La table qui désire la communication.  
Ponge and the object

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Through the study of La Table of Francis Ponge, this article investigates the relationship between words and objects centralized on the question of why and how to communicate with the object, as well as the function and meaning of words as material. Known as poet of the thing, Ponge illustrates a very exceptional and unique example of communication. Ponge communicates with the thing to show the thing itself as it is, without any prejudices or fixed ideas. Before having communication, the thing is characterized by silence; it is unexpressed by words. Communication gives words to the silent thing. The words serve to recover the severed communication between the subject and the object. Ponge dreams of a complete unification between the object and words. However, Ponge is aware that this perfect communication is a non realistic utopia. His usage of words as a medium is accomplished by maintaining a good distance that allows the depiction of the object’s various aspects. Ponge considers the thing as the absolute other, and finally realizes that the subject of the writing can never possess the object. Thus, he is able to enjoy the play of words, through rejecting completion of works and having interactive communication with object. This attitude toward the object is significant in suggesting another view on the phenomenon of digital culture in South Korea, where there is a strong tendency to identify the subject and object as equals.

KEYWORDS : PONGE, OBJECT, THING, COMMUNICATION, WRITING, WORDS, TABLE

A travers l’étude de la Table de Francis Ponge, cet article examine la relation entre les mots et les objets centrée sur la question de savoir pourquoi et comment communiquer avec l’objet, en plus de la fonction et du sens des mots en tant que matériau. Connue comme poète de la chose, Ponge illustre un exemple tout à fait exceptionnel et unique de communication. Ponge communique avec la chose pour montrer la chose elle-même, telle qu’elle est, sans aucun préjugé ou idée fixe. Avant d’avoir une communication, la chose est caractérisée par le silence ; elle ne s’exprime pas par mots. La communication donne des mots à la chose muette. Les mots servent à retrouver la communication rompue entre le sujet et l’objet. Ponge rêve d’une unification complète entre l’objet et les mots. Toutefois, Ponge est conscient que cette communication parfaite est une utopie irréelle. Son utilisation des mots comme un moyen est accomplie en gardant une bonne distance qui permet la description des divers aspects de l’objet. Ponge considère la chose comme l’autre absolu, et se rend finalement compte que le sujet de l’écriture ne peut jamais posséder l’objet. Ainsi, il réussit à apprécier le jeu des mots, à travers le rejet de l’achèvement des œuvres et en ayant une communication interactive avec l’objet. Cette attitude envers l’objet est importante en suggérant un autre regard sur le phénomène de la culture numérique en Corée du Sud, où il y a une forte tendance à considérer le sujet et l’objet comme égaux.

MOTS-CLÉS : PONGE, OBJET, CHOSE, COMMUNICATION, ÉCRITURE, MOTS, TABLE

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Ponge and the Object

Objects are companions to human beings and exist through communication with us. We live among the objects of our surroundings - chairs, tables, telephones, lamps, and glasses. Whether we are aware or unaware, we are in ceaseless communication with these things. When a new product is introduced, we peruse the manual and learn how to communicate with it. And as we become familiar with the thing, we make it part of our life.

It is difficult to imagine a world without objects. Yet rare is the individual who is conscious of his/her communication with them. Among the French writers, there was a poet who dedicated his life to such communication. Known for Le parti pris des choses (Siding with Things, 1942), Francis Ponge paid attention to the objects surrounding him, talked to them and wrote about them. He gives words to the everyday object - La table ("Table"), Le cageot ("Crate"), Le savon ("Soap"), La bougie ("Candle"), La porte ("Door"), Le verre d'eau ("Water Glass"), and La cruche ("Pitcher") - and attempts to communicate with it. Ponge's poetics is that of communication with the object-thing. He says that writing (Ecriture) is turning a wall into a window (Ponge, 1991, p.50). His writing is an attempt to transform the wall that stands before the object, uncommunicated and isolated, into a connecting window.

Communication with objects can be treated in disciplines as diverse as design, painting, architecture, and others. Then what about literary texts? This article discusses the communication of the object within the literary text: How does the object communicate in the literary text? How does the poet communicate with the object, and ends up creating yet another object - the text itself? Finally, what is this object that is the newly created text? These questions will be addressed mainly in context to La Table (Table) by Francis Ponge.

