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Thing and Word: On the Lyrical Museum

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. . . oh, for such saying as never the things themselves
hoped so intensely to be.
. . . fleeting, they look for rescue
through something in us, the most fleeting of all.

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Ninth Duino Elegy*

1. What is a Lyrical Museum?

Normally, things are selected for museum display for one of three reasons. Either very old and rare things are selected by virtue of being one of a kind or intrinsically valuable, in which case we have a thesaurus-museum, a treasure trove like the Kremlin Armory or exhibits from the Diamond Fund. Or things possessing the significance of typicality are chosen for their ability to represent an entire class or category of similar things—in this case we have a catalogue-museum, a systematic collection on the order of most museums of technology, minerology, zoology and the like. Finally, things may be neither especially unique, nor especially typical, but derive their interest from the fact that they belonged to some remarkable person. In this instance we have a memorial museum, which recreates the surroundings of a famous writer, scientist, military leader or whomever. Of course, these three functions of a thing—as rarity, as example or as relic—may intersect and combine in actual practice, but traditionally any one of them could guarantee the museum status of things; they elevate things to the category of display items.

The museum which I plan to discuss here, however, does not belong to any of the types listed above. Its displays are composed of the things of everyday life, lacking any material, historical or artistic value. These are things of universal distribution which are available everywhere, without ever arousing the slightest attention or surprise. At the same time, there is an essential individuality, rather than typicality, in the being of these things, which preserves the imprint of their owners' lives and worldviews. Yet this does not serve to endow the items with memorial value, insofar as their owners are ordinary people, whose names enjoy no fame, and of whom it would be premature to take final stock.

And so, what kind of museum is it that displays ordinary things, and by what right is attention called to them? The explanation lies in the fact that, along with the material, historic and artistic values that are characteristic of very few things, *every* thing, every object, even the most insignificant, can possess a personal, or *lyrical* value. This is derived from the degree of experience and meaning which the given thing has absorbed, the extent to which it has been incorporated into the owner's spiritual activity. If we can discern in it a significant meaning, or if we find a signature or commentary affixed to it, then this is an item worthy of inclusion in a

lyrical museum. The intent of the museum is to reveal the endless variety and profound significance of things in human life, the wealth of their figurative and conceptual meaning, which can in no way be reduced to a utilitarian role.

The whole of human life consists of things and is preserved in them, like so many geological layers, through which we can trace a succession of ages, tastes, attachments, fascinations. Children's toys—a ball, doll, hand shovel. . . An eraser, a pen, pencil case and book bag. . . A ruler, skis, tennis rackets. . . A table lamp, book and notebook. . . A purse, coinpurse, mirror and fan. . . A wallet, cigarette case, keys, various documents. . . Scissors, knitting needles. . . A spade, pliers and a hammer. . . A compass, watch, thermometer, magnifying glass. . . Cups, plates and a well-worn chair by a window. . . A simple stone, collected by the sea at one time, now a frequent resting place for someone's gaze. . . Each thing is contained in the integral magnetic field of a human life, charged with the meaning of this life and oriented toward its center. Each thing is connected to a particular memory, experience, habit, loss or acquisition, an expansion of life's horizon. The ordinariness of things bears witness to their particular importance, their capacity to enter into the order of life, to grow as one with the qualities of human beings to the point that they become a fixed and meaningful part of human existence—all of this is denied to things which are "extra-ordinary."

The world itself is articulated, is "spoken," in things. It is not coincidental that the Russian word *veshch'* ("thing") is etymologically related to *vest'* ("news," "a message") and *veshchat'* ("to prophesy") and originally meant "that which is said, pronounced" (compare to the Latin word with the same root: *vox*, meaning "voice"). To hear the voice contained within a thing, prophesying from its depths, is to understand both the thing and oneself. The very dichotomy of "thing" and "human" can at best be arbitrarily established within the framework of "human-thingness," which, ultimately, is as indissoluble as soul and body. "Thingness" derives its "head" from humans, while acting in turn as an extended human "body." Wherever there is a thing, there is also a special exit for a human being beyond his body: to nature or art, space or thought, activity or quiet, contemplation or creativity. All of the basic components of human life find their correspondences in things, which act as letters, spelling out the meaningful words of actions, situations, interrelations. There is no such "thing"—be it an automobile or a button, a book or a candy wrapper—as a thing that lacks its own place in culture, or fails to bring its owner into communion with culture while demanding his reciprocal attention and understanding. After all, his very position in the world, the sense of his existence, is defined by the entirety of things surrounding him. A thing which falls away from meaning puts man in rupture with the system of surrounding connections and with himself.

It is here, around the things we encounter with every step we take, that an area has taken shape which now awaits its researcher, even demands the creation of its own academic discipline. This discipline could be called *realogy* (from the Latin *res*, meaning "thing"). At the present time, the words "realogy" and the "science of things" are unfamiliar to the ear, but they had to appear eventually, inasmuch as the vast majority of things which surround us everywhere and every day do not come under the rubric of any theoretical discipline devoted to the study of things: neither industrial technology, technical aesthetics, commerce, art studies, nor museum practice. Of course, prior to reaching the hands of its owner, a thing normally must pass through the factory production line and the commercial distribution network; some also pass through a design bureau or a craftsman's workshop. But realogy looks at that essence of the thing which cannot be reduced to the technical qualities of a *product*, nor to the economic

qualities of a *purchase*, nor even to the aesthetic aspects of a *work*. A *thing* possesses a particular essence which gains in significance in reverse proportion to the technological novelty, commercial value and aesthetic appeal of the thing per se. This essence, involving the capability of a thing to become kindred, to enter the life of a human being, is revealed more fully as other qualities diminish and lose their value or newness. The one property of a thing that increases over the course of its incorporation into a life is its ability to absorb personal attributes, its quality of *belonging* to a person. Each and every thing has this essence by virtue of its very existence, but it remains for the person to reveal it through experience and attention, transforming intrinsic value into value for someone. This is precisely the task of reology as a theoretical discipline and of the lyrical museum as the experimental foundation for a science of things: to comprehend the proper, nonfunctional meaning of things, independent of their commercial and utilitarian intent as well as their aesthetic qualities.

It seems wise to suggest a preliminary distinction between the terms “thing” and “object,” which occur in very different contextual combinations. “Object” requires an inanimate noun complement, while “thing” requires an animate one. We speak about the “object of what?”—of industry, of consumption, of export, of study, discussion, examination. . . . But we ask, “whose thing is this?”—his, hers, mine, ours, my father’s, my wife’s, my neighbor’s... In this instance, language shows better than any theoretical explanation the difference between object and thing, between the status of belonging to the world of objects and that of belonging to the world of subjects. A thing is not an object by its very nature as the property of a subject, a person. It is always “mine” or “someone’s own.” “Products,” on the other hand, “goods” and even “rarities” are all varieties of objects, objects for industry, consumption, buying, selling, collection or contemplation. Between “object” and “thing” approximately the same contrast exists as between “individuality” and “personality”: the first is but the possibility or substratum of the second. An object only becomes a thing when it is spiritually incorporated into someone’s life, just as an individual becomes a personality through the process of self-awareness, self-definition and intensive self-development. To compare further, let us consider “he made a fine object” and “he did a fine thing.” The first means that he produced something with his hands; the second, that he performed an action. In Old Russian the word *veshch’* (“thing”) originally meant “spiritual matter,” “deed,” “achievement” or “word”—and this meaning, intuitively felt in the contemporary use of “thing,” must be more fully revealed by theoretical work. Within every object there slumbers a portentous “thing,” the trace or potential of a human achievement. . . .

