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John C. Stout, *Objects Observed. The Poetry of Things in Twentieth-Century France and America*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2018. xii + 285 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$85.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9-78-1487501570.

Review by Andrew Stafford, University of Leeds.

Following the success of his collection of prose poems, *Le parti pris des choses*, in 1942—praised, amongst others, by Jean-Paul Sartre—Francis Ponge came up against an “object” or “thing” that would thwart his onward poetic and phenomenological march. Between 1948 and 1954 the surrealist poet tried to use his strategy of *objeu*, of playing and toying with objects, to work on writing (about) the Sun. The ultimate defeat of this project, the failure felt by Ponge following a relatively long period of trying to think poetically about the solar, is described in an unpublished piece from the time: “le Soleil n’est pas à former mais à éventrer”—see Michel Collot’s work on Ponge’s “Manuscrits inédits du *Soleil placé en abîme*,” published in *Genesis (Manuscrits-Recherche-Invention)*, no. 2 (1992).^[1]

But why did the Sun, surely *the* most crucial phenomenon for humanity on Earth, thwart Ponge’s poetic essayism? How could the Poet of Things fail with such an obvious, open-ended, polysemic and rich object, and even though “*le processus des aurores*” (as he called it in an unfinished poem ^[2]) could boast an almost infinite “*dialectique de variations terrestres?*” Published in the third volume of his *Le Grand recueil* in 1961, *Le soleil placé en abîme* seemed to have solved the problem of how to talk about any object, big or small, fundamental or minor. Indeed, “*l’Objeu*,” as Ponge defined it, seemed to offer a pan-solution: “C’est celui où l’objet de notre émotion placé d’abord en abîme, l’épaisseur vertigineuse et l’absurdité du langage, considérées seules, sont manipulées de telle façon que, par la multiplication intérieure des rapports, les liaisons formées au niveau des racines et les significations bouclées à double tour, soit créé ce fonctionnement qui seul peut rendre compte de la profondeur substantielle de la variété et de la rigoureuse harmonie du monde.”^[3] The obstacle, however, was precisely the object itself. If every object is phenomenologically and ontologically constructed by our human eye—in that an object’s antithesis does not exist, neither structurally nor phantasmatically—this is patently not the case for the Sun. On the contrary, such is its power and fundamental importance to the poet, to humans, to poetry, that the Sun is overwhelmed, almost, by the number and type of its antitheses: shadow; eclipse; night; star; moon; Earth; cloud—the list of the Sun’s opposites is so long that we may wonder if there is one single antithesis of the Sun. In this sense, then, the Sun is not, and cannot be taken as, an object; no matter how much we think of its *abîme*, the Sun both slips away (cloud becomes night; the moon shines and lights up the Earth; an eclipse throws a shadow over the Earth; a star far away in another galaxy suddenly dies, but we can only see this when the Sun

is not there), and, at the same time (though at different times of day), it consumes, slowly but surely (as we now know from the climate crisis besetting the Earth), everything in its path. This all-or-nothing of the Sun, Ponge seemed to come to realize, could not be further from a dialectic. Although we can do things to stop the Sun overheating the planet, we have no direct, dialectical control over it. As the story of the French Revolution went, such was the voluntarist inspiration of overthrowing the monarchy (Louis XVI was after all the great-great-grandson of the "Roi-Soleil," Louis XIV) revolutionaries in the last decade of the eighteenth century believed that they could even destroy the Sun, but of course, all they got, (if they survived the Terror and the Napoleonic wars), was the utter disaster of 1826 when the Sun, hidden behind a cloud of volcanic cloud, conspired to decimate food production across northern Europe, causing misery if not outright famine.

So much for "solicide:" regicide--and all other forms of radical human action--in no way empowers humans to control the Sun. We might even suggest that the bourgeois revolution--the final act in capitalism's birth--has in fact got us into the climate mess whereby the Sun will, ultimately, burn us all to death. So much for a poetry of the object. We may interact with objects on the planet, but we do not interact with the Sun: we are merely, implacably, subjected to its whims, flames and spots.