The reason for choosing La Table as the representative example of the communication with the thing, among many other works of Ponge, is because this work exhibits the most Ponge-like example of communication. La Table was a posthumous compilation of texts written from 1967 to 1973. With the exception of Le parti pris des choses, Ponge's poetics is characterized by the incomplete form of works, which are produced through the process of infinitive repetition. His works, as the title Pratiques d'écriture, ou l'inachèvement perpétuel (1984) suggests, are perpetually incomplete. This posthumously published work also embodies this characteristic. La Table shows the process of creation as it is. By drawing the line across the signature Francis Ponge, Ponge left his work to be published without his intervention. This was actually a tentative work not intended for publication. Ponge left this work in the dark untouched after 1973, until 1980 when it was sent to Bernard Beugnot of Montreal to be introduced in a magazine.
Ponge Sides with the Object

Communicating with the objet*, for Ponge, means taking their side. It is being in the position of the thing and becoming eye-level with it, instead of keeping our human perspective and demanding communication from it. Ponge makes everyday things the subject matter of his writing in order to show things as they are, without human preconceptions. He rids himself of the humanocentric view and takes side with the object; he discards all knowledge and preconceptions and begins with a tabula rasa. This is the first step in the poet’s communication with objects.

Le meilleur parti à prendre est donc de considérer toutes choses comme inconnues, et de se promener ou de s’étendre sous bois ou sur l’herbe, et de reprendre tout du début (Ponge, 1965, p.201).³

To Ponge, objects become a means of emptying ourselves of our long-rooted prejudices and false ideas. Le parti pris des choses confers absolute power to the objet.

The Object before Communication

Ponge begins with the fact that, though mute, every thing in our surroundings entreats us for communication. The table has long been waiting for man, and the poet stands before the table that awaits him (Ponge, 1991, p.79). The table provokes communication, inviting the poet to prop up his elbow on it and think, write. The table, in the shape of a T, attracts Ponge by the simple fact of its being there. The table’s presence is “the absolute means of and need for” communication (Ponge, 1991, p.79). It is as if the object is signalling us in Morse code; it desires communication. But the table does not move by itself, so the poet must approach it first.

Just as we endeavor to communicate with a very familiar object, it falls silent. An existing thing that is unexpressed in words, hence unperceived, differs from the objet that is in communication with Ponge and is related to him in words. An object that is not perceived through the medium of words is something trapped in and isolated by silence :

Lèvre serrées (et pas de gorge)
Elle(La Table) résiste, s’en tient à son rôle de pur support ou appui

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² “Reconnaître le plus grand droit de l’objet, son droit imprescritible, opposable à tout poème. « (Ponge, 1965, p.257-8) ; Regarding communication, there is a difference between things and objets. The thing comes before written communication, whereas the objet is la chose parlée (the spoken thing), something related by words.

³ All citation in this article is provided in the original language of the cited text.
Il est vrai que sa dentale dure appelle, incite à l’attaquer ainsi (Ponge, 1991, p.58)

A silent thing is an obstinately closed thing. It is what Sartre calls *la chose en soi*. It is also what Heidegger calls *la choséité*; it makes a thing what it is but, paradoxically, distances the thing from itself (Heidegger, 1962).

**From the Silent Thing to the Speaking Object**

Ponge’s communicating - while siding with the object - is, in other words, comprehending the object through words. He expresses his writing formula in *Méthodes*; “le parti pris des choses égale compte tenu des mots (Siding with things is the same as keeping count of words)” (Ponge, 1961, p.19). Words are the key to unlocking the object, and their function is to resume the severed communication between the subject and the object. Words are none other than the traveller’s guide into the mysterious depths of the object. The key role of words lie in restoring communication with things. Communication is granting words to the silent thing. Words are the material of communication, and things are the pre-text of the text. The word ‘table’ becomes a communicative medium of the table as a physical thing. In most of the texts in *Le parti pris des choses*, as in *La Table*, the name of object becomes the material that determines the text’s contents. Derrida emphasizes the significance of the object name in Ponge’s poetics:

> Tout le texte n’est plus alors, en effet, que le développement du titre, son commentaire en quelque sorte, mais un commentaire qui le met en expansion (...) le poème va être simplement une longue glose de son titre. (...) le titre est toujours un nom. (Derrida, *Répliques*, p.192)

Ponge approaches *La Table* via its name, ‘table’. The T-shape of the table incites in us an impulse to lean on it, and gives us a place to write.