A lyrical museum is thus an experiment in *de-objectifying* things, starting with those that are closest to each of us, rather than those that are removed from us by historical time or associated with other natural surroundings or ethnic ways. Such a museum is the test of things’ authentic assimilation into our lives. Do we really understand what these things mean for us? How they enter our immediate surroundings, bringing with them distant, all-embracing meanings, connecting us to the integral system of culture with its traditions and possibilities? How the line of personal fate and the hope of inner becoming is drawn through them? All of this can be expressed subjectively to the extent that the lyrical “I” of the exhibitor determines the mode of expression in the exhibit. It is the sheer possibility of expression that is important, the presence of a lyrical impulse deep within the thing itself, its nonalien-ness, its kinship to the human “I” and human self-definition in the world.

In traditional museums it is essential to maintain a certain epic distance between the thing and that reality from which it is extracted and which it represents as if from afar, aloofly. This distance is necessary in order to establish the objective significance of things, to subject them to the test of time and of social recognition. It is necessary for the scientific investigation of their authenticity and representativeness. But another type of museum work is just as necessary—a type that will bring out the lyric, rather than the epic, nature of things. This must be revealed, not from the external viewpoint of the erudite specialist, but from within the spiritual and cultural situation in which these things act and live, inseparable from the life of their owner. To exhibit and offer commentary on a thing belonging to me personally—this is the opportunity that a lyrical museum gives to each of us. Here the meaning of things unfolds from the standpoint of their real-life implementation as something present in the here and now, within the horizon of that consciousness which uses them and embodies itself in them.

These things may not be as significant as the ones displayed in historical or artistic museums, since, after all, lyrical poems do not usually commemorate grandiose events—like the fall of Troy or the burning of Moscow—rather they convey a “marvelous moment” (Pushkin), the flash of a smile, a breath of air, or a “speck of dust on a pen knife” (Alexander Blok). A thing can serve in the capacity either of metaphor or metonymy, conveying the spiritual through the physical or the whole through its parts. A lyrical thing on display is like a poetic trope, whose literal meaning coincides with its material existence and everyday function, but whose figurative meaning embraces the entirety of experiences and conjectures expressed in it. The lyrical museum also has historical relevance, inasmuch as that personal essence of things, which it is called upon to comprehend, has only recently been fully manifested, in the era of increasing de-personalization.

2. Between Warehouse and Landfill

The problem of reification is one of the most crucial facing twentieth-century culture. The very words “thing,” “material,” and “materiality” have come to be perceived with suspicion, as if they posed a threat to spirituality. But a thing is not guilty of reification; that is the property of a person who reduces himself to a thing, whereas a thing proper always has the potential of rising to the human level and becoming animate through contact with a human being. It is not necessary to return to hand production for the realization of these potentials of things, as various thinkers including William Morris, Gandhi and Heidegger seem to suggest. A thing can be domesticated by man even if it rolls out of the factory on the most impersonal and technologically advanced conveyers, since it nonetheless ends up in someone’s house, where a person assimilates it into his private way of life, endowing it with numerous general, practical, conscious and unconscious meanings. The use to which a thing is put—be it sitting on a chair, watching a television set, wearing glasses or reading a book—deteriorates into consumerism only when it is not fully consumed, not assimilated to a person’s complete existence, however paradoxical this seems. As a banal example, consider the book which is “used” only for the pretty color of its cover, or, at best, for the topical information it contains. Consumerism arises when a thing arrives in the home of its owner only to remain alien and under-consumed, as if it were still just a pretty object in the store window or on a shelf.

The twentieth century has created two grandiose symbols of the alienation that separates things and man: the warehouse and the landfill. In the former are housed things that have not

yet come into human life and do not even seem to need to, as their bright labels glint haughtily beneath impeccable plastic wrappings. Meanwhile, in the case of the latter, things that have lost the attention and care they once enjoyed, are thrown out, abandoned to the ravages of dust, smut, rot and rust. Acquisitiveness and “disposingness” are opposite tendencies, but they are interrelated in their common cause: the incomplete assimilation of things—things for which someone didn’t have enough soul “to spare.” If a thing does not enter completely into a person’s life, but remains essentially a warehouse or store-window item, then its unneeded potential is condemned to purposeless decrepitude and collapse. In one sense there is no fundamental difference between warehouse and landfill: if we leave aside the space of human assimilation, the one passes directly into the other, from jewels to junk.

The image of “soulless things” has found repeated embodiment in twentieth-century art. We can readily recall pop-art portrayals of massive heaps of natural or naturalistically reproduced things, with their garish, store-bought exterior, which seems to have never *yet* been touched by human hands. At the other extreme, certain styles of avant-garde art, particularly conceptualism, have given meaning to the poor, worn, thrown-out things that will never *again* be touched by human hands. Yellowed papers, old documents, broken pencils, tattered remnants of books and newspapers, injured chairs, tottering on three legs—such is the ironic-grotesque, or sometimes the elegaic-grotesque, assemblage of many conceptualist works, in which words usurp the place of worn-out and neglected things.

Needless to say, these two extremes do not exhaust the artistic treatments of the “ready-made thing” in twentieth-century art. But if we consider the other trends that rely on “ready-made” motifs in eclectic combinations, the majority of which originated at the end of the 1910s and still retain their popularity to varying degrees, here, too, we discover that attention is turned primarily to the impersonal, object side of things. Constructivism was primarily interested in the technical and pragmatic aspects of things; Dadaism—in their absurd logic and metaphysical properties; Surrealism—in their potential for fantastic transformations; Suprematism—in the symbolic coding and decoding of visual elements. A thing was perceived and displayed as an attribute of the production process or the comforts of modern life; as a mysterious item situated in the boundless emptiness of the cosmos; as a sign of the invisible deeds of otherworldly powers; as an unstable daydream that shifts its shape even as we gaze upon it, and as a vicious trap, ready to snap shut on the trusting observer. In all of this there was much poetry, but none of it was lyrical. The connection of the thing being displayed to its owner, its inclusion in a circle of concrete concerns and attachments, the deep meaning hidden in its singularity—none of this was developed in relation to real things to the extent that it was developed in the literary and painterly images of things in Rilke’s lyrics, for example, or the still lifes of Van Gogh.

Word and color are less tangible than an actual thing, and for this reason they can express its spiritual essence very well, but only at the price of separating the thing itself from the artistic plane of the book or painting. The “lyricism of things” always turns up on the delimiting borderline of art: the lyrical is dematerialized, and the material is depersonalized. These are divergent extremes that cannot easily be mediated or combined. The lyrical meaning of an authentic and singular thing remains unrevealed. It may be transferred into words, colors or photographic and cinematographic images, pulling away in the process from the thing itself, from its full, truthful and irreplaceable presence. Or we may take a thing in and of itself, in all the wealth and variety of its potentials and plasticity, its decorative forms and visual

symbolism, but in this process the thing pulls away from its own inner history, from the meanings accumulated in its former lives, “off-stage,” through its interactions with a person. For an artist working with “ready-made” objects, the decision to include, say, a chair in an installation does not take account of where the chair may come from, who has been seated on it, carrying on a conversation, how it may have been moved about to provide a better view of other people. For the artist all that matters is the construction and material of the chair.