I am not entirely sure why this is important when we consider John C. Stout's *Objects Observed. The Poetry of Things in Twentieth-Century France and America*, since we have suggested that the Sun cannot be an object; but it does illustrate, perhaps not blindingly, that observing objects in poetry is fundamentally concerned with the dialectics of the human imagination predicated on humanity's interaction and, by definition, control over the globe, my objection (pun excluded) being that there is at least one phenomenon that cannot be objectified.

Stout does indeed mention Ponge's writing on the Sun, but only briefly and only as another object to be observed, in this ambitious and persuasive overview of the object in modern poetry in English and French. As well as Ponge, we find good coverage of the well-known French poets Apollinaire, Breton, Follain, Guillevic, Jacob, Reverdy, Roubaud, and Segalen, and more recent and lesser-known ones: Pierre Chardin, Jean-Marie Gleize, Christian Prigent, Paul Louis Rossi, Christophe Tarkos, and Jean Tortel. Stout also makes a decent attempt to augment this male world with more recent, women poets from France: Nathalie Quintane and Tita Reut. His study takes the time to consider Constance Aquaviva's 1990 collection of nine women poets, including Jacqueline Cahen, Liliane Giraudon, Frédérique Guétat-Liviani, Marie-Rose Lefèvre, Michèle Métail, and Jacqueline Risset, in the volume called (as a critique of male-dominated *blasons* in poetry history) *Blasons du corps masculin*. This modern, female version of the *blason* tries, as Stout shows, to write the male body as object in the way that male poets since the Renaissance in France (Marot and Scève being the best-known sixteenth-century *blasonneurs*), and right up to Breton and other surrealists, have done with women's bodies. Indeed, this objectification of the male body, by contemporary *blasonneuses* poets, is an important element in the analysis by Stout, an attempt to redress the persistent bias towards male poets in accounts of twentieth-century poetry.

Stout makes a similar assault on male-dominated poetry on the other side of the pond. Elizabeth Bishop, Marianne Moore, and Gertrude Stein are matched with Claes Oldenburg, George Oppen, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Richard Wilbur, William Carlos Williams, and Louis Zukofsky. However, with only one chapter on American poets--and this alongside French poets--the

analysis suggests slightly more (but not much more) than a gesture to a comparative study of objects in modern American and French poetry. Indeed, by ignoring francophone poets (what about the object in the poetry of Aimé Césaire, Madeleine Gagnon, Edouard Glissant, Abdellatif Laâbi, Elie Maakaroun, Amina Said, or Véronique Tadjo?), the volume misses a trick. Though Mallarmé and Rimbaud are mobilized as precursors to twentieth-century poetry, and the psychoanalytical work of Melanie Klein and Jacques Lacan turns up incidentally, there is no systematic attempt to think through the theory of the poetic object (such as by Bachelard, Barthes, Merleau-Ponty, even Sartre), and I dare say that some mention of “post-phenomenology” might have filled a philosophical gap, given as it is concerned with the tripartite interaction between “text,” “body,” and “space,” and goes beyond phenomenology’s traditional focus on the lived body by studying both bodily experience in its relation towards external objects and then their mediation by technology (see the notion of ‘multi-stability’ in the work of Jesper Aagaard, for example [4]).

So the focus of Stout’s analysis of modern poetry and the object is on the lyrical dimensions to the various types of elucubration written on both sides of the Atlantic, and with good English translations from the French in parallel, the volume tries to get to grips with how poets envision the object, not least the human (and specifically male) body. What seems lacking (to this reader, at least) is some notion of scale and proportion. I am not necessarily arguing that the opposite, the antithesis, of an object is the Sun; in philosophical terms this is meaningless. But in poetry it may well be so.

NOTES

[1] Michel Collot, “Manuscrits inédits du *Soleil placé en abîme*,” *Genesis (Manuscrits-Recherche-Invention)*, 2(1992), pp. 151-182.

[2] Francis Ponge, *Le Grand recueil III* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), p. 155.

[3] Ponge, *Le Grand recueil III*, p. 156.

[4] Jesper Aagaard, 'Introducing postphenomenological research: a brief and selective sketch of phenomenological research methods,' *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 30:6 (2017), pp. 519-533.

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