



“An amphora like an ampersand found in the sand”:

Found Objects as Traces of Memory in Suzannah V. Evans’s Poetry

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Suzannah V. Evans is an emerging British poet, whose debut double pamphlet *Marine Objects / Some Language* was published by Guillemot Press in 2020, followed by the pamphlet *Brightwork* in 2021. Her poetic practice is often concerned with things and with the idea of words as things. She has a particular fascination for the seashore, the paraphernalia of sailing and boatbuilding, and the flotsam and jetsam washed up on the beach after having undergone a marine metamorphosis. In her poems, the sea often works as an extended metaphor for thoughts and memories rising to consciousness, and the objects fished up from the briny deep function as transformative lenses triggering poetic meditations and unsettling experiences. Her use of the found object as a catalyst for memory engages with the legacy of various modernist and avant-garde works and artistic practices. *Marine Objects* is an ekphrastic sequence inspired by a 1939 Surrealist assemblage made by British-Argentinian artist Eileen Agar, featuring a broken antique amphora, some crustaceans, a ram’s horn, and a starfish. The second sequence, *Some Language*, begins with an epigraph from Virginia Woolf’s 1918 short story “Solid Objects,” and shares Woolf’s focus on what Graham Fraser calls the spectral, “inscrutable afterlife of things” (Fraser 88). Evans’s most recent pamphlet *Brightwork*, written during a residency at Underfall Yard, a boatyard in Bristol, also explores the materiality of objects and revisits the idea of words as objects, this time engaging with the legacy of French poetry, particularly Guillaume Apollinaire’s calligrams and Francis Ponge’s collection of prose poems *Le Parti pris des choses* (1942). This article aims to explore the intermedial and intertextual poetics of the found object that unfolds in Evans’s work, showing that her poetry is in a far-reaching conversation with the modernist and avant-garde experimentation with the idea of objects as vehicles of spectral memory. Evans is also a modernist scholar, so her poetry is replete with references to modernist and avant-garde works.¹ In her poetic practice, objects often undergo manifold transformations, conjuring up various kinds of memory—an impersonal memory carried by the sea, snippets of more personal memories, used to articulate

¹ Evans’s doctoral thesis examines T.S. Eliot’s intertextual dialogues with the legacy of nineteenth-century French poetry, in particular Jules Laforgue and Tristan Corbière. She also edited an anthology of contemporary English versions of and responses to Laforgue’s poetry titled *All Keyboards are Legitimate* (Guillemot Press, 2023).

a tale of trauma and healing, as well as the collective, intertextual memory of literary and artistic tradition. This poetics of the found object also has a strong meta-textual dimension, since words themselves are often posited as found objects and spliced in enigmatic assemblages.

Marine Historian: Transforming Surrealist Assemblage into a Mouthpiece of Marine Memory

Marine Objects is an ekphrastic sequence of eight poems, most of which take as their title the last line of the previous poem, a technique that not only reinforces the idea of a sequence,² but may also be read as a form of splicing together resembling the visual technique of assemblage. This sequence was inspired by an assemblage of found objects made by Eileen Agar. Agar made *Marine Object* in the spring of 1939, during a short stay in the vicinity of Toulon, to get a last glimpse of France before the outbreak of the war.³ In her memoir, *A Look at my Life*, she recounts that one day, while strolling by the fishing port at Carquieranne, she came across a Greek amphora, broken into two halves, caught in one of the fishermen's nets. This fragmented amphora would become the starting point of *Marine Object*: she combined it with some crustaceans found two years earlier on a beach near Mougins, Côte d'Azur, while beachcombing with Picasso among others, as well as a ram's horn that she had come across in Cumberland. She thus transformed the broken amphora into a Surrealist chimera of sorts, creating a hybrid mythology combining marine and sylvan elements. Agar writes that "it took [her] and the amphora a long time to attempt such a conjunction" (Agar 144). Therefore, the passage of time is an important aspect in the assemblage: the object is "time-speckled," i.e., covered with the patina of time. She suggests that, for her, objects like fossils function as "signals in time" (Agar 84), and the same could be said of crustaceans. Moreover, the careful accumulation of items found in different places eventually results in a sudden transformation into a new kind of composite object that springs to life in a moment of *kairos*, transformed into a "sea-sprung" denizen (*Marine Objects* 2). The choice of the singular form in Agar's title underscores the idea that through the artist's act of "conjunction," the group of found objects forming the assemblage become one. At the same time, the very choice of the term "conjunction" invites the reader to make meta-poetic parallels between visual assemblage and the poem's splicing together of diction.

² Although none of Evans's poems are sonnets, this technique hinges on the same principle as the crown of sonnets.

³ Agar's assemblage is now part of Tate Britain's permanent collection: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/agar-marine-object-to5818/>.

