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The Shape and Color of Words

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**The Shape and Color of Words: The word as a visual/haptic volume
in Yannis Ritsos' poetry and Paul Klee's paintings**

1. Introduction

The present paper is focused on the specific pictorial elements that render the – written or drawn – word a highly plastic, intensively haptic, even fleshly presence in Yannis Ritsos' poems, as well as in Paul Klee's poem-paintings. We will be treating the two artists' divergence of medium by applying an inter-medial hermeneutic approach through which we can draw needed affiliations between poetry and painting, the visual and the verbal, despite their obvious difference of representational ways and matters in use. Following Lessing's *Laocoon*, it can be stated that "poetry can come to the aid of painting; [...] painting to the aid of poetry, by illustration and example" (7-8). Lessing distinguishes between the arts of space, where painting belongs since it expands its objects in space, and the arts of time, under which falls the poetic medium and whose objects are the very actions of a poetic subject. Yet, Lessing immediately proceeds to the statement that:

all bodies [objects] exist not only in space, but also in time. They continue, and, at any moment of their continuance, may assume a different appearance and stand in different relations. Every one of these momentary appearances and groupings was the result of a preceding, may become the cause of a following, and is therefore the centre of a present action. Consequently, painting can imitate actions also, but only as they are suggested through forms. (91-92)

So, seen as inseparable, spacetime relations can be detected as they unfold into the poetic corpus as much as on the painting canvas. Resonance between poetic words and painterly colors or shapes does not come as a surprise, especially in Ritsos' highly optical and haptic poetic language. The same is true for Klee's poem-paintings, which treat verbal forms as material volumes that are attributed with differentiating characteristics, such as color hues and contours. Both Ritsos and Klee, each by his own medial approach, make use of the hieroglyphic potentiality of words formulated as living or dead organisms with a certain size and relation to space. It is exactly this materiality of the verbal and, at the same time, visual figure, that assigns them with organic connotations. In other words, as Higgins notices, "in intermedia, [...] the visual element (painting) is fused conceptually with the words. We may have abstract calligraphy, concrete poetry, 'visual poetry' [etc.]" (Higgins 52).

2. The word's material texture in Ritsos' poems

The aforementioned elements of materiality can be clearly detected in Yannis Ritsos' poem titled "The Usual Contradictions", where unspoken words affect the scale of space as well as the objects' material texture:

Words, he said, unspoken words – they 're our only company.
 We explore them, extend them, and they extend us; the landscape
 deepens: discoveries
 not only of bones, but of delicate bodies, wings – you put them on,
 and they put you on; you become one with the air; vanish.
 They find us behind doors and high moldy walls. And you know:
 it's your only means of communicating. The wooden partition
 between the rooms turns into glass. You can see the words
 falling onto the empty table in the basement – a hollow sound –
 among the night-insects around the clandestine lamp. (23)

In this self-referential poem, the narrator stands alone with his unspoken words that are intensively and materially present, as they acquire their coming into existence out of silence. A landscape is gradually unfolded and grows out of the verbal as a *rhizome*,¹ so that words appearing into the spatial field take extensive and plastic properties. The narrator shares his own materiality – his bodily flesh – with the words', creating a *chiasm*² of interchangeable shapes and sizes, a new worldly perception. As Merleau-Ponty put it, "what we call visible is, [...], a quality pregnant with a texture, the surface of a depth, a cross section upon a massive being, a grain or corpuscle borne by a wave of Being" [Merleau-Ponty, 136]. Accordingly, a notion of depth and perspective arises, out of which wings that liberate eyesight are drawn in a spiral flight.

