brillenburg Wurth 2018, Plate 2018). However, many scholars still tend to privilege textual meaning over material medium (Baetens 2018). Some would even argue that there is a certain blindness among scholars of literature to material (including visual and haptic) features of books in literary interpretation. For instance, many professional readers would probably agree that differences in the material manifestation of a novel, as a version in print or on screen, do not change the text *qua* text. Others would agree that such alterations may very well affect the reading experience, but that, as Ryan and Weisheng (2024, 178) put it, traditional literary scholarship lacks the methods to identify the effects "of material factors such as visual appearance or the sense of touch provided by the text, and these effects would be probably too reader-specific to allow a general theorization".

This, however, is not a very convincing argument to keep the sensory dimensions of the literary text out of scope. Instead, the recognition of the text's materiality urges for a conception of reading as a simultaneously mental and material and therefore multisensory act. More precisely, if we conceive of reading as a negotiation between a reader and a literary work, that is, the "mental gymnastics involved in individual textual interpretation" (Korthals Altes 2014, 30), it makes sense to pay attention to the material features of the text as well as to its verbal traits. As Mc Laughlin (2015, 1) points out: "eyes scan the page, hands hold the book, body postures align the entire

musculoskeletal frame around the visual and manual requirements of reading, adapting to the materiality of the book and to the physical space the reading body inhabits". Therefore, I would argue that the negotiation process which is characteristic of the reading act involves both a cognitive dimension ("making *sense* of") and *sensory* perception.

But how can we adapt these abstract views to the concrete analysis of literary texts? In this vignette I want to address this question by exploring some fruitful paths for a simultaneously textual and material approach to literature. To do so, I will take my cue from the legendary book *Love Song* (1963) by the Flemish poet Hugo Claus (1929-2008) and the Dutch painter Karel Appel (1921-2006). *Love Song* is certainly a thought-provoking case in this respect, as it could best be described as a multimodal poetic object. Both linked to the experimental Cobra movement in the early fifties, Claus and Appel collaborated on several occasions, but *Love Song* is without doubt their most spectacular endeavour. The work was reputed to be the largest art book in the world at the time consisting of five large, hinged plastic panels and a metal cover. With its unique genesis and design, *Love Song* foregrounds some key aspects of literature's materiality, as this work is clearly made for reading, looking, and touching. Not being a book in the traditional sense, it paradoxically emphasizes its physical form, its *bookness* so to say. As such, it urges for a conception of the reading act which takes both the text and its material features into account and can offer some suggestions on how this can be done.



Walking and reading "between" the unfolded pages of *Love Song* at the book launch of "the largest book in the world", 1963.

To describe this singular book is more complex than it seems, as one cannot consult *Love Song*. While the commercial ambitions for the project were high, it proved to be a disappointment. It was planned that prospective buyers could order a custom-made copy, after visiting the book presentation in New York and Amsterdam. However, no orders were made and the presentation exemplar turned out to be a single exemplar, and it was reputedly shipped to some country house in Colorado, USA, to serve as a paravent near the owner's swimming pool (Schaevers 2024, 391). So, while we know that *Love Song* exists (or has existed), my description of it has to rely on an English prospectus of the book, reports and photographs of the press release, and a collection of pictures by the Dutch star photographer Ed Van der Elsken, who documented the making of the project (the pictures can be consulted online on the website of the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum). *Love Song* measures 210 cm by 80 cm, and weighs 359 kilograms – as such, it is called the largest (art) book in the world in Norris McWhirter's *Het Groot Guinness Record Boek 1984* (Hemmink 1987). It consists of five panels in heavy plastic and glass, three transparent panels with illustrations by Appel in coloured glass (based on paintings) and two milk glass panels containing two English poems by Claus (Wildemeersch e.a. 2004, 105). Both poems touch upon the transience of (erotic) love, contemplating the short time before lust rusts away and the bed of the lovers gets metaphorically frozen.

The fact that *Love Song*, as a unique exemplar, is inaccessible to the public today, draws attention to literature's vulnerable condition and the risk it runs of getting lost and becoming "dark matter of literature" (Marx 2025, 79), lost literary heritage which is beyond the reach of memory and history. As it is (in a way) lost to the reader, *Love Song* demonstrates the fate of countless literary works from ancient to contemporary times, while at the same time emphasizing the importance of accessible public libraries. A book that is not in any library or museal collection is as good as lost for the reader. Visibility – or findability, the possibility to be explored – is crucial for any literary work to survive.