The opening poem of Evans's sequence, titled "sea-wrung, sea-wracked, time-speckled," is not only an ekphrasis but also an apostrophe, and uses a technique clearly reminiscent of John Keats's famous poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn," where the speaker addresses an antique urn, calling it "thou foster-child of silence and slow time" (Keats 461):

You, salty, you, barnacled, you, sea-sprung, you,
made thing, found thing, cherished thing.

Barnacles have covered you in brittle kisses
and the sea has poked its tongue into your hollows.

You are a wide mouth, a silent mouth,
lips of terracotta and eyelashes of shell. (*Marine Objects 2*)

As in Keats's poem, the speaker not only meditates on the object as a silent embodiment of history but also personifies and addresses it. Drawing on the polysemy of the word "mouth," which may also refer to the amphora's opening, the poetic voice in Evans's poem transforms the object into a mouthpiece of marine memory, a kind of marine historian, in the same way that Keats's urn is compared to a "Sylvan historian" (Keats 461). One may see the anthropomorphic imagery of the second and third stanzas as an allusion to the "sea-change" of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and the famous lines:

Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes,
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
into something rich and strange (Shakespeare 178)

In this respect, it is worth mentioning that one of Agar's first Surrealist assemblages was a skull decorated with seashells, and she specifically suggests she was inspired by Shakespeare's lines to create it (Agar 94).⁴ The "marine object" comes to life, metamorphosed into a "rich and strange" denizen of the deep. It is clearly meant to function as a receptacle of marine memory,

⁴ Another relevant work by Agar is *Angel of Anarchy* (1936–1940), a plaster cast head covered with various found objects, in particular patches of fabrics and seashells, in order to create an enigmatic and rather menacing creature. See <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/agar-angel-of-anarchy-to3809>.

but initially remains silent and enigmatic. Agar does not say much about what the “conjunction” of *Marine Object* aimed to express, but writes that the year prior to the war was “a time of uncertainty and apprehension, dismay and despair, mixed with [the] determination that life should be as full as possible” (Agar 143). This apprehension was undoubtedly made more poignant by the visit to Toulon, which is the principal base of the French Navy. These elements point to the fact that this “silent mouth” may be read as a premonition or warning of the looming menace of World War II. At the same time, the sensual imagery suggests that this mouth speaks in a Surrealist dream language that is not univocal, oscillating between Eros and Thanatos, and remaining partially indecipherable, unfathomable.

The poetic voice also meditates on the object’s transformation into a museum piece: the idea of the museum or cabinet of curiosities is present in the lines “submerged and now emerged / on display, in a cabinet on a plinth” (*Marine Objects* 2). Unlike Keats’s Grecian urn, which is a museum piece by definition, metonymically representing the artistic heritage of ancient Greece, the transmogrified Greek amphora is an object that has been for a long time lost to history, and is only salvaged through the process of artistic recuperation, first by Agar and then by Evans: as the amphora is fished out from the sea, the speaker (and fishermen) are wondering “is it ancient is it ancient or is it just a pot?” (*Marine Objects* 8). Therefore, there is a reflection on what exactly distinguishes an artwork from an ordinary object. Arguably, Evans’s gesture of writing an ekphrastic apostrophe about a relatively obscure artwork, particularly given that it replicates the technique of Keats’s canonic poem, amounts to an attempt to fish up the forgotten piece from the sea of oblivion and make it enter the space of the museum where it belongs.

By choosing to write a collection of poems dedicated to this obscure object and introducing a key change to the title of Agar’s assemblage—no longer *Marine Object* but *Marine Objects*—Evans engages with the Surrealist fantasy of the book of poems itself as an assemblage of objects having undergone a marine metamorphosis. Juxtaposing the poems alongside visual art by Chloe Bonfield conceived specifically for this collection, Evans suggests that the poems themselves, and the words that compose them, should also be seen as material objects. In this respect, it is relevant to mention that Agar’s *Marine Object* shares certain features with Leonor Fini’s *Objet trouvé par Léonor Fini. Couverture d’un livre ayant séjourné dans la mer* (1936), a Surrealist found object which creates the illusion of a book cover that has been immersed in the sea. In a fascinating article, Alex Zivkovic tracks the history of this object. In 1936, Fini’s object was exhibited at the *Exposition Surréaliste d’objets* at the Charles Ratton gallery in