Not only bones as an architectural framework, but also skin as a medium of senses that opens up being to the world, are attributed to the verbal, as ways of alleviating external pressure to point zero. Words have then the ability to carry a human body on their extensive masses, extremely light and heavy at the same time, thus consisting ambiguous or even contradictory figures that exist on a threshold. At this moment, the whole world becomes a *chiasm* of complete interactivity, a perforated mass through which air can freely flow and, at the same time, a completely tangible volume, since the poetic subject's body:

takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them,
 opens finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part.
 Through this crisscrossing within it of the touching and the tangible,
 its own movements incorporate themselves into the universe they
 interrogate, are recorded on the same map as it. (Merleau-Ponty 133)

¹ The *rhizome* is a term of Deleuze and Guattari that suggests multiplicity or the *plane of consistency* that those multiplicities fill and where they draw lines related to other multiplicities, thus composing rhizomatic formations. Specifically, "a rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" (7). It is, therefore, "a map and not a tracing" as it has "multiple entryways, as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back 'to the same'" (12). Most importantly, "a rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*" (25).

² To Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theory, *chiasm* is the *flesh* of the world as unified and related to the beings' flesh. To his own words, "between the alleged colors and visibles, we would find anew the tissue that lines them, sustains them, nourishes them, and which for its part is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency, and a *flesh* of things" (132-133).

However, in “The Usual Contradictions”, it is the piercing quality of the words’ own shape that makes matter yield and, as long as they bear an intensely transformative force, they can –to use a Deleuzian terminology– *reterritorialize*³ what they previously *detrterritorialized*,⁴ by turning wooden partition to glass, that is, invisible to visible and unperceivable to perceivable. This element of *detrterritorialization* is what renders the poem a strong pictorial element as, to Deleuze and Guattari. “The aim of painting has always been the detrterritorialization of faces and landscapes, either by a reactivation of corporeality, or by a liberation of lines or colors, or both at the same time” (301). Under this spectrum, the words “mark a certain threshold crossed in the course of these movements, and it is for this reason that the word should be retained” (ibid. 67-68). Thereafter, having accomplished their purpose, words fall dead back in silence like an empty carcass that has completed its circle of life, leaving a material trace of their past communicative vigor, which still retains, though, its haptic and visual connotations in present through its traceable spiral movement.

Respectively, words are depicted as solid blocks of matter that bear, however, a twofold function, in the oxymoron poem “The Meaning Is One”:

Experienced words, dense, determined,
vague, insistent, simple, suspicious –
useless memories, pretexts, pretexts,
emphasis on modesty, – stones supposedly,
residences supposedly, weapons supposedly, – door handle,
pitcher handle, table with vase,
made bed – smoke. Words –
you hammer them on air, on wood, on marble,
you hammer them on paper – nothing; death.
You must tighten your tie. Like this.
Keep quiet. Wait. Like this. Like this.
Slowly, slowly, in the narrow opening, there
behind the stairs, pushed against the wall. (Ritsos 168)

Despite their dense materiality, as well as the persistence of memory where they derive from, words keep their meaning closed to interpretation like monolithic stone masses that one needs to break open so as to extract their essence. An intense visual and haptic sense of the verbal is brought into matter, along with the analogy of language as a construction, but also its destructive capacity, that arises through weapons, defensive as well as offensive constructions.

³ According to the theory of Deleuze and Guattari, the factors of territoriality, detrterritorialization and reterritorialization should be taken under consideration simultaneously, as long as they form an “abiding correlation between the molar and the molecular: no flow, no becoming-molecular escapes from a molar formation without molar components accompanying it, forming passages or perceptible landmarks for the imperceptible processes” (303). Additionally, “anything can serve as a reterritorialization, in other words, ‘stand for’ the lost territory; one can reterritorialize on a being, an object, a book, an apparatus or system” (508).

⁴ “Deterritorialization is always double, because it implies the coexistence of a major variable and a minor variable in simultaneous becoming (the two terms of a becoming do not exchange places, there is no identification between them, they are instead drawn into an asymmetrical block in which both change to the same extent, and which constitutes their zone of proximity)” (ibid. 306).

