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PAUL KLEE
LEGENDS OF THE SIGN

Interpretations in Art, No. 1

INTERPRETATIONS IN ART

A series of Columbia University Press

Mannerism and Anti-Mannerism in Italian Painting

Walter Friedlaender

PAUL KLEE
LEGENDS OF THE SIGN

RAINER CRONE



AND

JOSEPH LEO KOERNER



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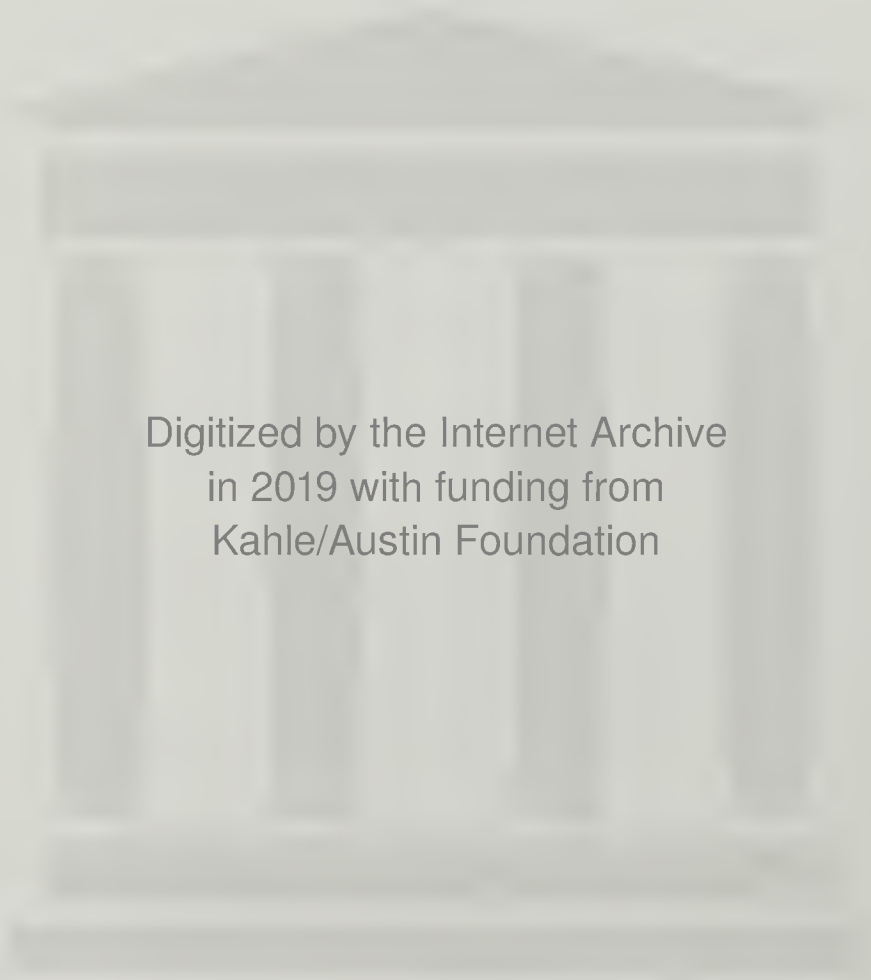
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Preface

The work of translation made possible through the discovery of the Rosetta Stone in 1799 was not without its disappointments. In a letter to his brother August Wilhelm, the German romantic philosopher and poet Friedrich Schlegel registers an uneasiness about the new method of decoding the wisdom of the ancients:

Please write me what you think of Champollion's system of hieroglyphs. It exerts a strong attraction on me, and I pass my time with it. The other side of matters—I mean the actual symbolic representation on Egyptian monuments—[Champollion] seems, of course, less to understand, possessing no real feeling for such things. These too can now be conquered, but only after all that which is pure script, along with those hieroglyphs that are mere letters, has first been wholly deciphered, and when this, taken by itself, is totally separated from the actual symbolic representations.¹

Writing in 1825, just one year after François Champollion's epochal *Précis du Système hieroglyphique des anciens Egypt-*

tiens, Schlegel is justly enthusiastic about reading a body of texts that had been closed to Western culture since late antiquity. Yet he is also dissatisfied by what they are revealed by Champollion to say. Once deciphered, that is, hieroglyphics turns out to be a writing like any other known writing, its messages no deeper, its stories no more profound, than those of any other text. Against such demystification, Schlegel attempts to reoccult a sense of depth by positing another, more esoteric text behind the legible hieroglyphs, a text that he calls "symbolic." Within this domain, he recuperates what had finally, after millennia of false keys and pseudo-systems, been vanquished: the still-undecoded hieroglyph within whose essential untranslatability the "wisdom of the ancients" was, for the moderns, grounded.

Schlegel's faith in a symbolic representation which would be wholly distinct from script or letter rests upon the notion, foundational to romantic aesthetics generally, that a sign can so merge with its referent that it becomes untranslatable, being its own best possible formulation. Before such signs exegesis will be redundant or, as F. W. J. Schelling put it, "tautegorical." Within a tradition reaching back into the eighteenth century, this identity between signifier and signified, between what a sign says and what it means, is termed the symbol. Art is one of its privileged domains. For the early romantics, the Egyptian hieroglyphs represented a special case of the symbolic, for in their apparent combination of mimetic and non-mimetic elements, they were believed to be the remnants of a wholly natural language, in which word and meaning were absolutely one. That is, what was believed to be embodied by the hieroglyph were not only meanings of an unimaginably deeper, more mystical kind; the way it articulates those meanings, its mode of signification itself, was also believed to be more immediate, more symbolic, than any known language or sign system. Herein lay the source of its

fascination: the hieroglyph told a legend which, by the very nature of its telling, could never be translated into our ordinary post-lapsarian languages, which separate word and object, being and meaning. With the Rosetta Stone and its utilization by Champollion, however, the hieroglyph lost this imagined privilege. The deciphered ancient texts might indeed now reveal unknown myths, religions, and histories, but they would do so in an ordinary manner, in a language like our own: not natural, but conventional, and never wholly symbolic.

In his late work entitled *Legend of the Nile*, Paul Klee seems to have absorbed the post-romantic hieroglyph's fall from grace (plate 23). Here is assembled a spectrum of signs from line and letter to cipher, pictogram, and landscape. On the one hand, these signs, all dwelling on the same patterned plane, appear fully conventional: the pinkish circle at the upper framing edge may mean "the sun above the sea," yet its matter is no different than, say, the x, v, or Greek pi below. It is a graphic mark, a pure line enclosing a circle, which denotes the sun. On the other hand, framed as if in a scene and placed upon the blue of sea and sky, all marks begin again to revive. The *Legend of the Nile* tells a modern story, in which the hieroglyph, having been revealed to be no more than convention, is reduced to almost pure form. However, in imitating the shape of Egyptian writing, Klee also invokes the Romantic project of the symbol, and with it the utopian belief in an art deeper than ciphers on a surface. To read such tablets, it will be necessary to decipher their script against a modern history of the sign.

The essays of this book analyze Klee's pictorial practices by placing them within the context of twentieth-century discussions of the nature and status of the sign. Far from being a whimsical *Kleinmeister* or a romantic modern, Paul Klee de-

velops a thorough-going and radical critique of the grounds of visual representation. In his novel conjunctions of word and image (e.g., in the poem paintings and the late hieroglyphic works), his deconstructions of the dominant symbols of Western pictorial representation, and his emphasis on the material aspects of works of art, Klee extricates painting from its traditional, "naturalized" function: as representation of reality, expression of self, or construction of pure (i.e., non-mimetic and non-narrative) forms. In place of these stubborn fictions, Klee proposes the painting as sign, and thus as cultural praxis whose meanings and effects emerge diacritically, in the manner theorized for language by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure.

The radicality of Klee's critique of the grounds of picture-making has been concealed by a history of art which tends to preserve a romantic notion of the image precisely overturned by Klee. The two essays that make up this book analyze the circumstances and consequences of Klee's break with tradition. Rainer Crone's essay establishes the historical and methodological basis for viewing Klee's art as a sign system in the sense proposed by Saussure. Saussurian linguistics here does not serve as a mere "methodology" for the interpretation of Klee; rather, Crone uncovers the hidden homologies between the thematization of language as sign in structuralist linguistics and Klee's pictorial project. Joseph Leo Koerner's essay, "Paul Klee and the Book," discovers the relation between Klee's pictures, read as signs, and wider cultural phenomena which are themselves analogous to the Saussurian reduction. The image of the book, which in literature (Joyce and Mallarmé) becomes linked to the question of the materiality of language, and in Klee's painting becomes the intrusion of writing into the domain of visual representation, serves as an ideal concrete example of the view of Klee proposed here. By letting the book be materialized as painting, and by submit-

ting the painting to the textuality of the book, Klee blurs the boundaries between categories of cultural representation: image and word, nature and culture, thing and representation.

While different in style and focus, the two essays presented here are the product of an ongoing dialogue between their authors which dates back to a research seminar on Klee conducted by Crone in 1983 at the University of California at Berkeley. Convinced, with Schlegel, that hieroglyphs can never be fully translated, the authors each tell a legend among many legends of the signs of Paul Klee.

NOTES

1. Letter of April 27, 1825, *Friedrich Schlegels Briefe an seinen Bruder August Wilhelm*, edited by Oskar F. Walzel (Berlin: Speyer & Peters, 1890), p. 643.

Figures

FIGURE 1. Paul Klee, *Grid*.

Diagram from Klee, *Notebooks. Volume I: The Thinking Eye*, edited by Jürg Spiller, translated by Ralph Manheim (London: Lund Humphries, 1961), p. 217. © 1989, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

FIGURE 2. Paul Klee, *The Carousel* (1889?).

Pencil drawing on paper, 11 × 14 cm. Collection Felix Klee, Bern. © 1989, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

FIGURE 3. Paul Klee, *Fish*.

From Klee, *Notebooks I*:264. Upper fish (1 seen as *individual* and 2 seen *dividually*): pencil on paper; section: 9 × 8 cm; sheet: 28 × 22 cm. PN 5 (III) 188a (*Pedagogical Notebooks*), Paul Klee Foundation, Bern. Fish below (fish with scales): pencil on paper; section: 5.5 × 8.5 cm; sheet: 33 × 20.9 cm. PN 5 (III) 192a (*Pedagogical Notebooks*), Paul Klee Foundation, Bern. © 1989, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

FIGURE 4. Paul Klee, *Form-giving examples with structures on dividual-rhythmical base and with individual accents*.