Paris.⁵ As Zivkovic explains, the object created the illusion of a history of marine transformation, engaging with the Surrealist fantasy of storytelling related to ocean detritus, which was in fact entirely fictitious since Fini had found it not at the beach but at a flea market. Although it seemed to be encrusted with marine matter and crustaceans, the object had never been immersed in the sea, and was actually a somewhat kitsch late 19th-century attempt to commercialize a German translation of Christopher Columbus's journal. The cover, created by painter Carl Maria Seyppel, was made to look as if it were salvaged from the depths of the ocean. However, as this book had become a rarity by the time Fini salvaged it from the flea market, the artist's act of salvage may be metaphorically equated with the idea of fishing it up from the sea of anonymous, discarded objects to transform it into an artwork. As Zivkovic suggests, this object functions as a perfect embodiment of "what André Breton calls the 'marvelous precipitate of desire' formed by the encounter with found objects." In *Mad Love* (1937), Breton writes that the element of surprise is essential to the "convulsive beauty" of the encounter with the found object: "what is delightful here is the dissimilarity itself which exists between the object wished for and the *object found* [la dissemblance entre l'objet souhaité et la trouvaille]" (Breton 13). Both Fini's and Agar's artworks belong to a whole lineage of such Surrealist "marine objects" that were featured in the *Exposition Surréaliste d'objets*, such as *Objet trouvé et interprété par Alberto Magnelli. Racine d'olivier trouvée sur une plage* which resembles an elongated, Giacometti-like human body. By foregrounding the "miraculous shapes [...] produced out of the reaction between debris and water, then left behind on beaches" (Zivkovic), these Surrealist artworks sought to transform seemingly ordinary objects into props for Surrealist storytelling, often also creating an analogy between the marine metamorphoses they have undergone and the slow, complex transformations carried out by processes of the human mind, psyche, and memory.

Although Evans makes no direct allusions to Fini's work, her poems are clearly informed by the legacy of this Surrealist fantasy of the object in general—and the book in particular—having undergone an underwater transformation. Evans's collection creates an assemblage of word and image similar to Fini's object where we can still read the word "Columbus" on the cover of the book, onto which various crustaceans have been grafted. Furthermore, Evans's poetry is conspicuously meta-poetic: one may notice that the accumulation of composite adjectives in the poem's title—"sea-wrung, sea-wracked, time-speckled"—mirrors the technique of "conjunction" (i.e. splicing together of discarded fragments) in the assemblage itself. This idea becomes even more prominent in the second poem, "Starfish Balancing at your Throat," where words are accumulated in the same way that objects are accumulated in an assemblage,

⁵ It is unclear whether Agar was familiar with Fini's piece, but it is worth noting that like Agar, Fini was an Argentinian-born female Surrealist working across media.

particularly in the first and last stanzas. In these enumerations that clearly mirror the visual technique of assemblage, there is a gradual doing away with syntactic categories, which resembles the waves' breaking down of the object into fragments, or the grafting of the barnacles that gradually cover objects submerged in the sea. Alongside the noun phrases, we find more surprising juxtapositions like "a yes," "a burnished," or "a how though? a follow, an amplifying, a Greek" (*Marine Objects* 4). The speaker reflects on the sea change the marine object has undergone, with the rhythm clearly recalling that of the waves and emphasizing the double process of fragmentation and splicing that transforms the objects submerged in the sea into new, surprising, and enigmatic forms:

Waves once wept over these barnacles that spot you like freckles.

Lips once touched the lip of this jug and hands once handled it.

Terracotta can break as men can break.

Waves break when you pick them up.

A starfish is on the lip, the very lip, of the jug,

the very lip and heart and throat of the jug

where once water poured.

An amphora, an amphora found, an amphora found broken.

An amphora like an ampersand found in the sand and dredged up.

An amphora split in two like a heart, like the rose inside of a clam,

split in two and spliced too with the objects of two years ago. (*Marine Objects* 4)

The amphora is still impregnated with the spectral memory of its life in antiquity, a memory made extremely tangible through the sensual haptic imagery. Its immersion in the sea occasions a Surrealist transmogrification, as the proliferation of similes shows. The omnipresent use of internal rhyme, polysyndeton and paronomasia, for instance between "amphora" and "ampersand," reinforces the idea of poetic language as fragments of discarded debris, found and collected in the same way as the object itself. The paronomasia between "split" and "spliced" suggests that like the creative process itself, the sea change is a double process of fragmentation and grafting resulting in new forms: the lines "split in two and spliced too with the objects of two years ago" reflect Agar's creative process of piecing together over time fragments found in different places, looking for surprising conjunctions. The speaker's

quasi-obsession with the starfish balancing at the amphora's throat recalls its use as an enigmatic object in Man Ray's Surrealist short film *L'Étoile de mer*, where it functions as a token of lost love. Likewise, here the amphora is "split in two like a heart," suggesting a love loss.