So, on one hand, language is represented as a medium that handles matter by denominating specific objects and making them present on the spot but, on the other hand, as a cognitive structure that evaporates material objects in favor of their virtual image. The word's meaning, then, turns to be illusive, since the narrator struggles to fix it on air and, progressively, against harder objects, that is, wood or marble. Paradoxically he uses a hammer, as if words were poignant nails that need an exterior factor that would stabilize them, preventing their movement on paper. This happens because, as Jakobson put it:

poeticity is present when the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and inner form, acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality. (Jakobson 750)

Yet, their illusive, closed meaning is transcribed onto their skin and formalizes them as dead bodies. It is via this hypothetical 'supposedly' that poetic language bridges matter and vape, bodily and mental constructions, and consequently, creates the liminal spacetime conditions that are necessary for the matter to bend and reveal its components. In other words, in Ritsos' poem we find ourselves facing a *double articulation*⁵ inherent to the word as a medium, that which Paul Klee locates between 'material means', metal, wood, glass etc., and 'ideal means', the formal elements of a painterly figure, such as line, tone, value and color. Still, both to Klee and to Ritsos, the 'ideal means' are not "free from matter; [...] [for] the word and the picture, that is, word-making and form-building are one and the same" (Klee 17). So, poetic words are bits and parts of a wider system that is to be mentally composed and which, at the same time, provides its own building materials in an architectural way. Under this scope, words are pictured as hollow shells that resist their handling, or even more, as sculptural volumes that should crack open on time. Stillness and silence are spatial and temporal key factors –that is, external pressing factors– that will open up a certain passage, a 'narrow opening' through which resistant essence will be forced to flow out.

3. Verbal and visual *rhizome* in Paul Klee's poem-paintings

The *rhizomatic* emergence of verbal and visual volumes is depicted, as well, in Klee's painting *Ad Marginem* (fig. 1), a marginal work where letters are inserted in the natural landscape, scattered all over the canvas's periphery and intertwined with the flora and fauna, consisting part of an organic/inorganic whole. In the center of the painting, a spherical mass draws vegetation and letters close to it, creating a magnetic field that sets life and language into evolution. Moreover, the synthesis works exactly as a topographic mapping, considering that not only a single, but multiple focal points are fixed, thus undermining rules of perspec-

⁵ To Deleuze and Guattari, "there are pass-words beneath order-words. Words that pass, words that are components of passage, whereas order-words mark stoppages or organized, stratified compositions. A single thing or word undoubtedly has this twofold nature: it is necessary to extract one from the other – to transform the compositions of order into components of passage" (110).

tive in favor of a two-dimensional view. As such, the map⁶ *territorializes* correspondence between specific locus and its signs, or between nature and Logos, by means of a rotational symmetry that shifts the viewer's vantage points of the visual as well as of the verbal. Eyesight is constantly moving around the sphere in a *nomadic*⁷ way, so as to grasp the simultaneity of events, since the letter "n" stands for "u" if inversed, a "gamma" is an inversed "l", etc.

Furthermore, to Klee, temporality is of great importance regarding the creation of forms, since it is time that sets a fixed point into motion, transforms it to a line and, finally, to a set of lines that construct a form. To his words, "space itself is a temporal concept. When a point turns into movement and line – that takes time. Or when a line is displaced to form a plane. And the same is true of the movement of planes into spaces" (Klee 78). In an inversely proportionate way, words that are fixed –in Ritsos' poem– against a still surface, are not yet moving, so they are kept out of their temporal and spatial context. Nevertheless, there is an inherent movement or flux in poetic language, an internal rhythm that gets to be released and visualized. And, of course, both painterly figure and poetic word are seen under the organic scope of a body, as long as:

a picture has a skeleton, muscles, and skin. We may speak of a specific pictorial anatomy. A picture of the object 'nude man' should follow the dictates not of human, but of pictorial anatomy. First we build the scaffolding. How far beyond the scaffolding we get is an open question; the scaffolding itself can produce an artistic effect deeper than that of the surface alone. (Klee 449)

This focal function of the framework [scaffolding] can clearly be noticed in one of his poem-paintings, titled *Once Emerged from the Grey of Night* (fig. 2), where every letter comes within a fixed frame of cells and is attributed with a certain color tone. Seemingly, each letter that constitutes a scale of the poetic corpus is enclosed to a tightly organized square and thus stays immobile. Nonetheless, seen at its totality, the poem is regulated by a movement or current defined by constant shifts of hue. That said, color flux serves as a visual counterpart of rhythm, a framework or nervous system that regulates letters as body cells vigored by internal vibrations. The viewer now witnesses the birth of an organism or a cosmos that emerges from the grey of night, depicted as a grey plain that divides the upper and lower fields of the poem-painting, a non-figurative area full of invisible tension ready to explode at any time so as to produce form, color

⁶ The difference between a tracing and a map is that the latter is itself a part of the *rhizome*, "the map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation" (ibid. 12).