From Klee, *Notebooks. Volume II: The Nature of Nature*, edited by Jürg Spiller, translated by Heinz Norden (London: Lund Humphries, 1961), p. 211. Pencil and color crayon on paper. Several sections of one sheet newly arranged; sheet size: 27.3×21.5 cm. PN 17a Man 20, 59a (*Pedagogical Notebooks*), Paul Klee Foundation, Bern. © 1989, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

FIGURE 5. Paul Klee, *Hammamet with Its Mosque* (1914/199).

Watercolor and pencil on paper. 20.6×19.4 cm. New York City, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Berggruen Klee Collection, 1984 (1984.315.4). © 1989, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

FIGURE 6. Paul Klee, *Architecture Red-Green (yellow-purple gradations)* (1922/19).

Oil on canvas with red watercolor border around edges of canvas, laid down on cardboard mat. 34.4×40.3 cm; with border: 37.9×42.8 cm. New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Collection Société Anonyme (1941.533). © 1989, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

FIGURE 7. Paul Klee, *Beginning Chill* (1937/136).

Oil on cardboard nailed on a frame, 73×53 cm. Private collection. © 1989, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

FIGURE 8. Paul Klee, *Architecture in the Evening* (1937/138).

Oil on cotton, mounted, 60.5×45 cm. Private collection, photograph courtesy of Galerie Louise Leiris, Paris. © 1989, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

FIGURE 9. Paul Klee, *Villa R* (1919/153).

Oil on cardboard, 26.5×22 cm. Basel, Oeffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel Kunstmuseum. Inv. Nr. 1744. © 1989, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

FIGURE 10. Paul Klee, *The Vocal Fabric of the Singer Rosa Silber* (1922/126).

Gouache and gesso on canvas, 51.5×42.5 (irregular). Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Resor. © 1989, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

FIGURE 11. Paul Klee, *Once emerged from the gray of the night . . .* (1918/17).

Watercolor, pen drawing (in India ink) over pencil on paper cut into two parts with strip of silver paper between, mounted on cardboard, 22.6 × 15.8 cm. Paul Klee Foundation, Museum of Fine Arts, Bern. © 1989, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

FIGURE 12. Paul Klee, *Signs in Yellow* (1937).

Pastel on burlap, 96.3 × 50.6 cm. Basel, Collection Beyeler. © 1990, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

FIGURE 13. Paul Klee, *Let Him Kiss Me with the Kiss of His Mouth* (1921).

Watercolor over pen and India ink and pencil on paper, 16.1 × 23 cm. Lucerne, Angela Rosengart Collection (1921.142). © 1990, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

FIGURE 14. Paul Klee, *Document* (1933).

Oil, watercolor, and plaster on gauze and wood, 22.8 × 19.1 cm. Lucerne, Angela Rosengart Collection (1933.Z.3). © 1990, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

FIGURE 15. Paul Klee, *Plant Script Picture* (1932).

Watercolor on colored sheet, 25.2 × 52.3 cm. Bern Kunstmuseum, Paul Klee Foundation (1932.61). © 1989, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

FIGURE 16. Paul Klee, *Composition with Windows* (1919).

Oil over pen and India ink, varnished, on cardboard, 50.4 × 38.3 cm. Bern, Kunstmuseum, Paul Klee Foundation (1919.156). © 1989, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

FIGURE 17. Caspar David Friedrich, *Cemetery in the Snow* (1827).

Oil on canvas, 31 × 25.3 cm. Leipzig, Museum der bildenden Kunst.

FIGURE 18. Caspar David Friedrich, *View from the Studio of the Artist, Right Window* (1805/6).

Pencil and sepia, 31 × 24 cm. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.

FIGURE 19. Paul Klee, *Open Book* (1930).

Gouache over white lacquer on canvas, 45.5 × 42.5 cm. New York, Guggenheim Museum. Photo: David Heald. © 1990, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

FIGURE 20. Paul Klee, *Aquarium with Silvery-Blue Fishes* (1924).

Ink and wash, 22.5 × 12.1 cm. Bern, private collection. © 1990, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

FIGURE 21. Paul Klee, illustrations from *Notebooks*, I:52, of "endotopic" and "exotopic" treatment of the plane.

© 1990, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

FIGURE 22. Paul Klee, *Open* (1933).

Watercolor and wax, muslin on wood, 40.7 × 55 cm. Bern, Felix Klee Collection (1933.A6.306). © 1989, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

FIGURE 23. Paul Klee, *Legend of the Nile* (1937).

Pastel on cotton on burlap, 69 × 61 cm. Bern, Kunstmuseum, Hermann and Margrit Rupf-Stiftung (1937.215). © 1989, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

Cosmic Fragments of Meaning: On the Syllables of Paul Klee

R A I N E R C R O N E

To Jonathan Miller,
as students become friends,
so friends become teachers

And, moreover, what about these conventions of language? Are they really the products of knowledge, of the sense of truth? Do the designations and the things coincide? Is language the adequate expression of all realities?
—Friedrich Nietzsche (1884)¹

One of the most significant of twentieth-century intellectual developments has been the growth of the modern science of linguistics, the study of "existing languages in their structures and in the laws revealed therein."² The enormous energies invested in probing the structure and function of language have produced insights of far-reaching influence. To speak of

The following essay would not have been realized without Jonathan Miller's fruitful dialogue. His thoughtful contributions to my 1978 seminar, "Paul Klee and the Theory of Sign" at Yale University, proved invaluable. The collaborator on both ideas and sentences, I am gratefully indebted to his modesty.

a linguistic revolution in our era is no exaggeration, for as Jacques Lacan indicates, "the reclassification of sciences and regrouping of them around it [linguistics] points up, as is the rule, a revolution in knowledge."³ The effects of this "revolution in knowledge" are still filtering down into many areas of study.

The linguistic revolution has two aspects: "First there has been a massive development of synchronic linguistics whose particular object of knowledge is language's own laws of operation"; the counterpart of this first aspect is "the assumption that all social practices can be understood as meanings, as significations and as circuits of exchange between subjects and therefore can lean on linguistics as a model for the elaboration of their systematic reality."⁴ The history of art figures prominently among those disciplines which would seem receptive to the second aspect of the linguistic revolution; certainly the social practice of artistic production can be understood within the compass of "meanings, significations, circuits of exchange between subjects." Yet art historical methods have adjusted slowly and unevenly to the type of understanding expressed in the linguistic model.

In *Art and Illusion* (1956) Ernst Gombrich, exploring the conventions which reign in artistic representation (an exploration intended to discredit naive notions of faithful renderings of "nature"), felt it necessary to state that "everything points to the conclusion that the phrase, 'language of art' is more than a loose metaphor."⁵ Gombrich bases his examination of the "language of art" on the philosophy, rather than the science, of language, although he does take account of the latter. It now appears that any attempt to characterize art in terms of language has to confront the analytical methodology developed by linguistics and its corollary, semiotics.

Ferdinand de Saussure, whose *Cours de Linguistique Gén-*

érale (published posthumously in 1916) played a fundamental role in establishing modern linguistics, saw linguistics as forming a part of another more general science, one which had not yet been developed. This science, semiology (from the Greek *semeion*, or 'sign') would have as its concern "the life of signs within society."⁶ (For the moment a sign may be defined as "everything which can be taken as significantly standing for something else.")⁷ To Saussure it was obvious that language was "a system of signs that express ideas."⁸ Language, while the most widely used, and the most exemplary, of sign-systems, is not the only one. Once constituted, semiology would subsume linguistics; the study of language would become a part of the study of sign systems:

Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them. . . . Linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiology; the laws discovered by semiology will be applicable to linguistics, and the latter will circumscribe a well-defined area within the mass of anthropological facts.⁹

Since Saussure, semiology or semiotics has developed along many disparate paths, most of them characterized by the same hypothetical tenor with which Saussure proposed the science's right to existence. Furthermore, Saussure's conception of the relation of linguistics to semiology has been called into question; it seems more apt to say that "linguistics is not a part of the general science of signs, even a privileged part, it is semiology which is a part of linguistics."¹⁰ "All more or less hypothetically generalized" semiotic theories still rely heavily on a linguistic model, a dependency which gives rise to many obstacles in the consideration of social practices which are, properly speaking, non-linguistic.

This increasing conceptualization of social practices in terms of a linguistic model should be seen not as an academic fashion, but as a response to history itself. Only in the last

twenty-five years or so has semiotics developed rigorous formulations, and for good reason.

The deeper justification for the use of the linguistic model . . . lies in the concrete character of the social life of the so-called advanced countries today, which offer the spectacle of a world from which nature as such has been eliminated, a world saturated with messages and information, whose intricate commodity network may be seen as the very prototype of a system of signs. There is a profound consonance between linguistics as a method and that systematized and disembodied nightmare which is our culture today.¹¹

The consonance between the linguistic method and twentieth-century culture should not be limited to only the present day. The elimination of "nature as such" from art took place in the early years of this century.

The linguistic method seems eminently suited to considerations of modernism in the visual arts for other reasons as well. Because "the crucial and revolutionary aspect of modern linguistics is [its] insistence on the primacy of relations and systems of relations,"¹² a further consonance opens up between the linguistic method and the aesthetic credos of many modern artists. Georges Braque's statement, "I do not believe in things, I believe in relationships,"¹³ and Paul Klee's following statement exemplify this type of relational thinking for the visual arts in the modern era: "A work should [not] consist solely of elements. The elements should produce forms but without losing their own identity. Preserving it. Usually several of them will have to stand together to produce forms, or objects or other secondary things."¹⁴

The consonance between the linguistic method and the visual arts will be examined in the following sections. After an introduction to the linguistic model developed by Saussure and some of its implications, this discussion will lead into a

consideration of two aspects of Paul Klee's oeuvre: his architecture-paintings and his use of language in the symbolic space of the image.

II

From certain viewpoints it is not difficult to understand painting under the rubric of sign. If for the moment we adopt Umberto Eco's provisional definition of a sign—"a sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else . . . everything which can be used in order to lie. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, . . . it cannot in fact be used to tell at all"¹⁵—it becomes clear that many works of art, particularly representational works, fall within this general definition. Throughout the greater part of its history, visual art has served to signify. The importance of visual imagery in the Middle Ages (stained glass, or *The Biblia Pauperum*, for instance) provides a striking example of this. Those members of society to whom the predominant sign-system—language—was inaccessible were granted access to cultural meanings through the signs of visual art.