Just as the object surged up from the briny deep is transformed into a living being through the artistic process, the sea itself is also personified: in "sea-wrung, sea-wracked, time-speckled," the sea has "poked its tongue" (*Marine Objects* 3) in the amphora's hollows, while in the poem "Waves Break When You Pick Them Up," as the fishermen dredge up the amphora, they "disturb the sea and break its thought pattern" (*Marine Objects* 6). This introduces an extended metaphor transforming the sea into a visualization of the human psyche, with the briny deep becoming equivalent to the subconscious and the object sprung from the deep—a representation of the rise of memory to consciousness. The simile "like the rose inside of a clam" also introduces the idea of memories that are difficult to access, with the tightly-shut shells of molluscs functioning like the locking mechanisms of the psyche. This is reinforced by the emphasis on the idea of the amphora's throat being a kind of mouth, which is initially silent but gradually becomes a speaking apparatus. In the poem "Balancing and Barnacled," there is a key shift from the apostrophe to a ventriloquism of sorts; while the speaker is initially addressing and interpreting the enigmatic *Marine Object* in her ekphrastic meditation, she eventually starts speaking through it, making a surprising analogy between natural objects and technological devices:

You might think I'm speaking through a megaphone
a microphone a phone (a telephone)

but I am speaking through an amphora
amplifying the coincidences of circumstance and crustacean

using my lips as if they are moist sea lips
as if they are the twin halves of a soft razor shell
as if they are other lips and as if those other lips are shouting (*Marine Objects* 7)

Thus, the marine object becomes a kind of puppet, revisiting the use of puppetry by Dada and Surrealist artists, and the poetic voice oscillates between individual and collective, personal and impersonal memory, modernity and antiquity. While the starfish blocking the amphora's "throat" initially seems to make it mute, preventing it from delivering its secrets, it eventually comes to serve as a voicing apparatus, transforming sound the way a prism transforms light,

and turning the object into a mouthpiece blurring the personal memory of the speaker and the impersonal memory of the sea. The use of paronomasia creates an analogy between the rhythm of the poetic utterance and the murmuring rhythms of the sea waves, particularly as they slide in and out of the amphora's mouth. The wordplay creating links between two abstract notions ("coincidences" and "circumstance") and a concrete object ("crustacean") foregrounds the idea of the materiality of words themselves, resulting in inextricable fusions between objects and the splinters of memory they embody.

"Scour[ing] the seas of language": Collecting Words as "Solid Objects"

Evans's poems engage with Agar's own description of her technique as "a form of inspired correction, a displacement of the banal by the fertile intervention of chance or coincidence" (*Marine Objects* 7; Agar 147). This meditation on an artistic practice of collecting and assembling objects that triggers a surreal transformation of the ordinary into a tantalizing locus of marine memory introduces the next sequence, *Some Language*, which is interrelated with the first one in many ways but also functions as a distinct entity. The hermeneutic key of this sequence is the epigraph taken from Virginia Woolf's short story "Solid Objects"—"as nearly resembling a starfish as anything" (*Some Language* 3; "Solid Objects" 105)—which points to Evans's project to explore the intersections between Surrealist and modernist aesthetics. The idea of the material object as a receptacle for spectral memory is central to Woolf's modernist poetics as a whole. In many of her texts it functions as a haunting *memento mori*, such as Jacob's shoes as a token of loss in *Jacob's Room*, or the seashell and the boar's skull in *To the Lighthouse*.⁶ In "Solid Objects," by contrast, Woolf endows the object with an unsettling, enigmatic indeterminacy. The main character of "Solid Objects" finds a piece of green glass on the beach and takes it home without knowing why. He puts it on the mantelpiece, where it triggers various meditations, becoming a key element in his mindscape, so to say: "Looked at again and again half consciously by a mind thinking of something else, *any object mixes itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain when we least expect it*" ("Solid Objects" 104, my emphasis). The mantelpiece thus comes to serve as a metonymy for the mind, where endless associations between the enigmatic object and the ever-changing "stuff of thought" are formed by a restless consciousness. As the haunting encounter with the enigmatic object triggers an unexplained, uncanny obsession with discarded objects

⁶ On the role of the object as a *memento mori* in Woolf's poetics, see for instance Cara Lewis's chapter "Mortal Form: Still Life and Virginia Woolf's Other Elegiac Shapes" in *Dynamic Form: How Intermediality Made Modernism*.