To combine the personal importance and the everyday presence of things, to show, as far as possible, how these attributes are intertwined—this is the task of the lyrical museum. Here the spiritual life of the lyric “I” is not torn away from those concrete things in which it poured itself forth, concentrated its activity and its embodiment, nor is it dissolved in purely verbal or visual imagery. Furthermore, things are not torn away from their singular fate, from participation in the lives and concerns of the specific people among whom they acquired their “face.” They are neither frozen in pure objectivity, nor transformed into material for graphic constructions. The words of each individual exhibitor, our “lyrical hero” in this case, come together with his things, as they mutually complete each other in a holistic work of art: a “verbject” (in Russian, *veshcheslov*), which should be recognized as a new genre in spiritual-material culture.

It is well known that twentieth century history exerted considerable effort to disengage things from their meanings and to place man’s surroundings in opposition to him. Twentieth-century art could not help but reflect this alienation in fearsome and pathetic images, in the sheen of things untouched like idols, and in the rot of things untouched like lepers. But while the store window and the dump are extreme points which things move between, they do not exhaust the proper essence—mobile, changeable, wandering—of any given thing. The path a thing traverses runs through the hands of people, through innumerable contacts with their meaning-engendering fates. Even if we accept that the store shelf is the point of a thing’s origin, and the trash heap its final destination, still, the center and heart of the thing’s existence is its stay in someone’s home, broadly understood as the world inhabited by man. Here the thing may lose its cold glitter, but it doesn’t fade into oblivion as long as the fingers whose touch dulls its shine keep it free of dust. It consists entirely of touches that invisibly carve out its essence. It is not at all their separateness, their counterposition to man that defines things, but rather the “contactability” that earmarks them for being touched, taken, carried. After all, many things have knobs and handles and are specifically structured for the human hand, almost as if they themselves reach out for someone. Such items as these, though their construction depends on machine work, express the warmth and essence of sculpting fingers; in the lyrical museum they are displayed as works of *everyday spiritual creation*.

Culture now faces the task of “dis-enchanting” things, of setting them free from estrangement and oblivion, and in this undertaking, the *domestic* emerges as a vital social and cultural category, one that heralds the complete incorporation of things into body and soul, their full communion with our lives. Of course, the home can also be transformed into either a landfill or a warehouse (or even into both at once)—but in that event, it ceases to be a home, a place where all things and creatures present in it belong together. In this sense, the lyrical museum is an experiment in the self-consciousness of *domestic culture*, which is deserving of the broadest display, and should be brought outside the boundaries of private practice into the larger world, so that the latter may benefit from following this prototype by becoming increasingly domestic.

3. A New Memorability

In our time, the commercial value of a thing as an attractive “novelty” for consumers represents a normative significance that takes precedence over all its other values. The prominent role of the display window comes into play in this system of material culture as the point of origin from which things enter into life, sent off with the best wishes of advertising copy. The entire social complex of commercial signs serves to increase the status of novelty, emphasizing its practical superiority, its convenience, fashionability, reliability and all manner of advantages. Methods for describing and recommending new things have been developed down to the minutest detail: outlines, annotations, instruction booklets, guarantees, trademarks, quality control slips, and etc., etc.

But any interpretation of those things that have served out their term is altogether lacking. For this we need a kind of “anti-display window,” where used things could find shelter, and where appropriate descriptions and attestations could be attached to them—not of the advertising type, of course, but rather a lyrical, memorial kind of meditation. Here would be depicted not the product’s price, but the life’s worth of the thing, the meaning it acquired from people, over the course of time spent serving them. If so many approving and laudatory words can be found for unused things, then why can’t we find words of understanding and sympathy for old things that have stood up to trials and given use to their owners, becoming kindred to them in the process?

Of course such “anti-display windows” could not be set up behind sparkling glass in well-trafficked areas, but a place could be found for them within the very house where the thing spent its life. Before relegating the aged thing to the attic or landfill, where it will ultimately mix in with dust and rubbish, dissolving into undifferentiated muck, why can’t it be kept in a specially maintained memorial space in the home, like a part of one’s life, once embodied and now passing away? If in the space of the display window each advertised model stands in its unique integrity, then how much more deserving of such dignity is the thing that has served out its usefulness? It is no longer just a standard or a type among hundreds of identical examples; it has become unique in its essence and fate, representing nothing other than itself. It might indeed prove worthwhile to keep such dear and deserving things hanging on the walls to give the room a dimension of depth, of “eternity,” where time already-lived-through abides in a single space with the on-going and the incipient.

I will attempt to describe the impression produced by a lyrical museum organized once in the apartment of this author’s friends in 1984. The things that were hung all over the walls seemed suspended between life and death, as if frozen in endless expectation or in some kind of otherworldly service. They had left that part of the room devoted to active life, where they had once played a useful role, but had not gone beyond its walls into the useless clutter of storage, nor yet further, beyond the borders of the home, into a garbage dump. The wall thus became a particular kind of mute, impenetrable curtain between two worlds, from which departing things take a final look at what they’re leaving behind. They had already lost the appearance of substance but retained sharp, sunken features that resembled faces, protruding from the surface of the wall like a memorial bas-relief. These sculptured masks looked into the space of

the room upon their living doubles: a bottle looks down upon a bottle, a saucepan on a saucepan, a pair of glasses on a pair of glasses, as if trying to remind them of the most important thing in their existence. The flat surface of the wall is a spatial analogue for death; it cuts every thing into two sides, “this” and “that,” baring the heart of the matter on an accompanying label, so that what was once just a “thing in itself” is now revealed to us in word traces on a magical plane.

Needless to say, the presence of such a museum on the wall lends a good deal of weight to the room, just as a case lends a sense of enclosure and value to any object it contains. When we place mirrors in a room, we attempt to close off the living space, directing the gaze inward to illuminate the soul, but the brilliant reflective surface leads only to the level of the empirical being of things, where they are splintered, changeable, elusive. Decrepit hardware hanging from the walls, on the other hand, can become a kind of mirror of the semantic eidōs, reflecting the consistent and lasting essence of things. Looking into this depth, the whole room recognizes its prototype, shifting in time, so that together they may house a growing share of immortality. Such museums on the wall become mirrors of memory, capable of inspiring in each home a more respectful and less exploitative attitude towards things; they can help to overcome consumerism, which values only the new.

The very category of “memoriality” must now be viewed with due consideration for the changing status of things in an age of mass production of objects destined for consumption. Traditionally, a memorial museum assumes that a thing is longer-lived than a human being and can therefore be appointed to preserve his or her memory. This was the predominant situation in all previous epochs: one and the same thing—an armoire, a trunk, a book, a set of dishes—was used for several generations. In our epoch the relationship has been reversed: many generations of things can pass through a single human lifetime. The owner of useful things, still in their prime, buries his short-lived commodities at the landfill, replacing them with more fashionable and convenient items. This is a source of difficulties for those who wish to found memorial museums in contemporary society: there is a scarcity of things that fully reflect the life of their owner, that fully “answer” for him.

This represents a new socio-historical phenomenon: it’s no longer things that change ownership, it’s owners that change things. The situation calls for a re-evaluation of the traditional understanding of memoriality. Who is to preserve the memory of whom? Who will take the responsibility for bearing witness? In reducing the useful time span of things, we eliminate their burden of memory. In so doing, we place this burden on ourselves.

In that system of ephemeral and lasting values that is culture as a whole, an increasingly episodic, passing role is relegated to things. If at an earlier time our material surroundings represented the most stable, “immovable” elements of an existence, in which a person could leave brief traces, now it is human consciousness that has become far more long-acting, as it draws into itself a multitude of changing material conditions. We can say that a thing bequeaths the consciousness of its owner to another thing that comes after it, making consciousness a mechanism of continuity between them. As a given group of things subsides and casts off the load of meaningfulness and hereditary memory that it has borne over several generations, the difficult task of endowing culture with meaning and weight passes to personal memory.