⁷ In what concerns nomadic dispersion in space, Deleuze and Guattari note that "nomadic waves or flows of deterritorialization go from the central layer to the periphery, then from the new center to the new periphery, falling back to the old center and launching forth to the new. The organization of the epistrata moves in the direction of increasing deterritorialization" (53). Furthermore, nomad space "is a tactile space, or rather "haptic," a sonorous much more than a visual space. The variability, the polyvocality of directions, is an essential feature of smooth spaces of the rhizome type, and it alters their cartography. The nomad, nomad space, is localized and not delimited" (382).

and rhythm all around it. This is what Klee himself calls a *graupunkt*,⁸ the chaotic point out of which form emerges, a locus of *cosmogenesis*⁹ that sets into motion and gradual evolution a shell waiting to burst into existence. *Cosmogenesis* is a concept closely related to chaos, considering that, to Klee, the point leads a *two-fold* existence since it participates in the incomprehensibility of chaos but, at the same time, “renders chaos visible. Chaos is not only a state at the beginning of the world [...]; chaos is present, for example, when a point should emerge from the emptiness of a plane” (Boehm and Maskarinec 321-322). In his theory of color, grey is produced by an inorganic –pigmentary or subtractive– mix of colors that is here invigorated by its surrounding Logos. The key factor that visualizes spacetime folds both in poetry and painting is the change of rhythm, even that internal rhythm of static bodies when in rest. In this way, the liminal locus of *chaosmos* (chaos and cosmos) is set, as long as, in Deleuze and Guattari’s words:

rhythm is the milieus’ answer to chaos. What chaos and rhythm have in common is the in-between–between two milieus, rhythm-chaos or the *chaosmos*: ‘Between night and day, between that which is constructed and that which grows naturally, between mutations from the inorganic to the organic [...]’. In this in-between, chaos becomes rhythm, not inexorably, but it has a chance to. Chaos is not the opposite of rhythm, but the milieu of all milieus. (313)

Proceeding even further, this locus of potentiality holds many affinities, as Klee noticed, to the –perpetually filled by tensions– milieu of the egg and in accordance, as Deleuze and Guattari pointed out, to the *Body without Organs*,¹⁰ since the latter is an “egg crisscrossed with axes and thresholds, with latitudes and longitudes and geodesic lines, traversed by gradients marking the transitions and the becomings, the destinations of the subject developing along these particular vec-

⁸ According to Klee’s own notes, the *graupunkt* is the pictorial symbol for a ‘non-concept’, the point “that is really not a point, the mathematical point. The nowhere-existent something or the somewhere-existent nothing is a non-conceptual concept of freedom from opposition. If we express it in terms of the perceptible (as though drawing up a balance sheet of chaos), we arrive at the concept grey, at the fateful point between coming-into-being and passing-away: the grey point. The point is grey because it is neither white nor black or because it is white and black at the same time. It is grey because it is neither up nor down or because it is both up and down. It is grey because it is neither hot nor cold; it is grey because it is a non-dimensional point, a point between the dimensions” (3).

⁹ Klee himself attributes to the grey point the element of a cosmogenesis that exists inherently on the egg, as follows: “When central importance is given to a point: this is the cosmogenetic moment. To this occurrence corresponds the idea of every sort of beginning (e.g. procreation) or better still, the concept of the egg” (4).