of all kinds, in many ways, the protagonist of Woolf's story comes to function as a figure of the ordinary person (with a promising career in politics at that) turning into an artist, except that he remains an ordinary person in that he is unable to fully process the meaning of his obsession and transform it into a more conceptualized artistic practice. His observations thus lack the programmatic nature of Breton's; instead, he has the intuitive, semi-conscious "impulse" of collecting found objects typical of "young children" ("Solid Objects" 103). Like Agar and myriad other Surrealist artists, the character finds himself looking for companion pieces for his find, and is drawn not only to the beach, but also to "the windows of curiosity shops" and "the patches of urban wasteland where the household refuse is thrown away" ("Solid Objects" 104). Again, this points to the fact that in modernist and avant-garde aesthetics, places like flea markets and refuse dumps were often metaphorically figured as oceans where thousands of objects awaited being rescued from anonymity and recuperated by the artist's act of salvage. One day, in the grass on a patch of urban wasteland, Woolf's character comes across the perfect match for his piece of green glass—a piece of blue china resembling a starfish. The title of the first poem in Evans's sequence "Some Language," "The colour was mainly blue," and its epigraph are taken from the character's ekphrastic meditation prompted by his tentative "conjunction" of the two objects on the mantelpiece:

he could see that it was a piece of china of the most remarkable shape, as nearly resembling a starfish as anything—shaped, or broken accidentally, into five irregular but unmistakable points. The colouring was mainly blue [...] But how had the piece of china been broken into this remarkable shape? A careful examination put it beyond doubt that the star shape was accidental, which made it all the more strange, and it seemed unlikely that there should be another such in existence. Set at the opposite end of the mantelpiece from the lump of glass that had been dug from the sand, it looked like a creature from another world—freakish and fantastic as a harlequin. It seemed to be pirouetting through space, winking light like a fitful star. The contrast between the china so vivid and alert, and the glass so mute and contemplative, fascinated him, and wondering and amazed he asked himself how the two came to exist in the same world, let alone to stand upon the same narrow strip of marble in the same room. The question remained unanswered. ("Solid Objects" 104–05)

Evans's poems thus draw a parallel between the assemblages unwittingly created by Woolf's character and Agar's Surrealist assemblage, which likewise revolves around the conjunction between objects belonging to different worlds (the amphora, starfish and ram horn). Clearly, what fascinates the character in Woolf's story is the conjunction of two objects belonging to different environments—the green glass is found in the marine environment, while the blue starfish-like china is found in the grass but seems to belong to the marine world. Evans's poem "The colour was mainly blue" may be seen as a kind of second-degree, intertextual ekphrasis, as it explicitly engages with the prose meditation of Woolf's text, which is itself ekphrastic. In the poem, the piece of china becomes impregnated with other echoes of literary and artistic memory; it conjures up not only Woolf's modernist aesthetic but also Yves Klein's pioneer use

of blue: “A china starfish made of mainly Klein blue, / mainly sea-wrapped blue, mainly the colour of the deep sea’s eyes” (*Some Language* 3). Like Woolf’s story, Evans’s poem foregrounds the hybridity between marine and sylvan elements, as underscored by the hypallage used in the phrase “an ossicle of china cast off [...] / to the abyssal deeps of the grass,” where “grass” replaces the more expected word “sea.” Here once again, the assemblage results in a creature that becomes alive, a process textually rendered in a proliferation of compound -ing forms: “A clam-eating, oyster-sucking, fish-chasing, mollusc-loving star?” (*Some Language* 3). Like the paronomastic analogy between the “amphora” and the “ampersand,” which underscores the connections between objects and language, here the poem ends with the line “a *,” where the asterisk stands for the china starfish, in the same way that, earlier, the ampersand comes to stand for the amphora.

In this sequence, a meta-poetic series of poems like “The Fisherman” introduce an explicit analogy between the practice of collecting seashells and other marine objects and the process of poetic creation:

Here he is, stooping in the sea again.

He is looking for shells—the bright blue ones,
the ones which shine under water.

[...]

He is looking for the word *light*.

He hunts, brow furrowed,
feeling his way with toes and tongue, fingers balanced on sea ledges,
probing rock pools, sifting currents. An anemone
puffs out its frills at the edge of his vision. *Anemone*,
he thinks. *Scarlet, satin, prickling petals, frond, polyp*.
And his mind rings with the scarlet, the heart-red, of it.
Crimson, coral, wine-dark, blush-struck, rust-rubbed red.

He dips his net into the water, scoops the words up. (*Some Language* 4)

Ultimately, words become the “solid objects” that obsess the poetic persona. With its analogy between physical work and the work of poetry, this poem also introduces a marine variation on Seamus Heaney’s “Digging” and “Blackberry-Picking”: Evans’s poems all abound with meta-poetic imagery comparing the act of bringing together poetic diction to the physical activity of collecting shells and flotsam found on the beach. The image of the fishing nets

hauled to collect words also recalls the etymology of the term “text” itself. In the poem “The Loop,” the speaker makes this analogy explicit: “I scour the seas of language / looking for the words with intricate sides, pale as shells” (*Some Language* 5). The intricate sound patterns of rare words like “anemone” become the linguistic equivalent of the “intricate sides” of the objects collected by the speaker.⁷ Thus, the seashore once again comes to function as a metaphor for the human psyche and the capacity of linguistic and poetic expression.