A contemporary memorial museum, in contrast to a traditional one, may be characterized by the fact that things do not tell the story of a person they've survived, rather a person tells the story of things that were somehow dear and close to him, so that these short-lived items should not be consigned to oblivion. That which is lasting assumes the burden of concern for the ephemeral, so that what has once entered the sphere of culture, may remain there as long as possible, if not forever. Along with memorial observances in which things traditionally preserve the memory of people, there should now be established observances whereby people, with a full sense of their responsibility toward culture, bear lyrical witness to and preserve the memory of things. A lyrical museum could even be called a memorial of things. Individual memory is the most important factor in creating a museum that displays in space the things memory has saved from time.

Thus we are not calling for a renewal of the "antiquated," benevolently accepting attitude towards things with its unshakable consciousness of their meaningfulness as rooted in a traditional way of life. It is unlikely that our ancestors would have taken a notion to intensively ponder the things near at hand to them and to create some kind of memorial, but this is because the very homes they inhabited were, in fact, "memorials" of this kind. A thing was possessed of meaning from the very beginning, insofar as it had been received from one's ancestors, and in the final analysis it had meaning by virtue of being passed on to one's heirs. This was a peaceful, epic-style appeasement, giving things their meaning without lyrical outbursts.

In our time these beginnings and endings have been disconnected; the ancestor's position has been usurped by the point of sale, while the heir's position is now the disposal site. But for that reason the mid-point becomes all the more significant, as that brief interval in which a person must create in personal experience the entire fate of a thing, compensating in the present for a lack of both past and future. Meaning is no longer accepted and passed on, it is created here and now, just as lyric takes the place of epic. The epic culture of things had broken down and is not apt to be resurrected, but in its place a new lyric culture is arising with its own psychological and aesthetic potentials. Because a thing is not originally one's own, the process of assimilating it can lead to failures, confronting us with faceless mechanical objects. But a certain lyrical "daring" inevitably treads upon the ruptured epic linkages of things, bringing together at risk to itself the sundered ends and beginnings, as it creates a new, more dynamic and "uncertain" meaning along the borders of an encroaching meaninglessness and loss of memory, characteristic of objects with neither roots nor shoots. The great accumulation of things confined to realms outside of consciousness, whether they be vast stores of ready products or burying grounds for garbage, necessarily activates a compensatory cultural mechanism that counters with the intentional safe-keeping of certain things in consciousness and for consciousness.

4. The Significance of Singularity

This form of safe-keeping entails a far-reaching consideration of self-interest and even a sense of thrift, which Andrei Platonov accurately named the "thriftiness of empathy." The following characteristic passage from Platonov's work elucidates the aim of our project:

Voshchev picked up the dried leaf and hid it away in a secret compartment of his bag, where he used to keep all kinds of objects of unhappiness and obscurity.

“You had no meaning in life,” Voshchev imagined to himself with meagerness of sympathy. “Lie here, I will learn wherefore you lived and perished. Since no one needs you, and you are straying about in the midst of the whole world, I will preserve and remember you.”

This bag—in which the hero stows things that have not yet obtained their own meaning in life, so as to bring them to consciousness and commit them to memory—is the prototype of the lyrical museum. Here we see that the human mind has a need to test even the smallest, most trivial thing to determine its meaningfulness; without this we cannot be at peace. Our contemporary situation, with its harsh questioning of the meaning of “unknown and orphaned” things, leads us to a problem that has troubled minds since time immemorial: the problem of cosmicity. Can the world endure if so much as a single grain of dust falls “out of line,” turns out to be inessential, unnecessary? Can a single anti-meaning destroy, like an anti-particle, the rational mechanism of the universe? The world can only be justified in good conscience for man if everything it contains is neither random nor worthless. It would seem that there is little difference, whether a certain dry leaf exists in this world or not—but this problem contains a decisive test for human understanding, which tests on such insignificant things as these the rationality or irrationality of the entire great Whole, thereby deciding whether to accept or reject it. Of course, it’s not enough to simply “see through” a thing in one’s mind, we have to pick it up, like Platonov’s hero, carry it about in a bag and pass it through our lives, in order to somehow make it kin to us. In return, a single such “unfortunate and unknown object,” healed through our saving and remembering, could become a blessed messenger of the deeper substantiality of everything that is.

A memorial to things may be seen as a potential experiment in cosmicity, a justification of the world in its most minute components. The fact that this is a collection of the unlavish things of unfamous people, not only does not negate, but to a certain extent enhances the value of their meaningfulness. In order to comprehend the nature of matter, a physicist turns not to many-tonned chunks of it, but to its most minute particles. And so comprehension of the structure of meaning in the world also requires intent and detailed examination, microscopic penetration to the depths where large meanings disappear and the most minute ones are discovered. It is not in the fabulous Kohinoor diamond, nor in Napoleon’s three-cornered hat, nor in a violin by Stradivarius, but in some little thread, a scrap of paper, a pebble or a match stick that the indivisible, “elementary” meaning of things is revealed. Investment of meaning in the smallest thing brings the greatest justification into the world.

Furthermore, the meaning that a thing acquires is gratefully returned to man, affirming anew that he himself does not exist at random: cosmicity becomes a prologue to anthropicity. To quote Platonov once again:

Voshchev sometimes bent down and picked up a pebble, or other sticky bit of trash, and put it for safekeeping into his trousers. He was gladdened and worried by the nearly eternal presence of pebbles in the midst of clay, in their abundant accumulation there; that meant that it was useful for him to be there, that there was all the more reason for a person to live.

Platonov's hero is one of those perspicacious eccentrics who come to know the measure of their own essential place in the world through a serious, painstaking sense of brotherhood with the lower forms of existence. A little stone that reveals some kind of "reason" as it is lifted from the earth becomes the foundation of man's hope to himself be justified, time and again, in a world of singularly justified entities. And so we see a mutual approach to one another of man and things, along with an increase of meaning. Perhaps the main thing that a visitor should derive from the lyrical museum is not just a new sensation of closeness to the objects that surround him, but also a new level of self-assurance, a kind of metaphysical energy, strengthening him in the knowledge that his existence is not worthless.

This author knows from experience that to give meaning to a single thing is a very difficult task: it is singularity itself that defies definition in thoughts and words, because these are intended rather for comprehending the general. It is easier to comprehend the significance of an entire class or type of item than of a single representative—"foliage" or "stone," rather than *this* little leaf or pebble. As we draw nearer to the singular, attempting to ask it, not a functional, but a philosophical question of worldview: "why are you alive?" we clearly feel how this question is grounded in the secret of all creation: only along with it or in its stead can the singular make an answer.

It is well known that in the course of its historical development, abstract thought ascends to the concrete level. It may well be that thinking in singularities is the highest level of ascent. In this process the general categories that lie at the basis of any theoretical contemplation are not canceled out, but are tested in the movement towards an ever more complete, multifaceted and integrated recreation of the thing as a synthesis of the infinite multitude of abstract definitions. Logical abstractions, which over the course of historical development raised human reason above the empiricism of simple sensations, seem to return once again to their point of departure—the singular thing—in order to reveal within it the condensed wealth of all human culture and universal meaning. The singular "this" is most directly connected with the one, the "all," in the same way as the elementary particles (and not mountains or whales) reveal the unity of material creation. Thus we find reason to hope that realogy will come to comprehend reality, not only in terms of general concepts, and not even in concrete images, but in actual, singular things, finding the most excellent means of describing and interpreting the meanings of countless "this-nesses" that surround us, leading directly to the unitary foundation of being.