With some adjustments, even a painting by Kandinsky or Malevich can be understood within the terms of the above definition. Kandinsky's improvisations around 1913 were to a large degree part of a highly personal, recondite sign-system; the forms he employed were linked (at least for him) to specifiable meanings. Malevich's works are, in general, signs of new conception of space and time, as developed in theoretical physics, and if this seems too broad a categorization of Malevich, certainly his forms evince the type of approach to relationships mentioned above, making them receptive to analysis by the linguistic model.

However, the complications attendant upon applying

semiotics to works of visual art are not so easily resolved. The language of painting is never given apart from individual works, and since the language of painting is not in the possession of the entire social body but of a limited number of individuals, it can undergo many more volatile mutations than language proper.

For theoretical purposes, the general characteristics of the language of painting can be designated by the term "tableau." This term best renders the sense of painting as a two-dimensional surface whose edges simultaneously bracket out the real and include the symbolic; a tablet which artists have inscribed more or less from the Renaissance to the present. The tableau circumscribes a distinct range of possible actions: singing at a blank canvas does not produce a painting, just as waving a paint brush in the air does not produce words. In recent years the tableau has seemed to many artists a limitation to be abandoned, a frame for the type of inscription to which they no longer feel impelled. One thinks of Duchamp's nausea at the "smell of oils and turpentine," and his decisive abandonment of painting for *chess* (among other activities), which Saussure used in his *Cours* as an analogue for the structure of language. Although it might have seemed that the bell tolled for the tableau in the early years of this century when the symbolic irrupted into the real (as with Duchamp), its death has been a slow one, and it is still valid to consider it as a locus of significations.

How semiotics, firmly rooted in a model derived from linguistics, may illuminate the signifying mechanisms of the tableau remains to be seen. Granting the tableau its status as a locus of signification (meaning), the question arises as to what characterizes the specificity of the tableau as opposed to other signifying systems and just how far semiotics takes us in defining that character.

As an introduction to the nature of the semiotic discipline,

we may invoke Julia Kristeva's explanation of its main discovery:

However great the diversity, the irregularity, the disparity even of current research in semiotics, it is possible to speak of a specifically semiotic *discovery*. What semiotics has discovered in studying "ideologies" (myths, rituals, moral codes, arts, etc.) as sign-systems is that the *law* governing, or, if one prefers, the *major constraint* affecting any social practice lies in the fact that it signifies; i.e., that it is articulate *like* language. Every social practice, as well as being the object of external (economic, political, etc.) determinants, is also determined by a set of signifying rules, by virtue of the fact that there is present an order of language.¹⁶

Kristeva introduces here the linguistic bias of semiotics. Unless qualified, her claim that the major constraint affecting any social practice is that it is articulated like a language can be deceptive. Kristeva's intent is not to declare unequivocally that these social practices are forms of language, only that they are *like* a language. As another critic of semiotics notes: "To be sure, when today we say that everything is ultimately historical, or economic, or sexual, or indeed *linguistic*, we mean thereby not so much that phenomena are made up, in their very bone and blood cells, by such raw material but rather that they are susceptible to analysis by those respective methods."¹⁷ For semiotics to have discovered in studying social practices as sign systems that they are articulated like a language means that it has found its categories—based on the structure and function of language—to be applicable to a wide range of "anthropological facts." Painting should be counted among these facts, among the social practices, insofar as the works of individuals who acquire competence in the language-game of painting are circulated and exchanged, consumed by society.

Semiotics finds in language (as described by linguistics) a

model whose structural properties are generally analogous to nonlinguistic phenomena. To understand the oscillations of this analogy requires some knowledge of “language’s own laws of operation.” For the purpose of orientation in this field, we may examine the achievements of Saussure.

Saussure’s primary gesture was “to introduce an order into the inchoate mass of speech acts that compose a language.”¹⁸ Saussure introduced this order by distinguishing between *langue* and *parole*. *Langue* is a synchrony, the total system of a language, “the ensemble of linguistic possibilities or potentialities at any given moment.” It comprises the set of structural rules or limits for *parole*, “the individual and partial actualization of some of these potentialities.”¹⁹ *Langue* is the social institution; *parole*, the individual event.

The *langue/parole* relation can be phrased in other words as the systematic matrix of language and the individual acts which arise from, and are permitted by, that matrix. The subject who engages the system—plugs into it, gets socialized into it—finds expression therein, this expression manifesting itself as speech acts. *Langue* and *parole* are interdependent for definition: no acts of speech can be performed without the competence (both to generate and to understand expressions) supplied by the system and “the system only exists in the fact that the potential infinity of utterances is comprehensible.”²⁰

Semiotics postulates that “there exists a general category *langue/parole* which embraces all the systems of signs . . . (applicable) even . . . to communications whose substance is non-verbal.”²¹ The possibility presents itself that a *langue* could be identified for painting; the tableau circumscribes a general notion of the language system of painting. Whether it is possible in all rigor to define a *langue* for painting remains to be seen. What should be noted at this point is that Saussure’s *langue/parole* relation has been broadened into the

general notion that "behind every process one should be able to find a system."²²

Saussure's distinction between institution and event shifted the focus of linguistics to the characteristics of the institution. "The linguistic system—what might nowadays be called the 'code'—pre-existed the individual act of speech, the 'message.' Study of the system therefore had logical priority."²³ The sign is the central fact of language as a system. For Saussure, the sign was a two-fold relation, uniting not "name" and "thing," but "sound-image" and "concept," or *signifier/signified*. Saussure rejected a vertical approach to the sign, that is, in relation to its referent (the equivocal "thing"), in favor of a horizontal approach in which language comes to be seen as a structure—"an autonomous entity of internal dependencies."²⁴ Thus, the internal relation of signifier and signified composing the sign, and the relation of sign to sign become paramount. By excluding the referent from the consideration of the sign, Saussure established language as a system of signs that lies "parallel to reality itself."²⁵ With this, the "discussion of the bi-univocal correspondence between the word and the thing" gave way to the "study of relations proper to the signifier and the breadth of their function in the birth of the signified."²⁶

Several things should be said about Saussure's conception of the linguistic sign. First of all, the relation between signifier and signified results from an arbitrary correlation established by convention. Here both notions, "arbitrary" and "convention," are equally important and far-reaching for their theoretical implication to painting, as we will see. No characteristic of the signifier/painting derives from the signified it articulates. The unmotivated connection between signifier and signified is known as the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign—a much disputed fact, as Roman, Jakobson, one of the first critics, pointed out.²⁷ One might be led by this to think that

language is just a nomenclature applied to preexisting concepts, but as Jonathan Culler points out, Saussure warned against this facile conception of language:

A language does not simply assign arbitrary names to a set of independently existing concepts. It sets up an arbitrary relation between signifiers of its own choosing on the one hand, and signifieds of its own choosing on the other. Not only does each language produce a different set of signifiers, articulating and dividing the continuum of sound in a distinctive way, but each language produces a different set of signifieds; it has a distinctive and thus "arbitrary" way of organizing the world into concepts or categories.²⁸

This brings us to a second aspect of Saussure's conception of the linguistic sign: "Both signifier and signified are purely rational or differential entities."²⁹ Saussure felt that it was impossible to designate an absolute unit in linguistics; language is best conceived of as two correlated systems, a system of expressions and a system of contents. As such there are no units with fixed essences, only values and relationships resulting from the interaction of the two correlated systems:

In a state of system there are no absolute terms, only relations of mutual dependence. Saussure expressed it, "language is not a substance but a form." And, if the intelligible form *par excellence* is opposition, then again with Saussure, "in a language there are only differences." This means that we need not consider the meanings attached to isolated terms as labels in a heteroclite nomenclature. What we are to consider are only the relative, negative, opposite value of signs with respect to each other.³⁰

The form of language is characterized by differential oppositions of distinctive units (phonemes). The correlation of signifier and signified does not fully encompass the identity of the sign; signs are produced just as much by value, the

relation of one signifier to other signifiers, one signified to other signifieds.

Saussure illustrated the concept of value in linguistics by the analogy of a sheet of paper: if one cuts the paper into strips, each one of the pieces—as well as having two sides (recto/verso, signifier/signified)—has a value in relation to its neighbors. Thus, “the signifier cuts out, articulates a certain space which becomes through this articulation a signified, that is, meaning.”³¹ The relationship of signifier and signified and the articulation and division of the “sound image” and “concept” continua should be seen as strictly intertwined.

Finally it becomes necessary to point to a “profound structural dissymmetry in the couple signifier/signified. The first of these seems able to exist as a kind of free floating autonomous organization, while the other is never visible to the naked eye.”³² The fact is that whenever one goes in search of the signified, the signifier appears in its place; in order to specify what Saussure calls a concept, one must replace it with a sound-image, signifier replacing signified in a process of “unlimited semiosis.” For instance, specifying the signifieds of a tableau means replacing its signifiers with a text of verbal signifiers. Likewise, if we specify what the word “tree” means by drawing an image of a tree, we have again merely replaced signifier with signifier.

Jacques Lacan has called Saussure’s formula of *signifier/signified* “a pure function of the signifier.”³³ Semiotics should be differentiated from semantics on this ground: the former refers to the plane of expression (signifier), the latter to the plane of content (signified). The dissymmetry between signifier and signified effectively focuses attention on the signifier. For, as Lacan says, in order to keep in view the question of language’s very nature, one must “get rid of the illusion that the signifier answers to the function of representing the signified or better, that the signifier has to answer for its existence

in the name of any signification whatsoever."³⁴ From this approach to the signifier arose Lacan's notion of "an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier,"³⁵ and Julia Kristeva's notion of *signifiance*: "The flux of meanings across a textual surface, its free play of signifiers which is to be distinguished from communication- and denotation-bound 'signification.'" ³⁶ These two notions can be understood by reference to the general term "polysemia," the overdetermination of the sign, the pool of potential signifieds upon which the signifier floats.

Because of the continual flight of the signified, the object of semiotics is the structure of the signifier, whose characteristics are as follows:

Now the structure of the signifier is, as it is commonly said of language itself, that it be articulated. This means that no matter where one starts from in order to describe the zones of reciprocal infringement and the areas of expanding inclusiveness of its units, these units are submitted to the double condition of reducing to ultimate distinctive features and of combining according to the laws of a closed order.³⁷

The ultimate distinctive features of the linguistic signifier are phonemes; the combination according to the rules of a closed order Lacan calls the signifying chain, "rings of a necklace that is a ring of another necklace made of rings,"³⁸ an image which eloquently renders the sense of the process of signification as an expansion of interlocking articulations, a simultaneous gearing up and gearing down.