This poem also introduces a new theme, making it clear that what is at stake in Evans’s work is not merely a poetics of joyful, serendipitous chance creation prompted by an obsession for objects and words, but rather a difficult process of re-membering, of finding a proper language to express a painful memory obliquely:

Sometimes my tongue snags, as if caught in seaweed,
and I repeat / repeat / repeat, looping on pain, chanting
my song of catheters, legs, toes, bottoms, stair lifts.
My toe my toe my toe my toe my toe my toe my toe
I carol to the carer, staring evenly ahead. My song
spills into the night, flooding the house, bringing
with it driftwood, sea glass, the bodies of small seals.
When I lie in bed at night, my mouth open in a silent
Munch scream of agony, what finally emerges is the trill,
the screech, the blood-singing whistling wail of seagulls. (*Some Language* 5)

In this poem, seashells function as unambiguous images of transience, a kind of *memento mori*, recalling the way Woolf uses them in *To the Lighthouse*. Shifting from the abstract aesthetics of Klein to the expressionism of Munch’s gaping mouth, the speaker here finally manages to voice out the memory that has been building up in the rest of the poems: the one of caring for a sick, immobilized and possibly dying, loved one, as terms like “catheters” and “stair lifts” suggest. The line “Sometimes my tongue snags, as if caught in seaweed” suggests that the speaker is still speaking through the “mouth” of the marine object, a ventriloquism making it easier to voice traumatic memory. One of the other poems actually incorporates the harrowing lyrics of this song that “spills into the night”: “*I remember when cancer was just a constellation / a starry-eyed crustacean*” (*Some Language* 9). These lines, the lyrics of a song

⁷ The idea of the link between material objects and words is also, although more obliquely, present in the opening paragraphs of Woolf’s “Solid Objects,” where her experimental syntax makes it seem that the phrase “the words were uttered” materializes the two characters as “solid” shapes on the beach (“Solid Objects” 102).

by Scottish singer Hamish Hawk, make the connection between the seashells, crustaceans and other marine animals, and the illness haunting the speaker. Thus, the two sequences create distinct but intricately interwoven kinds of subjectivity, which conjure up splinters of different forms of personal, collective and intertextual memory.

“The language is worked into the wood”: The Brightwork of Memory and the *Objet* of Poetry

In her most recent pamphlet, *Brightwork*, Evans shifts her focus from natural objects like seashells and starfish to the man-made objects of a boatyard, developing a thorough-going analogy between the craftsmanship of boatbuilding and the craft of poetry. In this sequence, “brightwork,” a technical term in nautical diction referring to the varnished wood or metal work on a boat, whose function is also to protect the vessel from the corrosive powers of sea water, comes to figuratively refer to the intricate processes of the work of poetry as a way of preserving memory. The subjectivity of the speaker is blurred with the imagined subjectivity of objects themselves through a subtle polyphony of personal, impersonal and collective voices. The point of view shifts between the first and the third person, and objects are often personified, adopting a first-person speaking voice. This pamphlet continues Evans’s work in interconnecting more personal meditations prompted by the seashore and ordinary things with an intertextual exploration of the poetics of the object in artistic tradition, turning this time to the legacy of French poetry. One of the first poems in this pamphlet, “Buoy,” clearly seeks to create a common lineage with Apollinaire’s *calligrammes*:

I am rounded
and supple as an orange
and in fact, I am orange, orange
and rusted, orange and russet. I am supple
and my slightly indented form says: *mussel, muffle,*
ruddle, shuttle, shuffle. Place your hand on my smooth
side and I am a rounded belly, full of sea dreams, watery
susurrations. At night, eels think of my rounded form as they
flicker sideways in the darkness, and minnows break
their daytime shoals to envy my floating shadow.

I am as orange as the colour that appears before

your eyes when you blink before the sun;

I am an orange tethered thought

sounding out the water;

I am a scorched moon

at the harbourside. (*Brightwork 2*)

Here, rather than a human speaker dreaming about objects, there is a personified object dreaming about itself, attempting to grasp its identity and express it through language: “Place your hand on my smooth / side and I am a rounded belly, full of sea-dreams, watery susurrations.” Once again, the object becomes first a prop for storytelling and then a personified storyteller; the buoy’s tale revolves around eco-poetic plenitude and becoming-one with the elements, fruit and celestial bodies, in particular the sun and moon. The rounded shape and haptic dimension of the object suggest a poetics of pregnancy and make it function as an archetypal symbol of femininity and fertility, reinforced by the unmistakable allusion to the shape of the breast in Marcel Duchamp’s *Prière de toucher* (1947).⁸ The layout of the calligram also reinforces the idea of the poem itself as a material, tangible object in which words function as concrete building blocks.

