Things in Poems

EDITED BY JOSEF HRDLIČKA AND MARIANA MACHOVÁ

KAROLINUM

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Content

INTRODUCTION: THINGS IN WORDS – Josef Hrdlička 7

THE PROJECTED HEART: EKPHRASIS, MATERIAL IMAGINATION, AND THE SHIELD OF ACHILLES – Karel Thein 17

NAVIGATING POETRY AS OBJECT AND OBJECT AS POETRY: OPTATIAN PORFYRY AND THE ANCIENT HISTORY OF *DINGGEDICHTE* – Michael Squire 35

BEAUTIFUL STONES AND EXOTIC OBJECTS: THE SYMBOLISM OF THINGS IN EARLY MEDIEVAL CHINA – Zornica Kirková and Olga Lomová 71

THE POETICS OF THINGS IN THE DIDACTIC POETRY OF EARLY GERMAN ENLIGHTENMENT: BARTHOLD HEINRICH BROCKES – Alice Stašková 91

FRANCIS PONGE'S OBJECTIVE LYRICISM – Michel Collot 107

IN MANDELSTAM'S KITCHEN – Anne Hultsch 131

TWO POLISH POEMS ABOUT THINGS – Jakub Hankiewicz 147

"TIME'S SECONDS PROMINENT ARISE / TREMBLING IN THE FAÇADE": A LOOK BACK AT ROMAN ARCHITECTURE. "IL GESÙ" BY MILADA SOUČKOVÁ – Josef Vojvodík 161

THE POEM AS A ROTARY OBJECT: ON TEXTS BY H. M. ENZENSBERGER AND H. C. ARTMANN – Pavel Novotný 195

WORDS TURNED INTO OBJECTS: THINGS IN VISUAL POETRY – Julie Koblížková Wittlichová 207

THINGS ON AN ISLAND – Josef Hrdlička 225

THE BRAZENNESS OF THINGS IN CZECH SURREALISM OF THE 1960S – Jaromír Typlt 241

THE THING IN MODERN LITHUANIAN POETRY: FROM SOCIAL IMPRINT TO METAPHOR OF SUBJECTIVITY – Dalia Satkauskytė 255

TWO EKPHRASTIC STRATEGIES IN RUSSIAN POETRY OF THE LATTER TWENTIETH CENTURY: "EMPTINESS" IN THE WORKS OF ANDREI MONASTYRSKI AND ARKADII DRAGOMOSHCHENKO – Kirill Korchagin 277

PAUL MULDOON'S HYPEROBJECTS – Justin Quinn 293

CONTRIBUTORS 313

BIBLIOGRAPHY 315

INDEX 343

Introduction: Things in Words[1]

JOSEF HRDLIČKA

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

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

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

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

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2 See Michael Squire's chapter on the topic.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Wolker 1953, 44)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Štrpka 2016, 16)

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

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

KAREL THEIN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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