Because painting relies on a different physical/psycho-physiological circuit than language, the structure of the signifier in the tableau differs from the linguistic signifier. The painter's "utterance" depends on the hand which arranges the "stuff of art," a process considerably different from producing "flawed

words and stubborn sounds" (Wallace Stevens, "The Poems of Our Climate"). Furthermore, the signifying chain in language unfolds in a line (even if in certain cases, e.g., poetry, language's multi-dimensionality gets stressed), whereas in reading a tableau, we find the "writing" there to be transcur-sive, multidirectional, simultaneous. The visual aspect of writing certainly deserves examination, which we will do in analyzing Klee's poem-painting *Once Emerged From the Grey of Night*; it seems subject to a closed order of rules in essentially the same material conditions that determine graphic art (the pencil which traces the letter is also capable of image-making),³⁹ the latter subject to an "open order" of rules.

The fundamentals and some of the implications of Saussure's linguistics have been sketched here to indicate the nature of the linguistic model. In mapping that model onto the language-game of painting certain transformations must occur:

If painting lets itself be analyzed in terms of system[s], system is not necessarily to be understood as system of signs, and . . . that if the problematic of the sign can be revealed as pertinent in the matter, at its level and within its proper limits, this is perhaps to the extent that the notion of sign lets itself be disjoined from that of system (and reciprocally). Unless it is perhaps for us to work to impose another notion of sign, another notion of system, than those which all the Western tradition will have regularly associated with the possibility of cutting a whole, an articulated structure, into discrete elements, into units identifiable as such.⁴⁰

The traditional concepts of both system and sign oscillate when viewed in light of the tableau. Semiotics' reliance on the linguistic model gives rise to several problems. Linguistics biases semiotics to consideration of the system, the social institution. The separation of *langue* from *parole* runs the risk of ignoring not only the ability of those who engage the

system to renew it and to alter it, but also those instances where indeed there is no system to be decisively extrapolated from the infinity of speech acts. To introduce the *langue/parole* distinction in painting "will always be a matter of sketching a surface of cleavage between the performance which a work represents (the 'masterwork') and the network, if not the system of competences which are put into play by the deciphering of the work, its interpretation—and all that even though one posits that 'art' is never given apart from individual works, that its significance does not refer to any recognized code or convention and that the signifying relations of 'artistic language' are to be discovered at the interior of a given composition."⁴¹ The system appears after the fact in painting; we read it into the infinity of works which continually change the conditions of that reading. Painting does not draw upon a closed order of distinctive features to produce its signifiers, if it weren't for convention as such and conventional schemes of reception. So if there is a system (competence) underlying the individual work (performance), it is one which continually renews itself.

Because the tableau problematizes the system, the notion of sign must be reassessed as well. Setting up language—"the most powerful semiotic device that man has invented"⁴²—as a master pattern can easily obscure the specific character of nonlinguistic signs. Whereas "all signs consist of a signifier and signified, a form and an associated meaning or meanings," not all signs may be said to possess the same arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign, nor do they necessarily arise from "cutting a whole, an articulated structure into discrete elements."⁴³

It therefore becomes essential to distinguish between different types of signs, as did Charles S. Peirce, the American philosopher who had already developed a complex semiotic theory by the late nineteenth century,⁴⁴ by establishing the

classification that "a sign is either an icon, an index or a symbol."⁴⁵ Peirce's "symbol," a somewhat misleading term, corresponds to Saussure's arbitrary sign; Peirce speaks of a "contract" by which the symbol functions as a sign. In an icon "the relation between signifier and signified is not arbitrary but is one of resemblance or likeness."⁴⁶ Saussure believed that even if semiology were to take account of "natural signs," such as icons, "wholly arbitrary signs are those which come closest to the semiological ideal."⁴⁷ It has proved very difficult to identify very many sign systems outside of language which are based on the principle of arbitrariness;⁴⁸ those which have been found—"micro-codes" such as semaphore, Morse code, traffic signs—articulate "a very sparse semantic range."⁴⁹ To undermine this "verbo-centric dogmatism," all considerations of visual art have to come to terms with the notion of iconism, with signs not wholly arbitrary.

III

Roland Barthes once said that the work of art "*est une forme que l'histoire passe son temps a remplir.*" I agree with this statement, but I would prefer to re-translate it into the categories of the present semiotic approach; the work of art is a text that is adapted by its concrete addresses so as to fulfill many different communicative purposes in diverse historical or psychological circumstances, without ever completely disregarding the underlying rule that has constituted it.

—Umberto Eco⁵⁰

The paths travelled in the preceding section can now converge on their ultimate destination: specific examples of the painter's practice. Several of Paul Klee's architecture-paintings as well as examples involving his use of language inside the pictorial space have been chosen for this purpose.

In Klee's architecture-paintings we face, without question, iconic texts. It is possible to speak of these works in terms of recognizable contents, without ever having to enter into debates about their faithfulness to nature; they hover between abstraction and representation, orchestrating both the "seen" and the "known." More importantly, Klee's architecture-paintings evidence the development of a systematic *articulation* of the tableau. These works depend for the most part upon an implied, if not actually present, division of the pictorial surface into a grid. The fact that this method of formal articulation circumscribes a particular set of contents—architectural contents—suggests the presence of a coding correlation. Although the product of an identifiable underlying rule, it should be clear that these works evidence only one specific approach to the generation of iconic texts, a particularly notable approach for our purposes because it is *systematic*.

Architectural themes preoccupied Klee throughout most of his career. We can pick up the thread of his attention to architecture as early as 1903.⁵¹ Reflecting on the influence exerted on him by Renaissance architecture in Italy, Klee noted in his diary the importance of architecture as a school of form:

When I learned to understand the monuments of architecture in Italy, I won an immediate illumination. Although these are utilitarian structures, the art of building has remained more consistently pure than other arts. Its spatial organism has been the most salutary school for me. . . . Because all the interrelations between their individual design elements are obviously calculable, works of architecture provide faster training for the stupid novice than pictures or "nature." And once one has grasped the idea of measurability in connection with design, the study of nature will progress with greater ease and accuracy.⁵²

Klee's insight into the connection of measurability with design and his sense of architecture as a *spatial organism* provided the impetus for his architectural abstractions. But many years passed before he began to effect the fusion of "the architectonic and the poetic"⁵³ in his work.

During the years 1903 to 1914 Klee assiduously applied himself to mastery of the basic formal means of line, tone, and color, integrating each element methodically. He gathered inspiration for his formal investigations from contact with the post-Impressionists—Cezanne ("the teacher *par excellence*")⁵⁴, Matisse, Van Gogh, and later (circa 1911–1914), the Cubists—with Delaunay making the greatest impression on Klee. In 1914, Klee travelled to Tunisia on a lark and his experience there represents a critical point in his career. Before turning to the "synthesis of urban architecture and pictorial architecture,"⁵⁵ which Klee commenced in Tunisia, two important concepts from his teaching at the Bauhaus deserve attention.

In his *Contribution to a Theory of Pictorial Form*,⁵⁶ under the heading of "Constructive Approaches to Composition," Klee introduced a distinction between the "dividual" (by which he means a divisible structure composed of repeated elements) and the "individual" (a nondivisible organism). Klee had come to understand this distinction many years earlier, as the following diary entry from 1905 attests:

Individuality is not an elementary sort of thing, but an organism. Elementary things of different sorts coexist in it, inseparably. If one tried to separate them, the components would die. My self, for instance, is a dramatic ensemble. Here a prophetic ancestor makes his appearance. Here a brutal hero shouts. Here an alcoholic *bon vivant* argues with a learned professor. Here a lyric muse, chronically love-struck, raises her eyes to heaven. Here papa steps forward, uttering pedantic protests.

Here the indulgent uncle intercedes. Here the aunt babbles gossip. Here the maid giggles lasciviously. And I look upon it all with amazement, the sharpened pen in my left hand. A pregnant mother wants to join the fun. "Pshtt!" I cry, "You don't belong here. You are divisible." And she fades out.⁵⁷

This quote is noteworthy not only because it introduces the concepts of dividuality and individuality—the individual an organism composed of “elementary things of different sorts”—but also because it illustrates the schizophrenic self-consciousness of central importance to Klee’s work: the dramatic ensemble of the self fills the stage of his imagination.

As Klee formulated it in his *Pictorial Theory*, the *dividual* is characterized by being “purely repetitive and therefore structural.”⁵⁸ The simplest dividual structures result from the repetition of “unaccented elements” like the regular pulse of a musical beat, or a single course of bricks. The dividual reduces to the equation: $1+1+1+1$, etc.⁵⁹ Klee’s example of a more complex dividual structure is the intersection of parallel vertical and horizontal lines to form a grid or diagram (the unaccented elements repeated in two directions) (figure 1). In such a structure any number of parts may be attached or removed without changing its rhythmic character which is based on repetition: “elementary things” repeated indefinitely and without accent build dividual structures and so the dividual can be typified as indeterminate number. In this respect, note how *Carousel*, a childhood drawing, depends on dividual structures—the fringe on the rim of the carousel’s top, the dashes and dots of its center structure (figure 2).

Dividual structures can consist solely of line or line and tone value: the unaccented grid is a purely linear example; if we turn it into a checkerboard, we merely create a composite dividual element (black and white+black and white = $1+2+1+2=1+1$, etc.) In the checkerboard the un-

accented repetition of a higher dividual element still results in a dividual structure. Klee further characterizes dividual structures as nonorganic; they may compose organisms but are not organic in themselves. As Klee said to his students:

In the structural sphere we have gone through an exercise from which nothing has emerged that is false, true enough, but neither has it given rise to anything particularly lively. Rather what has come out has been on the rigid ornamental side.⁶⁰

An *individual*, on the other hand, has definite measure, determinate extension (cf. indeterminate number, dividual); nothing can be added to or subtracted from it without changing it radically, "without disturbing or even destroying the function of the whole,"⁶¹ putting it to "death." For this reason the individual is organic as opposed to the non- or suborganic dividual. Individuals have a character beyond rhythm, which can be described in terms of proportion, quality, and intensity.