Love Song, however, is not completely lost, as there exists a second version of the poems, titled *Love Song Revisited* (1987), published by the private press AMO (Gert Jan Hemminck) in a limited, bibliophile edition of 25 copies. Still, the visibility of this version is very limited too. Both *Love Song* and *Love Song Revisited* are listed in the official Claus bibliography (Wildemeersch et al. 2004), but neither text is included in the poet's collected works. As a result, they are easily overlooked and remain difficult to access. These are the poems:

The horse of the universe
Leaps through clouds of unknowing.
Give him time, a little time,
It's not an easy trick, my love,
But it's a trick worth knowing.

If you give him time, my love,
The horse will leap the sea
Where basilisks observe the sun,
Basilisks reared by you and me,
Whose diet is a love's carrion.

It's not an easy trick, my love,
But it's a trick worth knowing,
So give him just a little time
And the universal horse will die
As he leaps through the cloud
of unknowing.

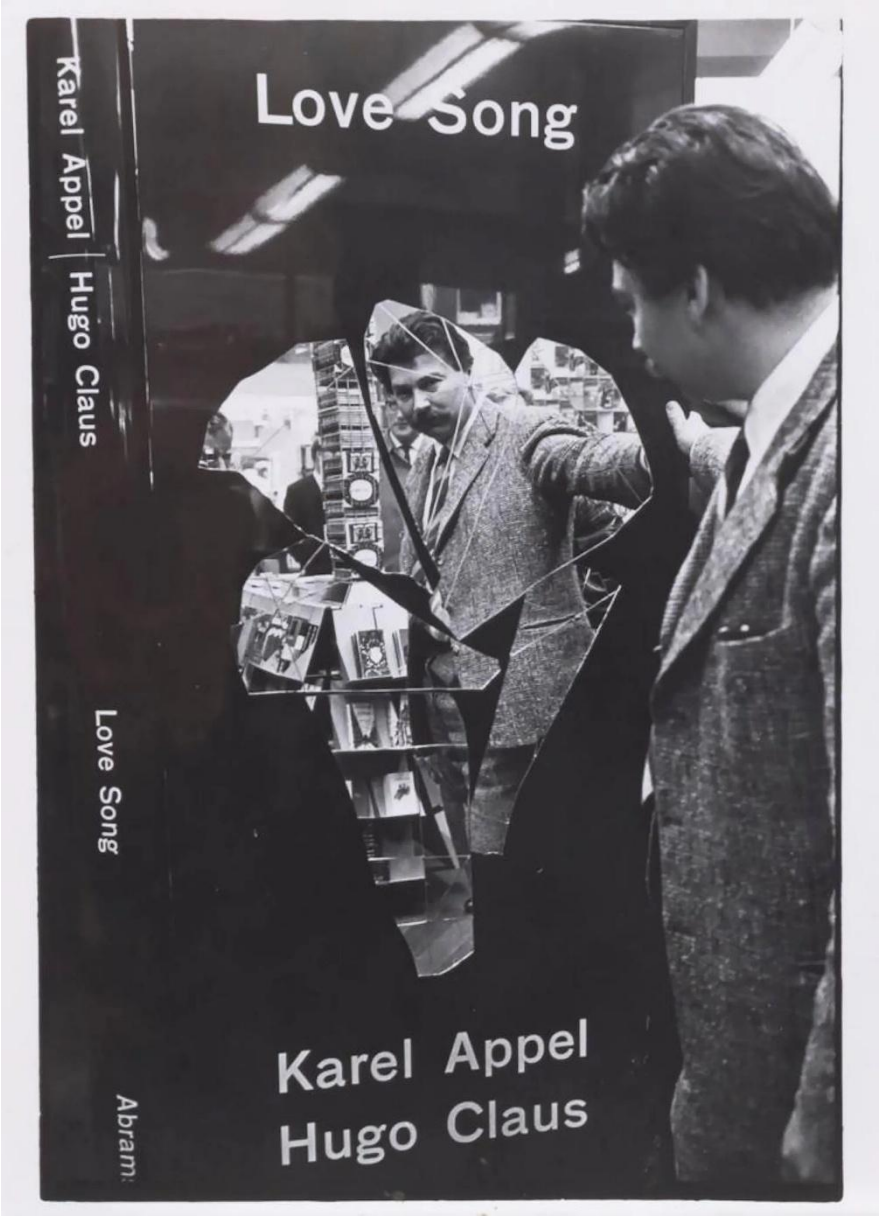
Woman, tonight I say hello
with easy fingers.
Between the fodder and the slow
Growth of your singing furze
It is not long before the so
Loved rod no longer lingers.