> Eh bien la *table* comporte sept lettres dont un couple anagrammatique la et a(b)l, 2 fois la voyelle a et la lettre la plus importante, le *T*
> qui me semble la figurer (ou représenter) <pictographiquement>; puis l’explosive *b* atténuée par rapport au *t*, atténuée encore par la labiale *l* et la terminaison muette *e*. (Ponge, 1991, p.38)

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4 «Ce qui m’en vient donc naturellement (authentiquement), c’est à la fois l’objet (le référent) hors le mot et le mot, hors de sa signification courante, et ce que j’ai à faire est de les rapprocher. Un objet plus épaiss, plus actuel aussi et un mot plus épaiss (que sa valeur actuelle de signe)” (Ponge, 1991, p.24)
Communication with a table is accomplished through the word ‘table’. Sympathizing with the letters of ‘la table’ is the means of communication. To the poet, ‘la table’ is simultaneously a thing and a word. As demonstrated in the image below, the object table on left resembles the letter T on right. In short, Table is an object is a word.

(Ponge, 1991, p.39)

In a very brief text titled Fable, Ponge shows that words as a means are an important element of the text:

Par le mot par commence donc ce texte
Dont la première ligne dit la vérité,
(...)
(Ponge, 1965, p.144)

What is significant in Ponge’s communication with objects is their visual forms. The horizontality of the table becomes an important axis of his writing. The poet’s objects are, foremost, visual objects. They are taking poses, are a kind of “tableaux-vivants” (living pictures). He says that he writes in order to give forms to visually perceived things. Gaze is very meaningful in the communication between Ponge and his objects. He talks to the object by looking at it (“le -regard-de-telle-sorte-qu’on-le-parle” (Ponge, 1965, p.137)). Jean-Pierre Richard argues that Le parti pris des choses consists of contemplation of the sensible aspects of objects (Richard, 1964, p.198). What is interesting about Ponge’s writing is his regarding of the forms of objects and words. It is an imaginative gaze that transforms objects into words. This imaginative gaze ushers us into the mysteries lying in objects. Turning a wall into a window also requires the imaginative gaze. Writing transforms the visual object into a legible object.

The object is related to memory and desire. Ponge announces that he will talk about the table which resides in his memory (Ponge, 1991, p.62). The table is, before it is to be considered an object in the present, a temporal object which contains our memory of the past. Through memory, objects go beyond the space of the present and connect times. The stirring of a desire to communicate with the table has something to do with our lost memory of the table. Ponge communicates with objects in order to regain lost memories. Objects are not simply limited to inanimate things but related to memories, events, and people. ‘The table’ in the

5 «(...) identifier l’art de Ponge avec celui d’un miniaturiste ou d’un peintre de natures mortes (...)” (Pierrot, 1993, p.111)
photograph that his father took when the poet was a child, ‘the table’ on which he slept several nights, fully clothed, in the Montmorency castle before evacuating during World War II. Objects are vessels containing the information of life. The poet’s writing is a process of unraveling memories of objects (“la bobine de la mémoire sensible” (Ponge, 1991, p.62)). It is through memory that objects last longer than the people who created them. Moreover, the object that continues through memory becomes the means of the poet’s meeting his readers even after the poet passes away, having created the object which is the text.

Closing in and Distancing

There are two important axes in Ponge’s communication with the object; closing in and distancing. His writing begins with some distance from the object and endeavors to close that distance. The distance between writer and the object originates in the fact that the silent object cannot be expressed. His *La Rage de l’expression* carries a strong desire to express mute things. Communication through writing is making relations through *la parole* that mediate the subject and the object, each isolated in their own world.