In the meantime, it is obvious that since the singular does exist, it is essential and meaningful. To "think" it is difficult, to comprehend it fully is no doubt impossible: thought is always deflected toward the abstract, bypassing "this" and encompassing a whole class, type or variety instead. But the mere approach to a singular thing, with its lasting and yet unrepeatable meaning, gives us the important and encouraging knowledge that nothing, not even the smallest and most insignificant, is doomed to pass away without a trace.

5. Experiments in the Description of Things

Let us imagine how a lyrical museum might look. Its physical space is divided into a series of partially enclosed cells, separated by opaque or semi-opaque partitions, not unlike rooms in a many-chambered house. In each of these "rooms" one participant sets up his own exhibit and hangs up sheets of paper with a commentary on each item—this is his personal space. The

things displayed are authentic, taken directly “from life,” and each is accompanied by a lyrical meditation-description. Each of the small enclosures, comprising the exhibition space (not only like a house, but also like a labyrinth where one can and even should lose one’s way at least a bit), is intended to be occupied and viewed by only one visitor at any one time. The nature of lyrical space does not allow for broad expansion of the exhibition, simultaneously attracting the attention of all visitors to a certain spot—on the contrary, it demands individual concentration, deepening the contact between the viewer and those items, on which his gaze is fixed. The encounter with things takes place one-on-one, in the spirit of “singularity” that makes itself felt in both the intellectual and the spatial approach to things, a narrow yet in-depth approach, that makes its way to the heart.

It is in no way mandatory, and indeed scarcely possible, for a viewer to look at all of the exhibits and read all of the commentaries on a single visit. It’s actually more important that he should feel the unencompassability of this multi-faced and many-personalities environment, stretching out all around him. A lyrical museum does not assume the creation of special items *for exhibition*, rather it re-creates an authentic reality of things, which always reaches beyond the horizon of perception. All things lie together in one field of vision only at the warehouse or the dump, in the overgrown and deteriorated remnants of a bygone, epic panorama of the world. In the domestic realm, one point of view captures only a small portion of reality at any one time, which is why this viewpoint must be mobile, so as to follow a path, whose course cannot be determined in advance. One can wander through the labyrinth-house for quite some time, everywhere coming upon unfamiliar exhibits or coming up to familiar ones from an unexpected angle. The inner world of each personality is open before us, but only from the point of view at which it is closed to all others. In this way the museum creates an image of an infinitely large and voluminous world, in which there is no one door common to all, only numerous entrances, and in which no one can meet everyone, but each can meet with each other.

Within the individual exhibits the most widely varying lyric focus is possible, including a meaningful violation of the lyric mood, which also tends to emphasize the overall focus of the museum. One may display detailed commentaries on nonexistent or absent items. Items can be “provocational”—intended for use in some type of action whose result will make the item fit its description as an exhibit. Descriptions may be either of the everyday variety or highly philosophical, either serious or humorous, precisely corresponding to the item displayed or emphatically and grotesquely not corresponding to it. Ideally, participants in the museum should include persons of various professions, ages and interests, so that the world of things in which we live and which lives in us may take shape to the fullest possible extent.

Below, the author offers to the reader’s attention two commentaries on his own display items as experiments in the description of things. I would like to lead the reader into the atmosphere of this imaginary museum, insofar as a text can accomplish this in the absence of the actual things intended for display. Needless to say, these descriptions should be accepted in accordance with their own laws, although they appear here within an article, rather than in their proper “lyrical museum” genre. As an introduction we offer the following words of Montaigne, a worthy epigraph to the entire lyrical museum:

I speak my mind freely on all things, even on those which perhaps exceed my capacity . . . and so the opinion I give of them is to declare the measure of my sight, not the measure of things.

A *Fantik* (Candy wrapper)

What is there to say about this candy wrapper bearing the sonorous title of *Bylina* (“Epic Song”), that somehow wound up stranded on my desk among much lengthier papers and books, full of import and intended for serious reading? Who will hear this solitary word, shouted out in haste, but promptly, abashedly cut off? This minute, shabby scrap of paper, not even of a moment’s, only of an instant’s usefulness, with a millennial memory: “*bylina*”!

Things have their own service entrance and ladder of social status, which leads them to a human being, and a candy wrapper has its place very near the bottom. Pitiful is the fate of things that serve only other things: all manner of wrappings and packing materials, boxes and sacking that don’t have their own value, but merely clothe more important articles, deserving of preservation. But even in this secondary category a candy wrapper takes last place. A box or packet of some kind can always be reused in its original function, but a dock-tailed wrapper, emptied and unfolded, has reached the point of offering no further use to anyone.

Nonetheless, there’s something attractive about it, something that a person can recognize as a tiny but significant part of his own fate. We see before us two bits of paper, one white and the other colorful, like under- and outer-wear, a T-shirt and a dress shirt for a piece of candy. It’s as if a general law of multi-layered coverings were in effect here: the inner layer is colorless, repels dirt and is intended mainly to protect purity, while the outer one is gaudy and bright, intended to attract the eye. (It is also possible to have a middle layer, which will be the most substantial and protective; among human coverings this would be a coat of mail and among candy wrappers—a layer of foil.) It would seem that these two functions are opposed—to enclose and to attract—but together they shape the essence of a covering, through which a thing at once reaches into the depths and emerges onto the surface, abides within and also outside itself. The luxuriant double wrap—and, moreover, triple wrap—gives a piece of candy the alluring and mysterious air, both challenging and unattainable, proper to any kind of sweetness. Thus, the many layers of the candy wrapper indicate the presence inside it of something secret and tempting, transforming the process of unwrapping into an extended, sweet anticipation of something that otherwise would just be swallowed, quickly and crudely. A candy wrapper is the sweet within the sweet, the covering of its physical nature, but also the kernel of its psychological content. “Sweet” is here removed from the class of simple sensations of taste into the realm of internal states of being, of expectation, a kind of languishing. It would seem that children sense this more sharply than adults and therefore save candy wrappers not only for the sake of their colorful appearance, but also because they are an extract of sweet expectancy that the tongue can never know. . .

But this “pure,” nonphysiological sweetness simultaneously finds expression on the tongue, in the name written on the wrapper. If the paper is the material covering of sweetness, then the name of the candy is an expression of its “ideal” meaning. This one is called *Bylina*, but many other names—“Masque,” “Muse,” “Enchantress,” “Kara-Kum,” “Lake Ritsa,” “Southern Night,” “Evening Bells,” “Flight,” “Firebird,” “Golden Cockerel”—are also unusually

beautiful and expressive of a fairytale quality that leads us away to distant lands, exciting our imagination. The candy's sweetness seems to be not of this world; it must be sought beyond the thrice times nine lands, in the kingdom of seductive dreams. The name on the wrapper corresponds precisely to its concealing and attracting essence, in that it seems to contain an alluring secret. It's surely not by chance that *fantik* ("wrapper") sounds so much like "fantasy" and "phantom": there is not more than one word inscribed on this tiny bit of paper, but it almost always belongs to the world of imagination. A *fantik* must be the minimal page of a fantasy, and a candy is a double fairy tale, known *in* the tongue of the dreamer and *on* the tongue of the eater. The "sweet" fantasy brings itself down to the immediate material reality of that tongue, whose idealizing capability is designated by the word on the *fantik*.