Between the harvest and the crows,
Between the moment when
The horny, neverending rose
Of enormous lust is rust – then
Between the time you say 'it snows'
And snow, our bed is frozen.
(Claus 1987)

While the texts in the two versions are identical, Appel's artworks have disappeared in *Love Song Revisited*. Therefore, we can only guess what the interplay between Claus's poems and Appel's paintings and its implications for the production of meaning must have been like. The original work is transformed here, absorbed into a new creation, which more or less takes the place of the original. The question arises, to quote William Marx (2025, 85), as to what extent "the original work [does] persist within the new form".

With its extravagant design and installation-like character, *Love Song* allows us to elucidate the impact of the text's material dimension on the act of reading. It foregrounds how the reception of a literary text (in this case, two poems) is inextricably linked to the material experience of the reader. For instance, the larger-than-life size metal cover containing fragments of a mirror, reflects the reader's gaze, thus pointing to the unavoidable negotiation which takes place between reader and text, and which is always intertwined with the text's material carrier. The reflection of the

reader's face in the mirror may symbolize the idea that in this process of negotiation, between text and reader, matter and interpretation, the reader takes centre stage.



Karel Appel looks into the mirror on the cover of *Love Song* at the book launch of "the largest book in the world", 1963. © Ed Van der Elsken

Moreover, the enormous volume of *Love Song* demonstrates how this negotiation process of reading is inextricably rooted in space. Literary texts are read in two spatial contexts simultaneously, being the two-dimensional flat surface of the page (in this case, the milk glass panels with sandblasted lettering) as well as the three-dimensional space of the material book (here the metal cover and the folded panels, positioned in a certain way). In other words, following Johanna Drucker (2024, 307), the book (every book) functions as a space of exchange (or negotiation, as I

would call it) structuring the interaction between reader and page; this structuring is determined by all kinds of material features, including lay-out, format, material).

As a series of panels used as a folding screen, the *Love Song* poems indeed draw attention to the verbo-visual materiality of any literary text, more particular of what the art historian Anne-Marie Christin (2000, 43–46) describes as the mutual shaping of the verbal sign (the words on the page) and what she calls the "screen" that localizes that sign (*l'écran*, the framed surface in which the text is inscribed). Following Christin, meaning is constructed by the reader in this visual interplay between text and screen; as such, the white space is more than a meaningless background allowing for the textual signs to be deciphered: it is as foundational to the construction of meaning as the verbal signs themselves. Therefore, she makes a plea for a visual way of reading (Christin 2000, 51), which can be demonstrated by *Love Song*. In "Woman, tonight I say hello", the black signs engraved in the milk white glass interact with the verses and allow the reader for a simultaneously verbal and visual construction of meaning. As the "easy fingers" of the lyrical I say hello to his lover, lying on the bed, the sandblasted verbal signs caress the screen, yet the transience of this erotic gesture is already suggested by the semi-opaque white surface, anticipating the frozenness of the lovers' bed described in the last two verses. The realisation that this transience does indeed arise very quickly, is emphasised by the swift shift from "it snows" to "snow" in the enjambement at the end of the second last verse ("Between the time you say 'it snows' / And snow, our bed is frozen").