Klee illustrates individuality with the example of a fish (figure 3). Head, body, tail, and fins compose the fish's proportions; add or subtract one of its parts and the individual dies.

Klee goes on to show how the dividual and the individual are synthesized. The individual itself may be composed of dividual structures. The fish "seen as an individual breaks down into head, body, tail and fins. Seen dividentally it breaks down into scales and the structure of the fins."⁶² Properly speaking, the individual structure is born through the "intimate fusion of individual and structure"⁶³ (individual proportion and dividual structure); the identity of the fish depends on its proportions, but those proportions are fused with the repetition of elementary units. This fusion reaches "the limit

of the perceptible," the letter of the image: "Perceptibility does not go beyond this limit, but remains within the perceptible whole, entering into its parts, its dividual rhythms."⁶⁴

Pursuing the dividual/individual synthesis further, Klee asks:

But is the fish always an individual? No, not when it occurs in large numbers, not when "it is teeming with fish," as the saying goes. When it's teeming with fish, we have not one fish but many, we have a fish-pond or an aquarium.⁶⁵

Thus dividual structures compose individuals and these individuals can in turn become the elementary units of a higher perceptible whole.

At this point it is worth recalling that from his earliest youth Klee attached major importance to the principle of analogy. He regarded it as one of the most effective aids for understanding the interconnection of ever more complex facts. An analogy exists between mathematics and the structural system of a plant. There is an analogy between nature and the creative act, and yet another between pictorial and urban architecture—and many other examples.

Klee invokes another highly pertinent analogy for the relationship between the individual and the accompanying dividium, one which suggests without doubt he must have had knowledge of recent achievements in linguistics. In 1916, Saussure's *Cours* was published in Lausanne and reviewed in every major Swiss newspaper as a centennial achievement of a noted Swiss scholar in structural linguistics. One of these reviews appeared in the Sunday papers in Klee's hometown of Bern.⁶⁶ Paul Klee, fluent in French, might very well have read these celebrated lectures of Saussure's, available to the public in the format of Saussure's students' notes.⁶⁷

The longer and more indefinite the series, the easier it is to add or subtract a few without making any essential change in

the exhibit. In the same sense I can line up series of concepts (e.g., sound, syllable, word, sentence, etc.).

The concepts lower (or dividual) and higher (or individual) are not absolute but mutually dependent; when I broaden the conceptual field, I create a higher perceptible whole.⁶⁸

Klee links the structure of language to the structure of pictorial form by finding in each a hierarchy of levels in which lower, dividual levels are continually integrated into higher, individual levels. A principle of relationship reigns here loosely comparable to Lacan's image of the signifying chain—up to the higher perceptible whole, the morpheme (and further, the text), down to the building blocks, the *figurae*. We begin to see here the truth of Kristeva's analogy—the articulation *like* a language—even if the characteristics of language's articulation can't be mapped point for point onto nonlinguistic phenomena. In Klee's opinion, the two levels of formal articulation were practically inseparable, although for the purpose of analysis they could be separated. Even though, as Klee says,

the line between singular articulation and mass articulation must lie somewhere, it is less important to localize this precisely than to regard the two elements as being in contrast, e.g., the singular as moving forward, the masslike as moving backward.

The disparity between the two then leaps to the eye. The mass element I should like to call structural character. The articulated aspect of mass should be envisaged as the massive repetition values that are of a similar order of smallness.⁶⁹

The structural character of language may also be understood as the massive repetition of values that are of a single magnitude. The passage from mass to singular articulation is of central importance for the creative act. The artist must

always keep his eye on “the higher proportions of individual structure”; they are “form-determining,” whereas dividual structures are “form-realizing.” The ultimate form a work takes results from the mutual cooperation between the governing proportions and “the pliable material aspect” of the indefinitely extending structures.⁷⁰ We can most clearly see this in the approach to composition, which Klee termed “partially constructive figuration.”

An illustration of this approach to composition (diagram)—one essential type of the dividual/individual synthesis—occurs in Klee’s notes: “Form-giving examples with structures on dividual-rhythmical base and with individual accents” (figure 4). The individual accents conform strictly to the dividual matrix in these examples; the structural norm establishes the constraints within which “free choice” may take place. The interplay of systematic constraint and free choice parallels that of *langue* and *parole*, as defined by Saussure. Free choice, individual accent in Klee’s examples, generates proto-images, the limit of the perceptible. Partially constructive figuration “avails itself of a schematic basis (norm) from which it chooses what it deems suitable for free figuration. . . . The partially constructive manner happens to be productive in a form-creative sense but only by calling on the help of the destructive principle. The creative ruin.”⁷¹

Klee’s architecture-paintings epitomize the dividual/individual synthesis as it appears in the method of partially constructive figuration; in them a schematic basis serves as a departure point for free figuration.

In the Tunisian watercolors, Klee was already employing a partially constructive method. In *Hammamet with Mosque* (1914) (figure 5), an implied if not actually present grid, a dividual basis, lays the ground for the creation of the image. A combination and opposition of colors and lines serves to create the impression of a landscape with architecture, bathed

in light. Topographical clarity is ensured, earth and sky being apparent at a glance. However, the schematic division of the surface into grid-like rectangles, triangles, and squares seems an unusual aspect to include in a landscape. The vertical strip composed of orange, yellow, blue, and white, running down the right-hand side, can be regarded as an indicator of this basic grid: it divides the surface into horizontals and verticals. The top edge of the watercolor, where Klee inserted a narrow red-rust, red-yellow strip, detached from the lower edge and turned around by 180 degrees, functions similarly. In fact, Klee defines the upper third of the painting by the two towers placed against the light blue–white section of the background, which continue the form and color used in the basic grid pattern. But he diverges from the dominant vertical/horizontal pattern of the surface with three undulating diagonal lines, initially drawn in pencil. These diagonals add movement to a composition, what Klee might have referred to as a construction, in a painting whose structure might otherwise produce a more static effect. These diagonals, the flowing sand dunes of the desert, serve as space-creating coulisses. Klee creates a mosque from the schematic basis by extending a pale violet band into the “sky,” the sparsely painted upper portion of the field.

The basic structure of this watercolor reveals a more or less schematic division of the picture plane into horizontals and verticals, producing a number of rectangles and squares, and with slight modifications, triangles. It is only when the artist applies his brush to provide graphic details that the picture acquires its definition, and clarifies what is intended to be up and down. These details transform geometrical shapes into architectural forms, into towers and minarets, before our eyes. Klee is using only the sparsest of means, and turns colored patches into gardens and fields, using figures in an abbreviated, suggestive form, reducing them to pure signs. On the

other hand, plants are depicted in a figurative manner. In conjunction with the signs placed in the bottom half of the picture, the round dots next to the mosque allow us, the spectators, to associate these sections with something more objective; whether this calls to mind gardens, tufts of grass, groups of people, or window openings in the minarets is immaterial. It is more important to recognize that this represents the emergence of a new way of perceiving and planning paintings: the pattern or network of coordinates comprising verticals and horizontals, forming the basis of the entire pictorial structure. Using only a limited number of additional graphic elements, it is possible to impose the face on a landscape, a momentary impression on this structure—a structure which itself determines the whole, as Klee stated in his diary of July 1917.

“The creative ruin” may now be better understood. To bypass the rigidity of dividual structures, and to engage creative freedom of choice, the schematic basis must be destroyed. The individual takes precedence over the dividual; it prevails at the expense (or absence) of the dividual. Integrally dependent on this process is a progression from the static to the dynamic, a progression from a purely dividual, static structure to a structure beyond rhythm, irregular, dynamic. We may imagine a battle, immanent in the work and the process of its creation, between the conservative dividual faction which fights under the banner of static order, the norm, and the radical individual faction whose declared ideology is dynamic movement, deviation from the norm. As we watch the battle, we can see creation creating itself.

All the elements of free figuration in *Mosque*—the color (“quality,” therefore individual), the diagonal deviations from the grid, the linear activity of the flora, the architectural details—serve to individualize the dividual basis. The process

of individualization produces the image as such, the visual text. The letter of the image results from the elements, which individualize the grid; so, taken as a whole the deviations from the norm signify. The difference between the norm, the system, and the individual, the figuration, generates meaning.

To a large degree, the abstract quality of *Mosque* can be ascribed to the underlying construct which asserts itself apart from any representational function. The patches of color in the image fluctuate between depiction, indicating features of the landscape from which Klee painted, and an autonomous existence as pure pictorial elements, released from the demands of representation to become parts of a construction.⁷² The tension between depiction and construction evidenced by *Mosque* emphasizes the very nature of an iconic sign: culturally coded yet not wholly arbitrary.⁷³

The uneasy coexistence of opposing functions in the pictorial elements of *Mosque* can be ascribed to the grid structure itself. As Rosalind Krauss has pointed out,

In the spatial sense, the grid states the autonomy of the realm of art. Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal. It is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature. In the flatness that results from its coordinates, the grid is the means of crowding out the dimensions of the real and replacing them with the lateral spread of a single surface. In the overall regularity of its organization, it is the result not of imitation, but of aesthetic decree. Insofar as its order is that of pure relationship, the grid is a way of abrogating the claims of natural objects to have an order particular to themselves.⁷⁴

The striking quality of *Mosque* results from the fact that Klee painted with nature *en face*: the anti-mimetic means of the grid serve mimetic ends. In a sense *Mosque* embodies the contradictions of modernist art at the early stages of its devel-

opment: the antinomies of construction and depiction locked in a single focus, an order of pure relationships generating the dimensions of the real.

As might be expected, when Klee became a form-master at the Bauhaus, the constructive element came to the fore in his work. Klee painted *Architecture Red/Green (yellow-purple gradation)* in 1922 close to the time he presented the divid-ual/individual relation in his course at the Bauhaus (figure 6). Whereas *Hammamet with Mosque* was painted from the motif, in *Architecture Red/Green* Klee turns his back on nature, or in other words, the grid predominates. Because it is unlikely that Klee began with a regular division of the surface, the grid does not exist as such. Only one or two of the verticals and horizontals go from edge to edge uninterruptedly; the imaginary regular grid has been made dynamic by shiftings and subdivisions. However, the imaginary regular grid “provides a solid basis on which to consider the action in the picture as a whole and in its parts. Starting from the norm, freely chosen steps are taken leading to irregularity.”⁷⁵ The result of these deviations from the norm in *Architecture Red/Green* is a complex interplay (interrelation) of different sized planes. Smaller rhythms build up into individual parts, which in turn join larger rhythms. The movement produced by the irregular projection of the grid is further enhanced by irregular color rhythms; greens and reds heightened and muted respectively by yellow and purple.