¹⁰ The *Body without Organs* is a concept of Deleuze and Guattari’s theory which does not connote an empty body deprived of its organs, but an organism or a machine resisting its organization by constant change and fluctuation of inner tensions, that functions as a matrix. As a matter of fact, “a BwO is made in such a way that it can be occupied, populated only by intensities. Only intensities pass and circulate. Still, the BwO is not a scene, a place, or even a support upon which something comes to pass. [...] The BwO causes intensities to pass; it produces and distributes them in a *spatium* that is itself intensive, lacking extension. It is not space, nor is it in space; it is matter that occupies space to a given degree – to the degree corresponding to the intensities produced. It is nonstratified, unformed, intense matter, the matrix of intensity, intensity = 0; but there is nothing negative about that zero, there are no negative or opposite intensities. Matter equals energy. Production of the real as an intensive magnitude starting at zero” (153).

tors" (153). In this way, a plane of immanence is set where tensions flow freely, its potentiality standing opposite to petrified organizations.

4. Application of Klee's theory of the *graupunkt* on a poem by Yannis Ritsos

As such, both Ritsos' words in the aforementioned poems and Klee's *graupunkt* in his poem-paintings are *Bodies without Organs* traversed with circulating tensions that derive from a point of zero tension as a fundamental productive principle, when a circulatory *event* occurs. This densely folded inner space of a form which, to Deleuze, consists the main artistic and plastic theme, shows "not only a temporal but also a qualitative conception of the object, to the extent that sounds and colors are flexible and taken in modulation. The object here is manneristic, not essentializing: it becomes an event" (*The Fold. Leibniz and the Baroque* 20).

The *twofold* spatium of cosmogenesis is outlined in highly plastic terms in Ritsos' poem "Means of Communication", since it takes the circular shape of repetition, not of the same but of the different:

Many signs, with repetition, would take on a different meaning
 from one night, one action, to the next; in the same way words
 are gradually undermined, left hollow; you can hear, from within,
 the clear sound of time's indeterminacy, the road's indeterminacy
 when traveled by the carts of the florist, the fisherman, the fruit-
 seller,
 heaped with flowers or fish or fruit; and that other cart, the black
one
 with its pale sleepers, rolling off toward
 the eternal, because the words have been hollowed out in the exact
 shape of the perfect memory, having a spherical shell on which
 every journey is a circle, and the dead come back
 to the point of resurrection (which is the Word of man)
 holding the candle, the silence, the white band, and a rose –
 and inside the rose is a scarab, speckled with pollen. (23)

However, no focal visual point is favored here, as long as the cart wheel's shape and motion visualizes spatial and temporal repetition, as a sign that enforces visual similarity with the words themselves. A paradoxical, circular space is arranged here that, as Argan put it in Klee's *Notebooks* preface:

will no longer be a logical sequence of planes but above-below-in
 front-behind-left-right in relation to the 'I' in space; time will no
 longer be a uniform progression, but in a before and after relation to
 the 'I' in time; and as nothing is static, that which is now in front,
 soon will be behind, and that which is now before will be after. (14)

Repetitive movement constitutes, then, not only the reemergence of the same but also forms a key-factor that brings along *difference*, making signs shift their meanings in the same way that words are emptied by their own's, that is, leaving a hollow space for time to sculpt their shells from within. Brain cavities, hollowed out by time distance, take the shape of memory –that of an egg or shell–

that sets the event of the dead's reappearance into motion, creating the locus of the *graupunkt* itself, "*the Word of man*", the point of resurrection that is neither a beginning or an ending, but a versatile vantage point. In other words, it is through memory –its spherical shape rendered to the poetic words in a highly plastic manner– that two distinguishable repetitions, a conceptual and a material, are simultaneously mediated, considering that, as Deleuze stated:

memory is, nevertheless, the first form in which the opposing characteristics of the two repetitions appear. One of these repetitions is of the same, having no difference but that which is subtracted or drawn off; the other is of the Different, and includes difference. [...] One involves succession in fact, the other coexistence in principle. One is static; the other dynamic. One is extensive, the other intensive. One is ordinary; the other distinctive and involving singularities. (*Difference and Repetition* 287)

Of course, in Ritsos' poem, an affinity to life and death's eternal circle is drawn through the singularity: the sign of the scarab. As such, scarab is the verbal and, at the same time, visual and haptic, the conceptual and material figure; a hieroglyph covered by pollen, the sperm of a future potentiality that unites time gradations into synchrony: the dead's past memory, their future resurrection and their present moment of recurrence.