The same holds for the interplay between the reader, the text, and its three-dimensional carrier, which is often overlooked in the case of the traditional literary book. However, as Liedeke Plate (2018) asserts, every reading is a performance in which the text's medium or material support is not incidental but a potential agent. For instance, the fact that readers cannot hold this huge book in their hands is blatant: *Love Song* has different visual and manual requirements than ordinary volumes of poetry. The usual intimacy between reader and book is lost: one cannot add glosses or marks, cannot grasp the weight of the book, or the touch of its paper. The monumentality of the design creates distance, preferring a public reading space where the poems must be read on vertical, sturdy panels, over a secluded, intimate décor (such as a bedchamber), where the love songs could be read on horizontal, soft sheets of paper. This loss of intimacy ties in with the way in which the lyrical subject expresses seemingly universal truths about love instead of personal reflections. The cosmic metaphors in "The horse of the universe" convey a wry image of erotic love: if you wait "just a little time", every romantic love will end; as soon as "unknowing" becomes "knowing", the interest of the lover fades away. This situation is conjured by the lovers themselves: they rear the basilisks "whose diet is a love's carrion".

Moreover, the installation of *Love Song* foregrounds this haptic and spatial character of reading; it isn't hard to imagine how the reader of this poetic object is bound to become a "book-wanderer" ("boekwandelaar"), as Claus phrased it in another poem. Instead of folding through the pages of a book, the reader must literally move through a three-dimensional space structured by the folded plexi glass panels, which filter the light and background against which the panels are positioned. This way, *Love Song* demonstrates not only that reading is a physical act as well as a mental one, but also that the material (albeit temporary) qualities of books indeed structure our reading experience. Finding out how books work as such spaces of negotiation, remains the challenge, as Drucker (2024, 312) correctly states – not an easy trick, but, definitely, a trick worth knowing.

Dimensions of Materiality

Together, these four *object lessons* show how in actual instances of materialist literary studies, different (and sometimes seemingly contradictory) dimensions of materiality are researched, described, analysed and move in (and out) of focus. These include, amongst others, (1) a synchronic or quasi-universal as well as a diachronic and historical dimension, (2) the materiality *of* literature as well as materiality as represented or used *in* literary texts, (3) the individual object as well as the more encompassing (narrative, cultural, social) networks these are embedded in and at least partly derive their meaning from, (4) the material conditions that impact the production, circulation and reading of literary texts, as well as the role literature plays in actively giving meaning to objects and contributing to larger material cultures.

The five articles collected in the thematic section of this *Cahier voor Literatuurwetenschap* issue further elaborate one or more of these dimensions of literary materiality. Rather than exemplifying a *new* materialism, or a specific theory or methodology, they testify to the richness of methodological approaches that embrace materiality in one way or the other (from the analysis of institutional practices, over reader response studies, 4E narratology, to multimodal semiotics, and *object-oriented* interpretation). Furthermore, they highlight the richness of "material" phenomena involved (from literature museums, over picture books for young readers, paratexts of popular romance novels, to multimodal experimental novels, and a cross-genre (post-)postmodern catalogue). As they focus on more recent literary developments, from the 1980s until today, they take off where the more historically oriented short vignettes have left us.

Zooming in on literary exhibitions and contextual literary projects, Chiara Zampieri explores how contemporary Italian literary practices at the intersection of literature and the

museum field challenge and reconfigure the materiality of literature. Maureen Hosay demonstrates how multimodal children's picturebooks such as *The Gruffalo Puppet Book* function as "scriptive things", that on the one hand script reader performance, but on the other hand give rise to often idiosyncratic, unpredictable and unruly reader response and engagement. In his contribution on Lanny Porter's multimodal novels *Grief is the Thing With Feathers* and *Lanny*, Nils Van den Keybus combines insights from textual materialism with 4E narratology to show how readers interact with the material and multimodal dimension of the text, bringing in their own embodied memories and experiences. Lore Goossens reads the covers of popular romance novels – and hence their "material" manifestation – as markers of shifting trends in the genre, from the 1980s "clinch" cover to the much less sexually explicit cartoon covers of today. Finally, Ivana Arandjelovic, drawing on insights from object-oriented ontology and speculative realism, reads Ben Marcus's 1995 debut novel *The Age of Wire and String* as an exploration of the way in which things can be described and "disclosed" without forcing meaning upon them or "destroying" them with "explanation".

Together, these contributions offer a picture of the many ways and possibilities of a materialist approach in contemporary literary studies. Moreover, they demonstrate that materiality is more than just an object of scholarly inquiry. Materiality shapes our engagement with literature, art, and the world around us. After reading this issue one can only conclude: we're all material boys and girls, living in a material world.

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