The poet’s closing of distance is an attempt at the perfect union of thing and word. The ultimate goal here is to achieve a utopian communication between the subject and the object. Such a poetic space implies a lost origin - the mother’s womb. The poet draws nearer to ‘the table’ as though he is approaching the mother, and this approaching is a verbal attempt to return to the maternal origin. But what does the utopian union - of no distance between object and words - mean? The object becomes words and words become the object. In other words, words themselves - which are granted by the poet - become the object. The utopian communication, however, cannot be achieved. Ponge describes this contradiction in an allegorical way. ‘Objects are words’ signifies that the words vested by the poet subject are objects. In the cases of *La guêpe* (“Wasp”) and *La chèvre* (“Goat”), the objects are seen speaking the words that the poet has given. The speaking objects are individuals with identities. They refuse words that the poet has conferred deliberately. Thus the poet announces that poems and things are incompatible. It is at this point where he turns from closing distance to maintaining the necessary distance. In Ponge, communication with objects are characterized by double movements.

6 «(...) l’un des compagnons inanimés de la vie de l’homme, un objet de son industrie mais qui dure généralement plus que lui – (mère durable) (mère fabriquée et durable, la table met au monde les fils et les filles du fils, les fils et les filles de la fille(...).” (Ponge, 1991, p.41)


8 «Les choses et les poèmes sont inconciliables” (Ponge, 1965, p.258)
The poet tries ceaselessly to reduce the distance between objects and words, but in the end he recognizes that appropriate distance (bonne distance) is itself the driving force of writing. The poet’s writing about objects does involve removing the distance that exists between the subject and the object but suggesting an appropriate distance through the medium of words. The writing of Francis Ponge does not pursue the thing’s being but shows varying aspects of the thing through word-mediated communication.

**Ponge’s Materialism**

The essence of Ponge’s poetics consists of how to re-create the thing as a literary object in the text. Language is important in the process of re-creation in that language liberates the object from metaphysics. Ponge’s materialism is founded essentially on words. The words are the materials for the text, and simultaneously another object. The words as material are a concrete medium that makes interactive communication possible between the subject and the object. The words, which are objective material, do not simply refer to the thing. Through communication, they serve as an entity that allows escape from contaminated thoughts and prejudices. Ponge’s writing purifies the contaminated language and recovers the proper characteristics of language through the communication with the object. The materiality of the words play the role of preventing metaphysical writing. Ponge believed that he could save humanity by recovering the authentic role of the words. This is the fundamental significance of Ponge’s materialism.

**Back to the Object’s Place**

What the double movement of closing in and distancing in Ponge’s writing ultimately pursues is to return the object back to its original place. Returning the object back to its place through distancing reflects the fact that the subject cannot possess the object. The reason Ponge sides with the object was to show the object as it is, away from humanocentric view. In this context, Ponge continuously rejects metaphysical writing as well as lyrical poetry and sentimentalism. This is because this type of writing does nothing but to project man’s emotions onto the object. By taking the object as ‘autre absolu’ (the absolute other), Ponge does not allow his writing to become subjugated to subjective sentimentalism or metaphysical idealism. Ponge is vigilant against sacrificing the object for poetry. He grants absolute rights to the object so that “l’object, c’est la poétique.” This means that a thing does not stop at simply being an object but is capable of engaging in equal communication as the ‘autre absolu’ with the subject. Therefore, the subject of the writing cannot insure complete ownership of the writing even when the act of writing has been completed. Once the text leaves the author’s hands, it communicates with the reader as authentic object. The completed work no more belongs to the author but becomes an independent individual. The concept of
object provides the keys for us to comprehend why Ponge communicates with the object and how he makes the object communicable, thus illuminating the final determination behind Ponge's writing.

**Sign-é-Ponge: éponge**

In *La Fabrique du pré*, Ponge asks the typesetters to bury his name, *Francis Ponge*, under the grass that he has made - *Fenouil Presle*, which share the same initials as his name - so that grass may grow from the text.

!(Image of Francis Ponge's signature)

(Ponge, 1991, p.24)

The image above represents the death of the author and the birth of the text that arises from the communication with the object. Derrida’s *Signéponge* depicts how the author’s unique property is deconstructed in the text in the relationship between author and sign, and object. Derrida sheds light on how the subject is deconstructed through the communication with the object by imitating Ponge’s attitude regarding objects. Ponge takes the name of the object and uses it as the material and communicative medium. As the like, Derrida takes the proper noun Ponge with which he deconstructs its property. Derrida deconstructs *Signé Ponge* to *Sign-é Ponge*; thus Ponge becomes a sign (*le signe est (é) Ponge*). Here in the process of the communication, the proper noun and the common noun are contaminated and absorbed into each other. *Éponge* erases Ponge and the proper noun Ponge becomes ‘éponge’ (sponge). In other words, ‘éponge’, the created object born through communication, absolves the proper noun and transforms it into textual material.