5. Conclusions

In brief, it can be stated that a *rhizomatic* notion of words and pictures can be detected in two different mediums such as poetry and painting, bearing a fruitful application in the context of an intermedial hermeneutic approach. The same is true for the inherently twofold quality of the poetic word that is conceptual, visual and haptic at the same time. Temporality, and especially the ambiguous relation of repetition and difference that creates rhythm through various artistic milieus, is a factor of great importance, since it visualizes the temporalization of space in highly material, plastic formations.

Concerning the works of both artists under study, it can be stated that what seemingly stands for a motionless structure or dead word, a reappearance of the same, always bears a spot of differentiation and renewal that flows within the rhythm of the verbal and, mostly, in the mere act of artistic creation. This process is articulated through the grey point of potentiality, a *Body without Organs* or a cell which is a matter interiorly folded and constantly moving. That said, words constitute visual and haptic nodes out of which corrugated motion bursts and retreats, thus retaining rhythmic and plastic values.

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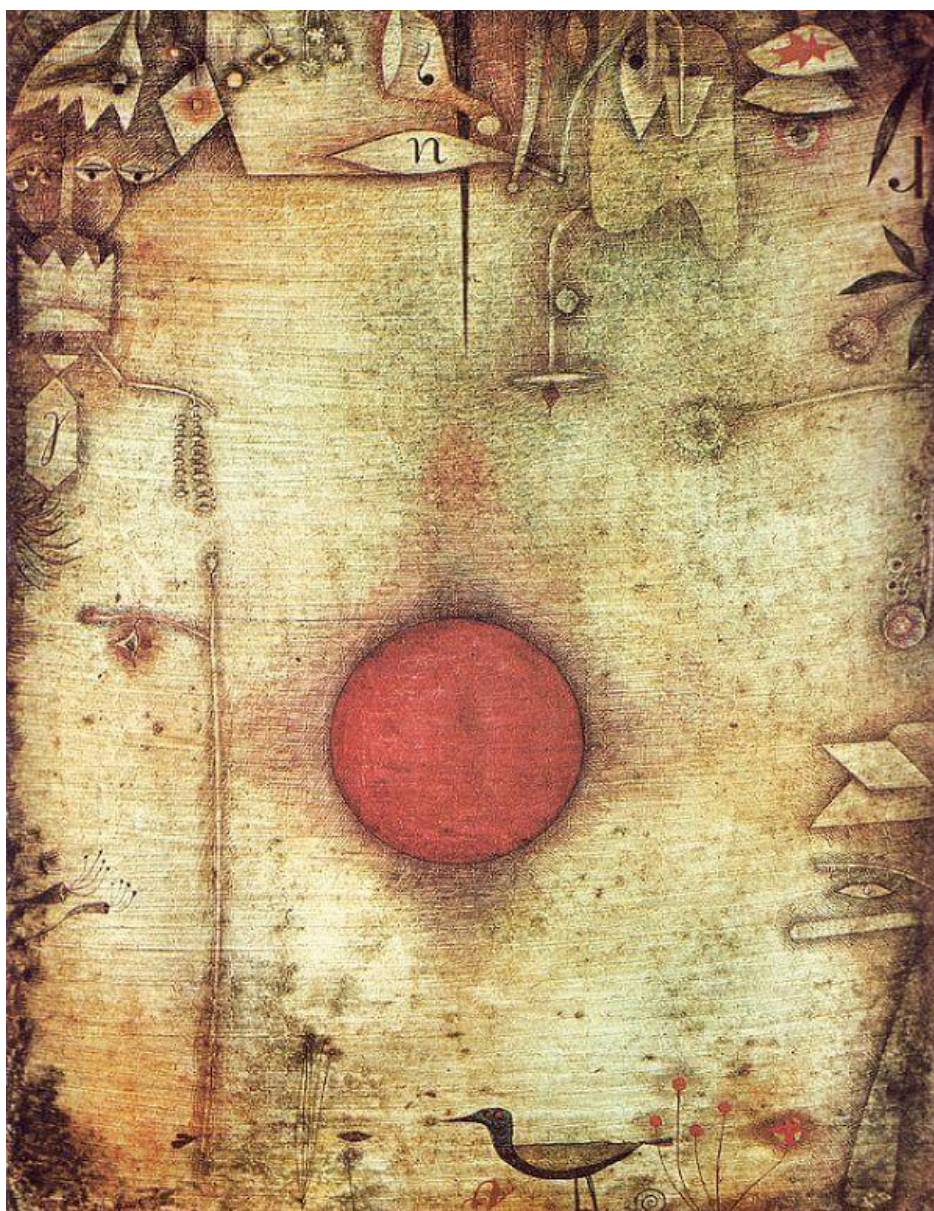