And so two properties of the tongue, diverging to the far reaches of culture and nature, coincide once again, like the two sides of a piece of paper, recognizing in a candy wrapper—in this little bilingual dictionary that translates from the tongue of the speaker to the tongue of the eater—their forgotten kinship with each other. The covering for a candy is the tongue's address to itself: its flesh addresses its sign system, by way of conversing with itself and re-establishing the unity of its abilities. It's not such a small thing, this candy wrapper: in it the most abstract dream and the most sensory reality come together as nature enters into culture and teaches us to cultivate the beautiful on the tip of our tongue.

A Kaleidoscope

Only once did I gaze long and hard into this child's kaleidoscope. It was at a difficult and weighty moment of my life. Perhaps for that reason I came to associate with it certain general thoughts, which I would like to share.

The most random combinations of bits of glass reveal proportion and purposefulness, when they are reflected in the mirrored purity of a kaleidoscope. Order, after all, is nothing other than symmetry: randomness becomes a pattern when it is repeated on the left and right, above and below. The kaleidoscope's magic is this momentary ordering of any chance caprice, its transformation into a law, in accordance with which an entire iridescent and crumbly world takes shape. Through the dark tube we stare as through a metaphysical microscope at the mysterious essence of life, perceiving order in the teeming movements.

The self-same stone that falls from a hill into a valley in Tiutchev's poem "Problème," cast down by its own will or perhaps by an unseen hand, is here broken up into many little stones, which give an answer in their contours to the eternal question of free will. The future lies before me—I am free to become one thing or another in it, to act like this or like that: everything depends upon a free decision. But no sooner is my act performed, than it turns out that I could not have done otherwise, that an entire chain of preceding actions led up to this singular act and made of it an essential link in a life progression. In the moment of transition from past to future, at the point of the present, a fatal leap "from freedom to necessity" takes place, and utter arbitrariness suddenly reveals itself as Providence.

It is as if mirrors were set up in the depths of creation, lending symmetry and order to our every act as soon as it is performed. Any one piece of glass may turn up any which way, but with each turn it reveals the stunning wholeness and meaningfulness of the entire, consummate picture of the world. In any design once obtained, it is too late to make a

replacement of parts, to poke another bit of glass in with the rest, out of time with the multiply affirmed and “symmetrized” selection. Past and future are like mirror-covered walls around the present in which anything can happen, but the whole of life changes with each happening, as if a new design of meaning passes through time, although life remains whole and integral at every moment, just as a picture in the kaleidoscope cannot possibly be asymmetrical, or taken in isolation.

The law of the continued wholeness of the present, in all its free and mobile fulfilment, is one of the most basic in life. A man may commit a crime or sacrifice himself, and in that very instant all his prior life and all his life to come is rebuilt in a new, finished and strictly shaped configuration. Our every act newly crystallizes not only the forms of the future, but also those of the past—a symmetrical formation extends from it on all sides.

True, the sides of the kaleidoscope are not as pure and bright as the triangle at its center, and the reflections upon them are more blurred and distorted, the closer they come to the opening, until their illusory nature becomes obvious. But, after all, in life itself, in broad daylight, within the strict confines of everyday consciousness, only the present appears to us clearly, while its symmetrical reflections grow dimmer and more ghostly in the far reaches of the past and future, in whose final, indiscernable distance, looks on these myriad details an all-seeing eye.

A word of warning for those who wish to take a look into the kaleidoscope: it has gotten slightly broken in the course of children’s play. The outer glass, which protects the eye, is missing. Between the inner walls a blue particle has gotten loose, so be careful that it doesn’t fall into your eye; don’t tilt the kaleidoscope too sharply. There is no guarantee that other bits of glass won’t also fall out. There is no impassable boundary between the illusion that delights the eye and the reality that can injure it.

6. Thing as Word

The texts presented above are intended to be perceived along with and in relation to the items described in them. And here arises the final question: Is such a doubling of the word by the thing really necessary? Anyone can easily imagine a candy wrapper or a child’s kaleidoscope—so why put the actual object alongside—almost *inside*—the verbal description, where the reader’s gaze has to stumble over it continually? If we endeavored above to establish why it is necessary to endow things with meaning, then in conclusion we will attempt to understand why the thing itself is indispensable to meaning.

As a rule, text exists so that the reality it describes should not necessarily have to exist immediately alongside it. A sign is the replacement, the substitute for a thing. If a thing is presented *along* with the sign that refers to it, this means that its being is incomparably more meaningful than its meaning, and is important as such. In the lyrical museum, words make an intense effort to express the essence of things in order to show that in the final analysis this essence lies outside, beyond words. In this sense words strive to point out the thing itself.

And now the author has said all that can be expressed, and the viewer has read all that can be perceived in words, and there remains only the thing itself, resting wordlessly on its stand. And now it is possible that in the uncapturable part of a second the most important event will occur: the inner contact of the viewer with the silent thing which is more than all the words that have been said about it. Now its own being continues speaking to you and acting upon you. In its silence and immobility some sort of special, unutterable word comes through, an inner movement arises that seems to rock the layers of space enveloping it . . . But even if we should succeed in describing all of this, the thing would still move away, beyond the framework of description, to turn up again on the far side of all words and all ideal representations as pure being, irreducible to anything but itself.

The touch of this being yields an incomparable joy, no weaker in force than aesthetic joy, but different in quality. In it we enjoy not the creative transformation of a thing, its turning into something else, as in a painting, but precisely the presence of the thing in its basic “is-ness,” in all the authenticity of its *own* existence, which communicates with *ours* directly and without mediation, expanding the volume and strengthening the basis of our own. The “is” of a thing rings with affirmation of our “am.” In distinction from aesthetic joy, this can be called existential joy, in that it embraces the existence of things so fully that it does not require their re-embodiment in imagery.

It would be incorrect, however, to suppose that such perception of the primary truth and self-value of things comes to us in and of itself, without the preliminary work of their meaningful and verbal assimilation. Despite the primacy of being in significance, it is ultimate in sequence. If we glance at a thing simply and without “mediation,” we will merely see its poor objectness, reduced without remainder to some practical function. Chair—for sitting, cup—for drinking, key—for opening the door, candy wrapper—for wrapping candy: the significance of the thing in this empirical context is reduced to a tautology and identified with a use. The contemplation of a thing on this “first” level is unbearably trivial and dull—one must simply pick them up and use them.

As we endow the thing with meaning by creating its conceptual description, we transfer it to a second, deeper level, where it emerges from the state of self-equivalence, not as a tautology, but as metaphor. The thing is included in a verbal context, in which the direct function of its being receives a generalized, figurative meaning. The function of a candy wrapper in covering sweetness or of a kaleidoscope in entertaining the eye with multicolored designs receives an interpretation on the scale of personal experience and fate, in the language of philosophy, psychology, morality. On this level the lyrical museum represents a set of texts, which derive, “draw out” all possible meanings from things—historical, biographical, symbolic, associative meanings. But the final task is to “return” all these meanings to the thing, to pour them back into their source.

It is only after the thing has been removed from the narrow confines of functionality into conceptual open spaces that the third level of its existential depth can begin to emerge. Here the thing is neither used as an object nor interpreted as a sign, but fulfills itself as being, in all the fullness of meanings enclosed and dissolved in its objectness. All that is proper to it, all that has been drawn out of the life around it and laid into it by thought, is *now here*, pointing to its presence. On the third level the significance of the thing is no longer tautological nor

metaphorical; rather it can be called mythological, in that the thing now becomes what it means and, moreover, *means* what it *is*.