**Play and Joy of Communication: ‘Objeu’ and ‘Objoie’**

Ponge refuses to complete the *oeuvre* (work). With the exception of *Le partis pris des choses*, most of Ponge’s works are always left incomplete and published in forms of manuscripts, journals, and memos without there being a completed closure. He achieves this by writing on one object in incessant repetition. To Ponge, there is no meaning in the actual completion of writing; only the experience in the process of communication between him and the object is valued. The process
of writing as an incomplete work gives Ponge two ‘sapates’ from where the terms ‘objeu’ and ‘objoie’ are derived. Ponge coined these terms in communicating with the objects. ‘Objeu’ is the compound word of ‘objet’ ‘je’ and ‘jeu,’ meaning that the object and the subject are entertained in the joyful play of communicating through words. ‘Objoie’ signifies, in a sense, an ‘orgasm’ gained from this play. Writing is thus the process of attaining ‘la joie’ (the joy) from playing with the object through equal communication. This is why Ponge’s poetics values the process, rather than the result of communication.

Ponge’s Writing and Mandala

The characteristics of Ponge’s writing which underlines the importance of process and experience are also found in the production of the mandala in Buddhism. Ponge stresses that he writes in order to efface what he has written. His attitude suggests what is ultimately implied by the communication of objects. His communication with the object has something in common with the ritual of constructing a mandala. A mandala is a design that enables communication between human consciousness and the universe. In the span of one week, the monks create a mandala accompanied by prayers. The mandala is a miniature of the sacred space of the universe. The viewer communicates with the universe through the mandalic diagram. It is precisely this point, this micro-cosmos that the object opens up for him, that Ponge intends to arrive at. The object called text, which is a design of words, enables the reader to come in contact with a micro-cosmos. But how is true communication possible through a made object? It is possible only when the maker of the object relinquishes the object. The monks complete the sand composition of the mandala only when they send it down the river.
The procedure of letting the completed mandala out into the river suggests a relationship between matter and consciousness in Buddhism. This is to say that the work of designing a mandala is important in itself rather than the designed mandala. In other words, important are the process and experience of making the mandala, but the mandala itself should never be a goal. Though one could reach enlightenment through a material image, the image is not enlightenment. The image provides a pathway through which one can access the world of Buddha, but it is not desirable to impose a meaning on the pathway itself. The pathway is never Buddha, though it is impossible to enter the world of Buddha without the pathway. The figures above show the mandala in its process of the creation. While Fig. 1 represents the designing of mandala with sand, Fig. 2 exhibits the destruction of the created mandala. In Fig. 3, the mandala is dissolved in water and let out in the river.

Siding with things and communicating with them does not aim at changing things. On the contrary, it purposes to rid ourselves of our egos and prejudices, to provide new visions of the world. Discussing his poetics in Proème, Ponge states that what he wants is not poetry but a cosmogony. He wants his little objects to take on the role of a telescope looking out to the universe, enabling communication between the micro-cosmos and the macro-cosmos. This is in keeping with the aim of the mandala.

**Ponge in Korean Society**

Distancing myself from Ponge offers me insight on recent Korean social phenomenon. After modernization, Korean society has witnessed a very rapid development of Information and Technology. IT formulates a very specific culture in Korea, especially in the young generation. The youth do not distance themselves from the media of communications; this is observed in how they build intimate relationships and identify themselves with cell phones, blogs, online games, and other platforms of communication. In this regard, Ponge’s wisdom of distancing himself from the object and ultimately returning the object back to its original place serves as a very critical lens in assessing the Korean cultural phenomena caused by digital technology. Ponge’s writing is Buddhist in the sense that there is no desire to possess the object; one is able to enjoy the process of playing with the object rather than being obsessed by an ultimate goal. Ponge’s communication with objects is not confined to literary texts but can be significant in our current society, where communication with objects has become inevitable.
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