Figure 1: Paul Klee, *Ad Marginem*, 1930, aquarelle on carton, 46x36cm.

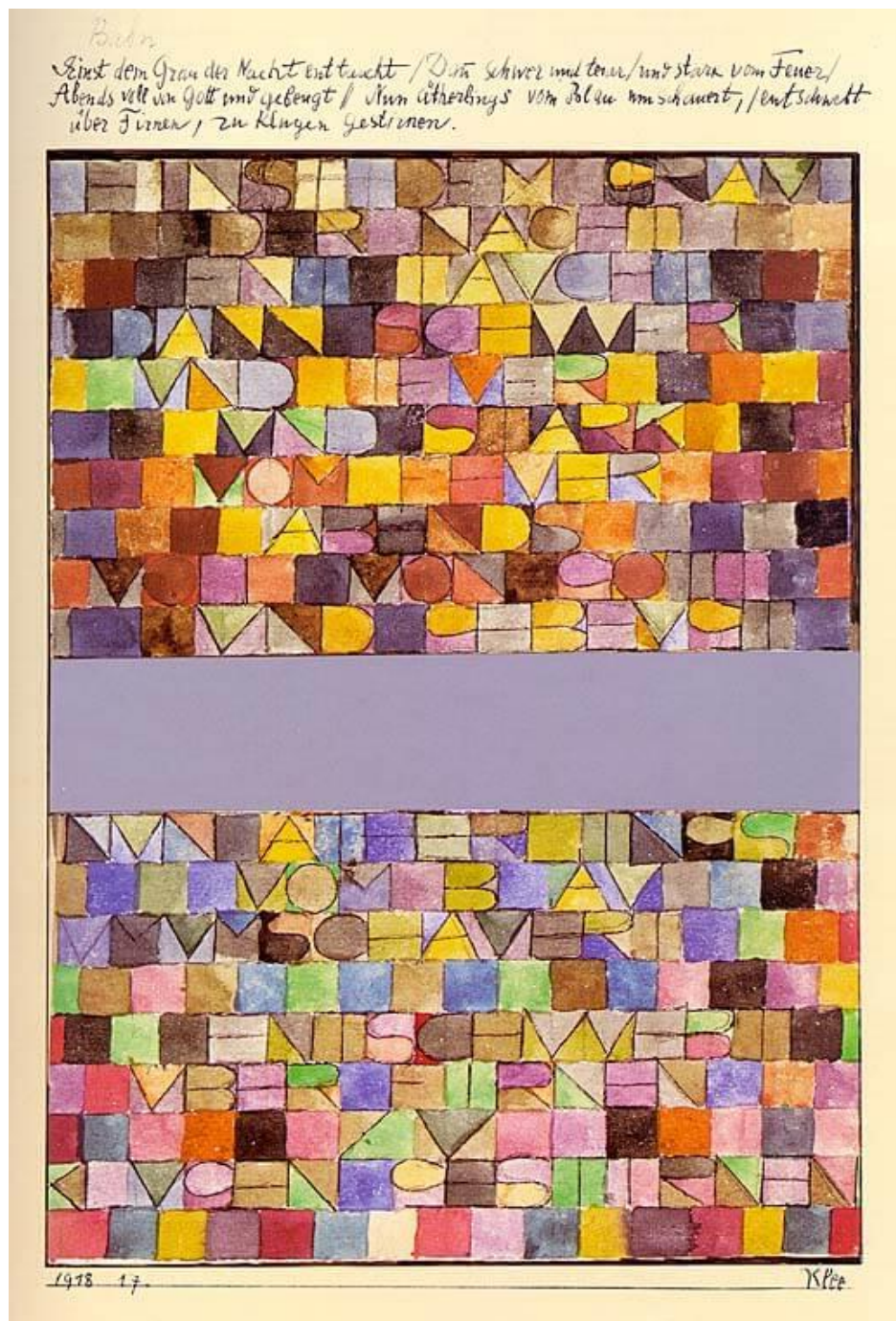


Figure 2: Paul Klee, *Once Emerged from the Grey of Night*, 1918, Watercolor and pen and ink on paper, 22,6x15,8cm.

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Περίληψη

Άννα Αμπατζόγλου

Το σχήμα και το χρώμα των λέξεων: Η λέξη ως οπτική/απτική ένταση στην ποίηση του Γιάννη Ρίτσου και στους πίνακες του Paul Klee

Η παρούσα δημοσίευση προσανατολίζεται σε μια διαμεσική ερμηνευτική προσέγγιση των ποιημάτων του Γιάννη Ρίτσου και των εικονοποιημάτων του Paul Klee, καθώς στοχεύει να υπογραμμίσει σημεία σύγκλισης μεταξύ των δύο ετερογενών καλλιτεχνικών μέσων. Υπό αυτό το πρίσμα, επιχειρούμε να αναδείξουμε συγκεκριμένα εικαστικά στοιχεία που προσδίδουν στη λέξη μια έντονη πλαστική και απτική παρουσία. Σχήμα και χρώμα, υλική δομή, έκταση και όγκος είναι μερικοί από τους βασικούς παράγοντες που προσδίδουν στη λέξη ένα σώμα, το οποίο εμφανίζει την απτική και οπτική ένταση των ιερογλυφικών. Αυτό που ενδιαφέρει τη διαμεσική μας προσέγγιση είναι ότι και οι δύο