By reducing composition to a systematic basis in which every variation from the system has expressive value, Klee created a visual text in which a simple act performed by a single element—a diagonal, for instance—embodies a wealth of associations. Two qualities of *Architecture Red/Green* and its structure incorporate architectural associations. First, in the irregular projection of the grid the verticals are closer together than the horizontals, giving rise to an overall impression of

verticality. The upright rectangles become parts of facades, piers, sides of buildings. Likewise, the curved and straight diagonals—further departures from the norm—produce arches, cornices, and even roofs. This production of meaning should be referred to Eco's discussion of the iconic sign/text: "A graphic convention allows one to transform . . . the schematic conceptual or perceptual convention which has motivated the sign."⁷⁶ The "graphic" or pictorial convention in this case is Klee's systematic approach to composition which is designed to encode the elements of a conventional conception/perception of vernacular architecture.

The space in *Architecture Red/Green* is more ambiguous than in *Hammamet with Mosque*. Larger elements seem to project, smaller ones recede; the half-arches and cornices suggest respectively front and side views. The overall movement subverts the cues which would allow the space to be read rationally. Because the image tends to flatten out ("flattened, geometricized, ordered" [Krauss]) as well as push and pull, every attempt to construct a rational space fails. Whereas *Mosque* depends on a more or less traditional topology (upper part of the field corresponding to sky and so forth), *Architecture Red/Green* dispenses with the dimensions of the real, operating on the basis of a multidimensional simultaneity. Like Picasso's *Still Life with Violin and Fruit Bowl* (1913), for example, Klee's architecture scrambles recognition codes in a flight from appearances. Klee's basic credo, "art does not reproduce the visible, but makes visible," locates him without the artistic context which established the autonomy of the iconic text. The interrelationships of different values, not the particular resemblance of the visual text to any real-world referent, create the significance of *Architecture Red/Green*.

Klee's admiration for Picasso's most recent production of collages, such as his *Still Life with Violin and Fruit Bowl*, goes back at least to 1914 when he created the collage/painting

Homage to Picasso using an oval format similar to Picasso's first collage of 1912, *Still-Life with Chair Caning*. The writings of the more penetrating art critics of the time may help us to understand the change in the mode of pictorial practice in the early twentieth century, and thus shed light on the direction that Klee's artistic development increasingly took from 1914 on.

In his Berlin lecture on Delaunay, for example, Apollinaire noted that

this art was concerned with painting new combinations of formal elements, derived not from visual reality, but from concepts. This tendency leads to a poetic kind of painting placed outside the scope of observation: . . . to produce a picture: one which, even were an effort made to understand it, would be entirely divorced from the object, i.e., the objective reality which one was seeking to present.⁷⁷

Maurice Raynal, without doubt one of the period's most perceptive critics, wrote about the exhibition *La Section d'Or* in October 1912 as "the idea of conceptually conceived painting, which has taken over from paintings of visible things."⁷⁸ He emphasizes "the principle of painting things the way one thinks of them, and not the way they are perceived by the shortsighted." He rejects descriptive or anecdotal, moralizing or sentimental, pedagogic or decorative painting. His major essay "Conception et Vision," written in August 1912, states that, in endeavoring to attain the truth, it is not simply a matter of "apparently imitating nature." Instead we must rely on those things we comprehend. Rejecting Italian Futurism and its studies of motion in painting, Raynal regarded "painting based on external perception" as insufficient. In the search for truth, he considered "conceptual notions" a means of a more adequate presentation of reality. It is only by introducing "a conceptual notion . . . that we can

imagine objects that we are unable to see. In the moment of entertaining the conceptual notion of a book I do not perceive it within a certain dimension, but with all dimensions together. If a painter succeeds in presenting an object in all its various dimensions, he is accomplishing the work of a higher order than one painted only in its visible dimensions."⁷⁹

Klee's views on the way abstraction functions support the above conception of the autonomy of the visual text:

Within the will to abstraction something appears that has nothing to do with objective reality. Free association supplies a key to the fantasy and formal significance of a picture. Yet, this world of illusion is credible. It is situated in the realm of the human.

Memory, digested experience, yields pictorial associations. What is new here is the way the real and the abstract coincide or appear together.⁸⁰

Klee's understanding of this abstraction recalls Eco's critique of the supposed similarity of the perceptual results produced by a photograph and an actual object. Eco claimed that on the basis of previous learning (memory, digested experience), two different perceptual results were viewed as "one and the same" perceptual result.⁸¹ The painter's practice does not rely on the same strict transformational rules as the photomechanical process and therefore the thread linking the two perceptual results is susceptible to attenuations and splits. Even if in *Architecture Red/Green* the perceptual result does not too closely resemble everyday coded perception of actual architecture, the real and the abstract coincide on the level of content (pictorial associations).

Interpretations, such as that offered by Christian Geelhaar, which overemphasize the constructed character of Klee's architecture-paintings, risk mistaking the nature of Klee's abstraction:

It would be too easy to interpret the colored squares simply as bonded masonry, triangles as tower roofs, crescents as domes, but such interpretations remain superficial. Like the Master Builder, the painter is striving to form a construction "capable of carrying the load."⁸²

While it is important to emphasize the construction in these works, Klee's construction process should be seen within the parameters of a general process whereby a coding correlation is proposed. The ease with which interpretations such as cornice, arch, etc, suggest themselves is telling. It points out that these constructions maintain a certain semantic link with actual architecture and the fact that Klee had achieved a mechanism communicated as much. Ignoring the coincidence of the abstract and the real on the planes of expression *and* content can only result in a superficial formal interpretation.

The breadth of meaning which Klee could incorporate into the architectural format appears full force in a late work, *Beginning Chill* (1937) (figure 7). This work is very much part of the romantic symbolism of death which filled Klee's last works. Based on the same vertical/horizontal division of the surface as *Hammamet with Mosque* and *Architecture Red/Green*, *Beginning Chill* employs this structuring principle in a different way. Six major verticals and horizontals divide the field into nine areas. In five of these areas (the four corners and the center), blues, grays, and greens predominate; in the other four, yellow, oranges, and browns. Within each of these areas various dividual rhythms build up, always in the service of creating architectural meaning. In the lower right corner of the center area, a rhomboidal lattice creates a window shutter; the middle area at the top is given over to the sweeping activity of pointed roofs; in the area to the immediate right of the center area, bright orange and yellow lozenges (the high-

est values of any in the picture) suggest decorative tile work or distant roofs. All these various elements enter into relationships with surrounding elements and forms, cohere and dissolve, open up and flatten out space. Meanings flow across the textual surface. In the lower left area a figure extends a craggy limb towards a window in what appears to be an interior space. The figure stands cut off from the outside, squeezed by the weight of the surrounding architectural activity. The colors wind down from a few sparks of fire, to ice, stone, and moss. In light of what has been said here about the individual, it is interesting that the figure is cut in half by the boundary between inside and outside. The pressure of the towering exterior crowds the individual into a constricted interior.

Here we move beyond the letter of the image. The figure, although apparently female, suggests Klee himself. This actor in the dramatic ensemble of his self has a darker resonance than the "lyric muse, chronically lovestruck" of many years earlier who "raises her eyes to heaven." In 1933, the Nazis locked Klee out of his Düsseldorf studio, forcing him to flee to his native Switzerland. By 1937, Klee's health was failing and even though his last years were among his most prolific, he would soon no longer expend his energies on such tightly ordered constructions as *Beginning Chill*.

Another architectural work, which comes after *Beginning Chill* in Klee's meticulously ordered work catalog, *Architecture in the Evening* (1937) (figure 8), depends on a much broader articulation of the surface. The grid confidently asserts itself, having completely colonized the surface in the names of construction.⁸³ The suggestion of architecture is more generalized, the significant linear deviations fewer; evening falls upon the architecture in *tempo adagio*. The resonances with Klee's stage in life are insistent.

IV

The support the title gives this work (and all discussed so far) brings up a point often stressed about Klee: the interrelation of title and work, the linguistic and iconic, in the production of meaning. One of the achievements of the Renaissance was the banishment of language from the symbolic space of the image. In the twentieth century language no longer merely flanks the boundaries of the tableau, or stands as an absent verbal text behind the iconic text; it brazenly enters symbolic space of the tableau, often tryannizing that space. The cubists invaded the tableau with random fragments of language in order to anchor their abstractions at the threshold of the intelligible. Klee's use of language, deriving from the cubist tradition, is multifaceted and deserves examination in the context of this discussion.

In *Villa R* (1919) (figure 9), the flat green *R*, a solid striding presence flanking the villa, which quietly echoes its forms, creates both a visual and phonetic identity for the scene. An *R* sound reverberates through the fantasy theater/landscape. Even though the letter seems integrally attached to the villa, it steps uneasily into the landscape, flattening the river-road which disappears into the distance, and casting no shadow as do the plants which surround it. The *R* is of a different order, a different dimension, than the rest of the scene: a dimension both linguistic and iconic. Here the letter of the image includes an image of a letter.⁸⁴

The *Vocal Fabric of the Singer Rosa Silber* (1922) (figure 10) involves a somewhat more complex interrelationship between the linguistic and the iconic. Weaving up and down over the surface of the gently articulated (phantom grid) cloth are the vowels of the Roman alphabet, *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u*, and above them two consonants, *R* and *S*. The vowels are song, airy voice, the primary tools of the singer's art. *R* and *S* function

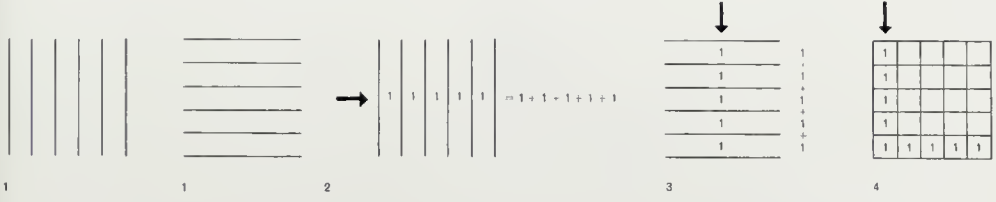


FIGURE 1. Paul Klee, *Grid*.