This is why, on the third level, a thing cannot be made to yield up its final meaning—in so doing the meaning of its being would be lost. One can approach the task endlessly and laboriously, but in the end we will meet that self-same thing, which does not give up its full meaning and therefore cannot be annulled in its own being. No matter how lyrically penetrating or philosophically significant the text, it must yet include at the limit of its comprehension the whole, actual thing, which alone manifests the higher degree of concreteness that thought aspires to. This thing will become, not an object, but an act of thought. It will enter the text with the rights of a fundamental, axiomatically undefinable concept which will be brought into the definitions of other concepts. Filled with meaning to the brim of its essence, the thing begins to think by means of its existence. To indicate “this,” means to employ the most authoritative and indisputable documentation.

And so a memorial to things is necessary not only because things require meaning and interpretation, but also because they can never be interpreted to the end. If that were possible, then the most important part of the memorial could be left out—the things themselves. This dialectic of necessity and impossibility unfolds within the exhibition, where words need things as much as things need words.

Usually it is words that speak, while things keep silent. But when words approach the boundaries of silence, this silence of things begins to speak for itself. The greatest challenge is to find the words that will set off the thing itself as its own singular, sought-for and irreplaceable word. Only then does it become itself—a message (*vest'*), a voice sounding in silence, in answer to all the words uttered on its behalf.

* * *

In conclusion—a few more excerpts from the lyrical museum, but this time rather than descriptions of individual things, some observations on the wisdom of things, the depth of content in their messages addressed to people. Rather than attracting us as a source of riches and external plenty, the world of things can be our reminder of a long forgotten bliss.

First of all, a thing is a lesson in humility and acceptance of the world. “Things are meek. On their own, they never do evil. They are sisters to the spirits. They receive us, and in them we lay down our thoughts, which have need of them, as fragrance needs flowers to flow from . . . My soul was unyielding with people, yet I often wept when I contemplated things . . . A kind of brightness emanated from them, a brightness like the arousal of friendship,”—thus wrote the French poet Francis Jammes in “Les Choses,” 1889.

Try to sense in yourself this tiny paradise, where each and every thing harkens from beginning to end to the voice of its creator. Refusing no request, it nonetheless keeps faith with its appointed purpose—a cup refuses drink to no one, but it will not allow itself to be used for wiping hands. Man has not yet “matured” to such a point of faithfulness to his own purpose coupled with responsiveness to all that surrounds him. He is harsher on others and softer on

himself, when it should be quite the other way around. From things he can learn the perfect art: to combine infinite obedience to each who needs him with infinite devotion to the purpose placed in him by the creator.

If the greatest temptation for profit and gain comes from things, then the greatest lesson in renunciation of these vices comes from them as well. Things, like saints, bestow everything they have upon us without recrimination, keeping nothing back for themselves. Wretched and poor, they fulfill the commandment “give of what you have,” literally and completely. All that we have is made up of things, while they have absolutely nothing. Things are not able to want or to take anything from us, since, after all, nothing can be given or taken but things themselves. An animal may have a den and a plant the soil, but property can have nothing at all. It is the truest have-not. In giving themselves to us as possessions, things teach us not to possess.

The human calling is not to amass wealth in things, but neither to refuse them altogether. Rather we are called to be with them and share in their qualities of silence, lack of malice, impassivity, freedom from envy. People could resolve the problem of property in a new way: not by sharing things out among themselves, but by sharing the very fate of things. In other words, by taking a vow of poverty even as we take things into our property: by becoming poor, as they are, for the sake of our spirit and thereby enriching ourselves. Our ownership of things should not be thought to give us unlimited power over them; we are only their stewards or, in the best instance, the ones who help them manifest their purpose. This means we must come to see in the worldly luxury of things a manifestation of their genuinely monastic poverty and readiness for self-sacrifice. There is no way out in obtaining and distributing things, but there can be one in sharing their poor state and their obedience, and in taking a lesson from them in giving service to people. For each thing there is a special service, to which its life is unstintingly devoted. He who loves things for the poverty in which they abide, rather than for the wealth they provide, grasps the wisdom of love.

A plant is more quiet and obedient than an animal, a thing is more quiet and obedient than a plant. The feeling of peace and quietude we experience in the forest or field must surely be still more profound in a gathering of things. We should conduct ourselves in the presence of things as we do at the bedside of a sleeping child, listening in silence. Some people become attached to the materiality of things with all their hearts; others spurn this attitude as materialism. Still others believe that materiality is fate’s own name for things, which they accept and bear far better than humans do.

All that a man has is taken from things—to things remains only pure being. In measuring himself against things, which have nothing except being, man can achieve authentic humility. Passing down the entire path of evolution, he returns to the place where not even a plant can be.

“Man is the measure of all things . . .” said Protagoras. But it is just as true that a thing is the measure of all human.

Rilke wrote that God is the thing of things, and boundless presence. At the limits of minutiae, the same pureness of being is reached that exists at the limits of greatness, and the one serves as a model for the other. No one is denigrated so much as things are, and no one is as blessed

as these "little ones," with a blessedness that man can never know. Even a monk, according to Rilke, is too insignificant, but still not small enough to have the likeness of a thing before God.

The world of things is a monastery, sunken in silence and patience, where people come and go as pilgrims, learning obedience.

And so we see that it is not only for use that things are given to man, but also for learning. We learn from those who serve us. When we receive something good from things, we should perceive it as an act of generosity and as an injunction to carry on the service in the human world. Only thus can a thing reveal its hidden nature as a meek, voiceless Word, tirelessly teaching us.

The lyrical museum is a project born within the framework of conceptualism and at the same time leading beyond it. Conceptualism revealed the vacancy of reality standing beyond words. The next step brings us to a realization of the vacancy of words themselves, beyond which stands the silent reality of singular things. The lyrical museum brings us out into trans-semiotic space where signs designate the limits of their own contingent nature and point to something external to themselves, something unconditionally existent.

Thus, there occurs a self-exhaustion and self-erasure of the postmodern paradigm which focuses on the reality of signs in their differing from each other. But if difference is the constructive principle of sign systems then it should include the possibility of something differing from signs themselves. This is precisely what is now radically reconstructing post-Soviet Russian culture, where conceptualism, the boundless play of signs, gives way to a new feeling of authenticity which might be defined as the realm of singularity (ungeneralizability) and silence (unspokenness).

Some 40 years of predominance of sign systems (since the mid-1950s) in the self-consciousness of Western culture and in the methodology of humanities is not only drawing to an end; it is now being understood as a necessary movement beyond the bounds of sign systems. We have no other means of talking about the world than through words or signs, but in postmodern space signs bare their own contingent nature, emphasizing it and thereby implying the possibility of an existence external to themselves. Postmodernism was a powerful warning that signs are only signs and should not be confused with reality. But from this it follows that reality should also not be confused with signs. Reality is the conceivable limit of all sign differences, the most radical of them all: the point of cross-over not from one sign to another but from sign systems as such to that which lies beyond them.

Needless to say, this "beyond" can only be designated, but in so doing, it is precisely the trans-semiotic existence that is designated. At the limit of its contingency the sign opens a door to the existential realm, indicating the boundary of postmodern semiotic relativism. To follow the sign means to overstep the limits of the sign. Postmodernism was a necessary introduction to this realm of wordless singular existences: self-criticism of language served as a starting point for the movement of culture beyond the language. The lyrical museum is an experiment

in reading things, so that the signs for things are gradually replaced by things themselves, as the ultimate and maximally accurate signs of themselves. The chain of signs closes on that which is not sign.