δημιουργοί χειρίζονται τη λέξη ως μια οργανική/ανόργανη μάζα, η οποία διαμέσου ορισμένων χωροχρονικών διαστάσεων συνοδεύεται από ποικίλες ρυθμικές και τονικές διαβαθμίσεις.

Για παράδειγμα, στην ποιητική του Ρίτσου, η λέξη εμφανίζεται ως μια οντότητα με αυτόνομη παρουσία, ως ένα σφαιρικό ή δεικτικό αντικείμενο που διαπερνά τη χωρική ύφανση. Μια εξωτερική πίεση καθιστά τη λεκτική μάζα κούφια στο εσωτερικό της, ώστε το νόημα να καθίσταται διαφεύγον. Από την άλλη, οι ζωγραφισμένες λέξεις του Klee απεικονίζονται εντός έγχρωμων διαστημάτων και κατανέμονται σε γράμματα συνυφασμένα με τέτοιο τρόπο, ώστε το εικονικό να δημιουργεί ένα κειμενικό ανάλογο. Έτσι, μια συγκεκριμένη απόχρωση, η οποία δεν είναι στατική αλλά κινείται ροϊκά ορίζοντας ρυθμικές εντάσεις, σχηματοποιείται ως γράμμα, καθώς γεμίζει τον κούφιο (άγραφο) χώρο. Για να ερμηνεύσουμε τα προαναφερθέντα απτικά στοιχεία της λέξης-εικόνας, χρησιμοποιούμε θεωρητικά παραδείγματα από τα Σημειωματάρια του Klee και την εικαστική θεωρία του Deleuze, όπως το γκρι σημείο (graurpunkt), το ρίζωμα και τη ροή (χρονικότητα) του χρώματος.