Diagram from Klee, *Notebooks. Volume I: The Thinking Eye*, edited by Jürg Spiller, translated by Ralph Manheim (London: Lund Humphries, 1961), p. 217. © 1989, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

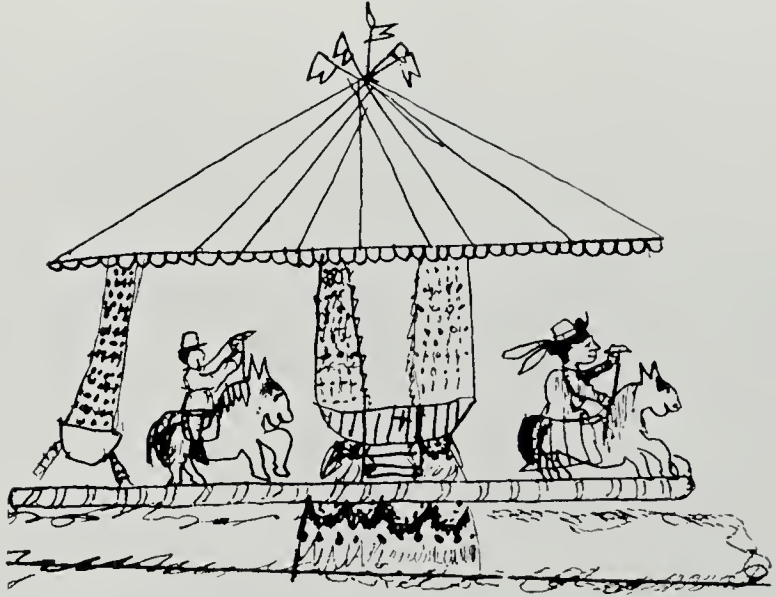


FIGURE 2. Paul Klee, *The Carousel* (1889?).
Pencil drawing on paper, 11 × 14 cm. Collection Felix Klee, Bern. © 1989,
copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

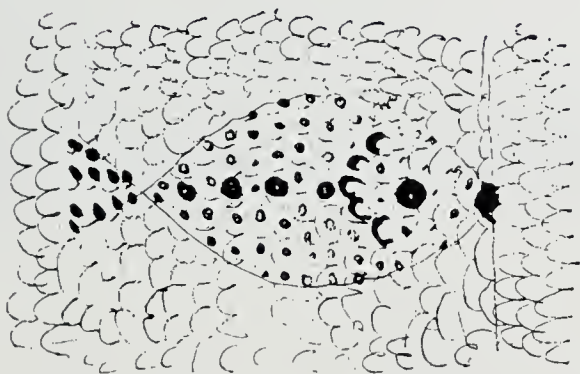
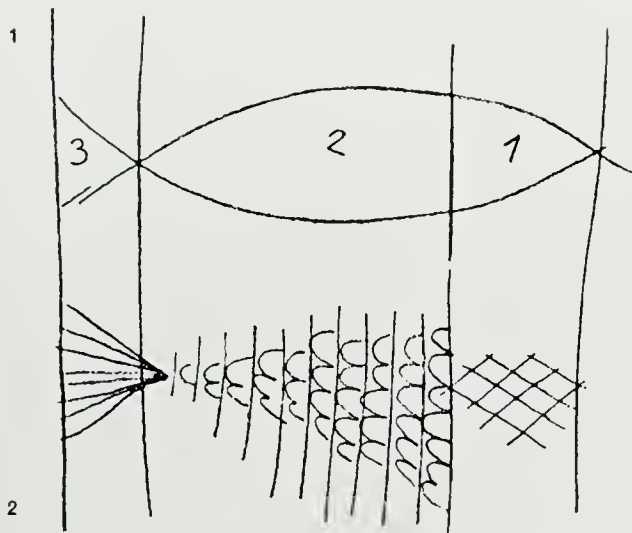


FIGURE 3. Paul Klee, *Fish*.

From Klee, *Notebooks 1*:264. Upper fish (1 seen as an individual and 2 seen dividually): pencil on paper; section: 9 × 8 cm; sheet: 28 × 22 cm. PN 5 (III) 188a (*Pedagogical Notebooks*), Paul Klee Foundation, Bern. Fish below (fish with scales): pencil on paper; section: 5.5 × 8.5 cm; sheet: 33 × 20.9 cm. PN 5 (III) 192a (*Pedagogical Notebooks*), Paul Klee Foundation, Bern. © 1989, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

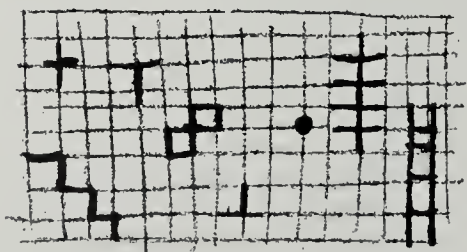
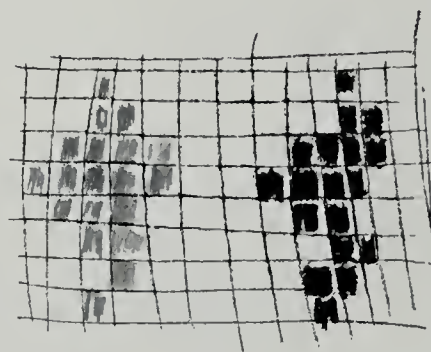
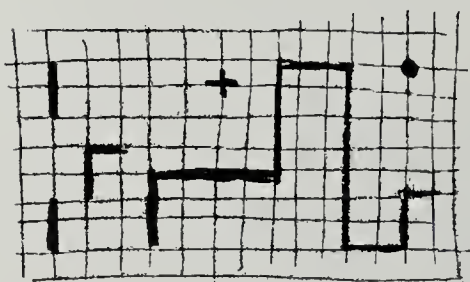
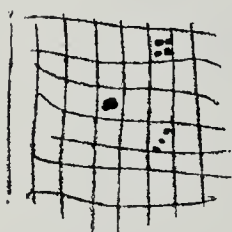
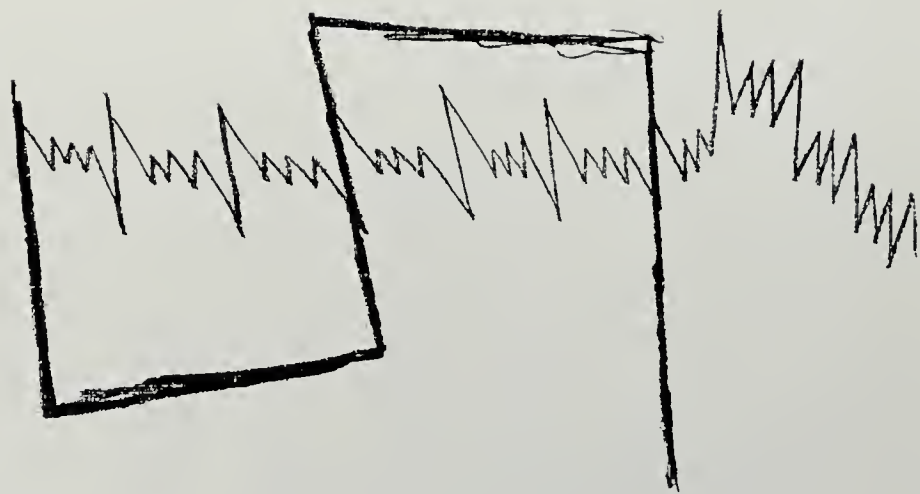


FIGURE 4. Paul Klee, *Form-giving examples with structures on individual-rhythmical base and with individual accents.*

From Klee, *Notebooks. Volume II: The Nature of Nature*, edited by Jürg Spiller, translated by Heinz Norden (London: Lund Humphries, 1961), p. 211. Pencil and color crayon on paper. Several sections of one sheet newly arranged; sheet size: 27.3 × 21.5 cm. PN 17a Man 20, 59a (*Pedagogical Notebooks*), Paul Klee Foundation, Bern. © 1989, copyright by COSMO-PRESS, Geneva.



FIGURE 5. Paul Klee, *Hammamet with Its Mosque* (1914/199).
Watercolor and pencil on paper. 20.6 × 19.4 cm. New York City, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Berggruen Klee Collection, 1984 (1984.315.4).
© 1989, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.



FIGURE 7. Paul Klee, *Beginning Chill* (1937/136).
Oil on cardboard nailed on a frame, 73×53 cm. Current ownership unknown. © 1989, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