This is no longer the naive realism that believed in a transparency of signs, in the truth of signifieds, but an experienced realism which doubts the correspondence between language and reality. This is a reality understood as transcendent to language and comprehensible only through its radical difference from language. Although we cannot get along without language for comprehending reality, we must use language precisely to the extent of its noncorrespondence with reality, as a series of self-unmasking speech acts, baring their own semiotic contingency.

In other words, reality is restored to its rights, but no longer as something positively denoted by language but as the self-negation of language, revealing its own constructed limits and lapsing into silence as it approaches that of which it speaks. Postmodernism may be seen as the negative, apophatic stage of development of Western culture, as the epoch of its linguistic self-consciousness, beyond which opens a space of non-linguistic existence. The lyrical museum is a world of non-reproducible reality in which the object of perception (a thing) is just as singular as the subject of perception (a personality).

Translated from Russian by Anesa Miller-Pogacar

NOTES:

An early version of this essay was presented at the 1984 Vipper Conference and included in its proceedings under the title *Veshch' v iskusstve* [Thing in Art] (Moscow, 1986); subsequently revised and expanded, it appeared in Epstein, *Paradoksy novizny*.

Translator: Quoted from the J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender translation of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies* (New York: the Norton Library, 1939), 75, 77.

Translator: The Kremlin Armory and Diamond Fund contain treasures of antique military equipment and the tsarist crown jewels.

Translator: Epstein speaks of the indivisibility of human beings and their things in terms of *cheloveshchnaia obshchnost'*—"human-thing commonality"—which allows things to obtain a *chelo*—"forehead"—from a person—*chlovek*—while offering material extensions to the human body.

The project of creating such a science was proposed by the present author in the article "Realogiia—nauka o veshchakh" [Realogy—the science of things], which appeared in *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR* [Decorative art USSR], 1985, 6, 21-22, 44. See also the following interesting discussions of the proposed project and the general problematics of "realogy," published in various issues of the same journal: V. Aronov, "Veshch' v aspekte iskusstvoznaniia" ["Things" from the perspective of art studies], 1985, no. 11; L. Annenkova, "Realogiia' i smysl veshchi" ["Realogy" and the meaning of a thing], 1986, 10; N. Voronov, "Na poroge 'veshchevedeniia'" [On the threshold of "object studies"], 1986, 10.

Distinctions in usage between the Russian *veshch'* and *predmet* are indicated in the *Slovar' sochetaemosti slov russkogo iazyka* [Dictionary of Russian word combinations] (Moscow: Russkii iazyk, 1983), 53, 423.

Translator: In Russian only the complements “object” and “thing” differentiate these statements; the verbs are identical: *On sdelał khoroshii predmet.* and *On sdelał khoroshuiu veshch'.* It is not possible to retain the identity of phrasing in English without straining acceptable usage.

See V. V. Kolesov, “Drevnerusskaia veshch'” [The thing in Old Russia], in *Kul'turnoe nasledie Drevnei Rusi* [Cultural heritage of Old Russia] (Leningrad: Nauka, 1976), 260-4.

Antimaterialism originates at precisely the same time as “thingism” (mass production and consumer fetishism) and suffers from the same limitations. One of the earliest and best examples of the contemporary view of this problem can be found in Mayakovsky's tragedy “Vladimir Mayakovsky”(1913):

Old man with cats: In the land of cities they became the masters

and now come creeping to crush us, soulless hordes of things.

. . . There, you see!

Things must be destroyed!

I wasn't wrong when I foresaw an enemy in their embraces!

Man with a long face: But maybe things should be loved?

Maybe things have a different kind of soul?

This is exactly the point: not to reject things, complaining of their “soullessness,” but to assume that they have their own, a “different” kind of soul, which requires a response and must be comprehended through love. Anti-materialism takes up the torch from materialism and hurls these things, already alienated from man, even farther into the zone of non-being and the accursed, thus ethically justifying the results achieved by commercial fetishism. But the task should be to draw closer to them, assimilating them even in their basic alien quality. The colder, more random, more “industrial” a product may be, the greater internal care is needed for it to compose itself as a thing, as an ontological fact; this orphanhood of the majority of things in contemporary life should inspire neither malice nor apathy, but a sense of kinship, a willingness to adopt, to make up for their initial rootlessness.

It may well have been Rilke who sensed earlier and more deeply than anyone else the new demands placed on human creativity by the crisis in the traditional assimilation and succession of things. He wrote: “For our grandfathers there still were ‘a home,’ ‘a well,’ a familiar tower, and simply their own dress or coat; almost everything was a vessel from which they were drawing something human and into which they invested and stored something human. (...) Animatied things, participating in our lives, disappear and cannot be replaced. *Perhaps we are*

the last ones to know such things. We have a responsibility not only for keeping their memory (this would be too little and unreliable) and their human and divine (as in domestic deities) worth... Our goal is to accept this transient perishable earth with such depth, such passion, and such suffering that its essence would ‘invisibly’ resurrect in us once again.” R.-M.Rilke. “Letter to V. von Gulevich, 13. XI. 1925,” *Vorspvede. Auguste Rodin. Letters. Poems* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1971), 305.

Translator: Quoted from Thomas P. Whitney’s translation of Andrei Platonov, *Kotlovan: The Foundation Pit*, bi-lingual edition (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1973), 8.

Platonov, *The Foundation Pit*, 32.

In substantiating realogy as a field of knowledge one could use Rickert’s ideas on the construction of “individualizing” sciences, which (in distinction from the “generalizing” ones) deal with the meaning of singular phenomena (see Heinrich Rickert, *The Philosophy of History*, St. Petersburg, 1908, p.19, passim.). Not only history, as the study of meaning in single-instance events on the axis of time, but a new “x” discipline should be included in such sciences to study the unique formations of meaning on the axes of space. What we have tentatively called “realogy” is such a science of things, as the formational units of space, the borders of its meaningful divisions, through which are manifest its axiological fullness and the cultural significance of the metrics of nature (not unlike the understanding of history as a revelation of axiological fullness in time, in the meaningful units of events).

According to contemporary conceptions in the humanities, things endow space with the properties of a text. “In space, things illuminate a particular paradigm which they themselves represent, and their ordering represents a syntagma, that is, a kind of text. . .” (V. N. Toporov “Space and text,” in *Text: semantics and structure*, Moscow, 1983, p. 279-80). Thus, realogy is the science of *realized* space—that is, space which has been divided and filled with things—space and its textual properties, which are recoded in linguistic texts in the genre of “verbjects”. The lyrical museum is a space which speaks in two languages simultaneously: the language of things and of words, thereby revealing the limits and potentials of their intertranslatability.

The general idea for such a division of space belongs to the linguist Alexei Mikheev. A feasible, concrete design for a lyrical exposition has been proposed by artist Francisco Infante. What follows is a related literary-conceptual project.

These may be compared with the experiments of other authors, participants in a proposed exhibition: V. V. Aristov and A. V. Mikheev, “Text descriptions of things as exhibits for a ‘lyrical museum,’” in *The ‘Thing’ in Art: Conference proceedings, 1984* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1986), 324-331.

Translator: Quoted from *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 298.

In Russian “language” and “tongue” are expressed by the same word *iazyk*.