This poem also ushers in the first of a series of references to Francis Ponge’s collection of prose poems *Le Parti pris des choses* (1942), which has been translated into English as *Taking the Side of Things* and as *The Nature of Things*.⁹ Evans’s poems “The Crate,” “Rain,” and “The End of Fall” are explicitly-referenced versions (in the combined senses of translation and rewriting) of Ponge’s “Le Cageot,” “La Pluie” et “La fin de l’automne,” interweaving the subjectivity of Ponge’s prose poems with her own speaker’s in order to create a kind of palimpsest. “Buoy” introduces the first implicit allusion to Ponge’s “L’Orange,” which revolves around an extended analogy between an orange and a sponge: “Comme dans l’éponge il y a dans l’orange une aspiration à reprendre contenance après avoir subi l’épreuve de l’expression. Mais où l’éponge réussit toujours, l’orange jamais : car ses cellules ont éclaté, ses tissus se sont déchirés” (Ponge

⁸ On the haptic dimension often present in Surrealist objects, see Janine Mileaf’s *Please Touch: Dada and Surrealist Objects after the Readymade*.

⁹ Ponge’s work questions the very idea of the poem; his notion of the “proème” defines a kind of prose poetry that goes against traditional poetic conventions and attempts to forge a direct link with ordinary things.

41). With its strategic ambiguity, the phrase “l’épreuve de l’expression” also introduces a subtle wordplay between the idea of squeezing an orange (*presser*), and the idea of linguistic expression. Evans alludes to Ponge’s technique of the prose poem as an “expression” of the essence of an object in her analogy between the buoy and an orange, which in turn triggers a number of other similes: the buoy becomes in turn mussel, pregnant belly, sun, “tethered thought,” and moon. This proliferation of analogies between different objects that ultimately makes one forget what object one started with and draws the reader’s attention to the idea of words themselves as objects (“*mussel, muffle, / ruddle, shuttle, shuffle*”) may be approached through the lens of Ponge’s notion of “*objeu*” (a portmanteau word fusing the French terms *objet* and *jeu*), which Marie-Hélène Luebbbers defines in the following way:

Ce mot-valise créé par Ponge est à lui-même sa propre signification. Il s’agit d’un objet textuel qui « vit de sa propre vie » : qui n’offre pas au lecteur des significations figées, mais une démonstration de la production renouvelée de ces significations, dans le jeu perpétuel de toutes les possibilités du langage, le lecteur participant à cette production. (Luebbbers 874)¹⁰

Evans’s collection of prose poems engages with Ponge’s project, which is, as Alain Romestaing puts it, to make things speak and thus make them “happen” in the human world, the world of the spirit and of language (“‘Donner la parole aux choses,’ les faire advenir dans le monde humain, celui de l’esprit, du langage,” paragraphe 5). *Brightwork* abounds with examples of *objeu* that make the reader incessantly see the object with fresh eyes; for instance, while the poem “Buoy” compares the object to a pregnant belly, the poem “Two Still Lives”¹¹ crystallizes a radically different vision of the same object, prompted by the homophony between “buoys” and “boys”:

Bright buoys like apples
spilling over the hot ground
red and orange and rusted
blue hooks that are partially browned

Bright boys walking the boatyard
hands in pockets, heads down

¹⁰ “This portmanteau word coined by Ponge is in itself suggestive of its own meaning. It is a textual object that ‘lives by its own life’: that does not offer the reader fixed meanings, but a demonstration of the renewed production of these meanings, in the perpetual play of all the possibilities of language, with the reader participating in this production.”

¹¹ On the poetics of the still life in Ponge’s work, see John Stout’s “The Text as an Object: Francis Ponge’s Verbal Still Lives.”

walking and pacing the harbour

hair tousled and chests brown (*Brightwork* 8)

Buoys are thus both like bellies and like boys, a link foregrounded by the alliteration in /b/. Both for Ponge and for Evans, the object is endlessly *like* something else, so what ultimately matters is not the thing itself but the endless transformations it undergoes through the brightwork of memory and its expression in poetry, as the grammatical parallelism of the phrase “Bright buoys [...] Bright boys” underscores. This emphasis on homophony also introduces a Saussurean awareness of language as a system of arbitrary signifiers and suggests that there are endless possibilities of *objeu* between linguistic “sound-images” and the world of concrete objects. Thus, what is ultimately at stake in Evans’s collection, as in Ponge’s, is to forge a poetic language directly predicated on things:

The pontoon is shaping a language. *Ei-arch, ei-arch*, the pontoon says, pulling away from the harbour wall, shucking its body about the water as a child might shake a walnut in its shell. It stills momentarily, the only sound a slight tug of rope, an unnoticeable fraying of cord. And then a pull, a headstrong horse nudging the water, nosing at the white fender attached to a boat. The pontoon curls its voice around a creak, grumbles, rocks. How still it is now (*ei, ei, ei*), how peacefully it leans into the harbour, as if listening. (*Brightwork* 5)

Like “Puffin, the Little Hillyard,” an explicit rewriting of Ponge’s “La Barque,” this poem centers on a boat, transforming it through a series of analogies (both Ponge and Evans compare the boat to a horse), thereby immersing the reader in the process of *objeu*. In “Pontoon,” this *objeu* is even more overtly focused on the idea of the “l’épreuve de l’expression,” i.e. a linguistic and poetic expression directly emanating from the object itself, rather than centered on more conventional human subjectivity.

At the same time, this focus on the physical object does not mean that Evans completely does away with human memory; instead, the pamphlet’s central conceit—an analogy between the physical work of boatbuilding and the poet’s work with memory—suggests a kind of thinking- and writing-through objects:

The boatbuilders balance by curved pieces of timber

[...] They let language fall from their tongues,

let it shape the movement of their hands.

[...]

The language is worked into the wood as they move,

mahogany murmuring with the sound of *canvas*,

carlins, clinker, coaming, cradle, crook,

taking on the shine of *seam, scuppering*, in place of varnish (*Brightwork* 6-7)

In these lines, the blurring of human subjectivity and the subjectivity of objects, as well as between physical work on the one hand and the work of memory through poetic expression on the other crystallizes a strong meta-poetic vision of the poem itself as a kind of marine construction. In this process of *objeu*, which creates endless analogies between objects, living beings, and words, the more personal motif of the traumatic memory of caring for an invalid parent, which also appears in *Marine Objects / Some Language*, suddenly resurfaces:

When I next lift my mother in her hoist,
into the air as if she's a heavy stone
I'll untremble my hands, turn her voiced
cries of pain into the sound of waves, blown back
against the shore, and conjure
my secret boatbuilding words: *scantling*,
roperoom, *crab winch*, watching her posture
among the scaffolding. (*Brightwork* 16)

This single reference to human memory in a sequence centered on the world of material things points to the possibility of transforming the raw material of trauma into a craft akin to the craft of boat construction. Through Ponge's interrelated processes of *objeu* and *objoie* (a portmanteau word fusing "object" and "joy"),¹² human memory and the pain it entails dissolve into the word-worlds of "solid objects," which function as a spell, a source of healing consolation and even joy. This kind of linguistic and poetic expression predicated not on the rhetoric of sentiment associated with traditional poetry but on a more direct link with the material world allows the speaker to escape the painful directness of their subject-position and paradoxically articulate a more powerful oblique expression of emotion, transforming material objects into a construction to hide behind once built. At the same time, this hiding is also a "showing," as this poetic construction exposes its stakes in the way that a boat shows its rigging, inextricably linking two contradictory gestures, just as the personal and impersonal are linked through a subtle change of scale. Evans's poem suggests that even paralysis might be envisaged as a Deleuzian "block of becoming," a means to forge an "alliance": "What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes" (Deleuze and Guattari 238; 291). Thus, Evans's poem arguably also revisits some of the formal patterns of Woolf's *The Waves*, which Deleuze and Guattari discuss

¹² See Romestaing 1997.

as an archetypal image of the infinite fluidity of becoming and blurring of different consciousnesses:

Each [character] advances like a wave, but on the plane of consistency they are a single abstract Wave whose vibration propagates following a line of flight or deterritorialization traversing the entire plane (each chapter of Woolf's novel is preceded by a meditation on an aspect of the waves, on one of their hours, on one of their becomings). (Deleuze and Guattari 252)

As the rhyme between “hoist” and “voiced” in Evans’s poem underscores, the analogy between the work of boatbuilding and the work of writing crystallizes a way out of paralysis and trauma, allowing a transcendental hoisting of the subject that triggers a magical, healing process of becoming-other through which the “cries of pain” are turned into “the sound of waves” and then into the sound of words.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, in both *Marine Objects / Some Language* and *Brightwork*, Suzannah V. Evans develops an intertextual and intermedial poetics of the found object, transforming it into a prop for storytelling and a catalyst of different kinds of memory: the impersonal memory of the sea becomes a metaphor for the human psyche, conjuring up fragments of more personal meditations and memories, which articulate a tale of trauma and healing, and resonate with a more collective literary and artistic memory which meditates on the legacy of both artistic tradition and modernist and avant-garde experimentation in relation to the object.

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