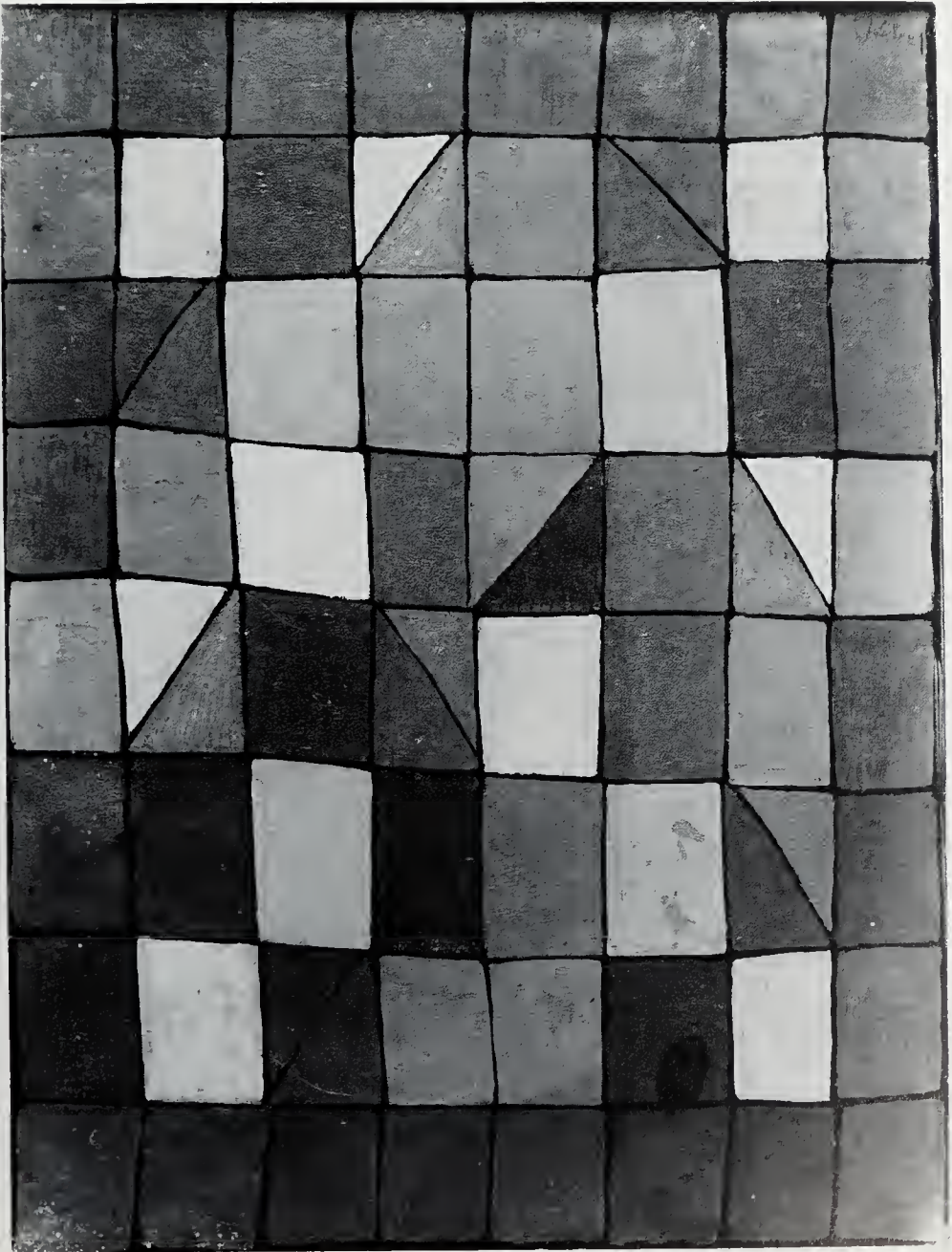


FIGURE 8. Paul Klee, *Architecture in the Evening* (1937/138).
Oil on cotton, mounted, 60.5 × 45 cm. Current ownership unknown, photograph courtesy of Galerie Louise Leiris, Paris. © 1989, copyright by COS-MOPRESS, Geneva.



FIGURE 9. Paul Klee, *Villa R* (1919/153).
Oil on cardboard, 26.5 × 22 cm. Basel, Oeffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel
Kunstmuseum. Inv. Nr. 1744. © 1989, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

in much the same way as the *R* in *Villa R*: to name, to identify the vocal fabric as that of Rosa Silber. Furthermore, the canvas support peeking through the gesso ground, the *fabric* of the image, speaks in unison with the title—"vocal-fabric"—to encode a figure of speech into the material of visual art. The vocal fabric sings not only through the inscription of letters on its surface, but through its linear, tonal, and textural modulations as well.

Seven letters float upon a vertical format. They are set, painted, upon a fabric. The loosely woven canvas and varying application of paint gives the work a highly tactile appearance. The adherence of the canvas to the backing, too, is done in such a way as to emphasize its material and constructional quality. The coloring is subtle, yet variegated. The canvas itself has been painted in vertical overlapping and fusing rectangles, some of which are dotted, cross-hatched, or lined, reversing dark on light and light on dark. The mottled background provides the ground for the floating letters. The colors of the seven letters blend with the tones of the background, but are a more intense hue of what we find in the ground.

Presented frontally, right side up as one would read them, the letters are concentrated in the center of the composition. Privileged among the seven, the initials *R* and *S* are in capitals and read left to right in the upper portion of the picture. The *S* is larger than the *R* and seems to slip from the imaginary straight line on which the *R* is placed. Above it hangs a large black dot, possibly the indication of a period. Both initials are of the same rust color and are drawn in the same ordered form. This specific manner is straight-edged and straight-lined with thickening of the letter in principal areas. The lower case letters conform to similar construction.

The line of the initials is separated by a space which is initiated, like an indentation, by a black rectangular block which continues outside of the picture plane. Falling just

below this piece are the *e*, in the same black, and the *i*, in an opposite white outlined black. The *o* and the *a* lie directly below the *RS* and are in the same rust tone while the *u* floating alone at right is in green. Taking the picture apart, with the title in mind, the letters fall into two groups: capitalized consonants and lower case vowels. Next to *RS*, the identification of *Rosa Silber*, in alphabetical order, are *a-e-i-o-u*, the five vowels. According to our rehearsed recitation of them, they are jumbled, but easily recognized. Unlike the initials, the vowels are of uniform size, approximately half the size of the initials, and do not read in sequence from left to right. What is the essential element in word construction and, consequently, speech and singing? The vowel. The vowel is the structuring force of word formation and the substance of singing. The act of singing, in fact, can be performed by vowel alone, but it cannot exist purely on consonants. The consonant itself, when made into an auditory image (our phonetic pronunciation), never gets away from the vowel (*B=be*; *L=el*, etc). In this way, the five vowels are what identify *Rosa Silber* as a singer and allow her to sing.

These same vowels signify singing apart from *Rosa Silber*, but Klee has taken the idea further by including *RS* in the same mode of representation. The painting is, after all, about one particular person, who according to Grohmann greatly impressed Klee.⁸⁵ The capitalization of *RS*, then, seem appropriate. It is in this way, that the painting operates in the self-reflexive mode, as the *RS* signifies *Rosa Silber*, *Rosa Silber* can also signify singing, which can signify *a-e-i-o-u . . .* and so forth. Klee presents two frozen signifying elements from a constant flow. Like a painting held up to a mirror, both elements (*RS* and *a-e-i-o-u*) signify concepts, but each element holds the concept within it and reflects it upon the other.

Though Klee's presentation of *Rosa Silber* seems somewhat

peculiar, it is quite conventional in itself. He defines *RS* first and foremost and defines it below. Nothing obstructs our view of it, not even its own presentation, for we are cued by the capitals and are given a straightforward, readable view.

In Klee's title the phrase "vocal fabric" calls to mind more than one concept. A fabric is something constructed, so that fabric stands here as a metaphor for a visual construction: a representation for something auditory. At the same time, vowels are the structure of, or the "fabric" for, singing. "Fabric" operates in a double sense *RS*, as identification, together with *a-e-i-o-u*, stands for the verbal representation of what is, as an entity, the fabric, the cloth, the gesso that signifies what Rosa Silber, the singer, is. On the other hand, *a-e-i-o-u* is the substance and thus the fabric of what we would hear from Rosa Silber. What we have here are the vowels as the fabric for language or sound and their physical sign as the fabric for visual representation. As the tactile quality of the painting becomes apparent to us, we sense a parallel projection from the singing of Rosa Silber. By depicting his signs as such and addressing the title to them, Klee represents in the fullest sense the voice of Rosa Silber, the substance of a singing Rosa Silber.

This graphic literalization of voice qualities should be seen in reference to what Eco calls rendering the matter of the sign-vehicle "semiotically interesting."⁸⁶ The matter of the tableau has been significantly valorized down to the lower limits of its articulation. In *Rosa Silber* the linguistic level coexists with the visual: letter, title, and visual image are set into motion to produce a unique synesthetic effect. The interdependence of these elements, their contextual solidarity—if the letters were removed, the surface handled differently, it would alter the identity of the work—makes clear the incestuous affair between the linguistic and the iconic.

The Vocal Fabric of the Singer Rosa Silber incorporates two of the functions of the linguistic in relation to the iconic: the anchoring function and the relay function.

The linguistic message's anchoring function has a "repressive" value. Language is there to fix the always polysemic image's signifieds. It answers the question: what is it? . . . The relay function implies that the image and language are in a complementary relationship: language says what the image does not express.⁸⁷

In *Rosa Silber* we can see how the polysemic image is anchored by its title. Without the title, the image would be wildly polysemic; too many meanings would converge upon the question "what is it?" With the title, its meaning is specified, "repressed." The relay function can be seen in *Rosa Silber* insofar as "the linguistic code and the optic code cohabit a space governed by the optic code alone."⁸⁸ The presence of language in the symbolic space of the image expresses the voice, something that is almost impossible without recourse to language. But, as we have noted, the image also means "voice," so perhaps it is better to say in reference to the relay function that language expresses what the image cannot express *in language*.

In *Einst dem Grau der Nacht enttaucht . . .* (1918) (figure 11)⁸⁹ the relay function predominates; images of letters inscribed in a dividual grid of colored squares contribute to the creation of the letter of the image. The complex play of meanings which the language system expresses can only be echoed schematically by the pictorial structure—the silver band in the middle of the field from which the colors and letters leap. The title is the poem which is the picture, a complex relay. The image/text reads as follows:

EINST DEM GRAU
DER NACHT

ENTTAUCHT
 DANN SCHWER
 UND TEUER
 UND STARK
 VOM FEUER
 ABENDS
 VOLL VON GOTT
 UND GEBEUGT

 NUN ATHERLINGS
 VOM BLAU
 UMSCHAUERT
 ENTSCHWEBT
 UBER FIRNEN
 ZU
 KLUGEN GESTIRNEN

The poem can be translated thus:

Once emerged/from the gray of night
 Then heavy/and dear
 and strong/with fire
 At evening/full of God/and bent.
 Now towards heaven/showered about/by blue
 Vanished/over the glaciers
 To/wise stars.

This image of *Einst dem Grau der Nacht enttaucht* . . . throws into contrast Klee's systematic articulation of the tableau and the articulation of language; the two are held in a fugitive single focus, within the armature of the grid. As such, *Einst dem Grau* condenses in a single figure the two major themes we have explored: the articulation of the linguistic and the iconic. The tension between the two in this work suggests the representation of a struggle: the impossible desire of the iconic for the linguistic and vice versa.

Klee's dividual articulation in *Einst dem Grau* adapts itself well to the structure of letters (the hand which draws the letter

makes the image). The tableau's potential infinity of articulations are reduced to an order of pure relationship closely allied to that of language. A letter in this image can suddenly become a colored square divided horizontally (*E*) vertically (*T*) or diagonally (*N*). The colors jam the reading of the letters, as if consuming language in the process of trying to become like it. The tableau no longer opens onto nature, only onto itself. Lying parallel to reality, ever more arbitrary and autonomous, it tries to seduce that truly autonomous entity, language, by wrapping itself in the coordinates of a grid. But the attempt leaves everything in flux: words and images do not cohere; they cancel one another out in a way that we may never truly fathom.

Perhaps only in those cases where an order of pure relationships, a massive repetition of *values* of similar magnitude has been imposed on the tableau, is it proper to speak of the coincidence of linguistic and iconic articulation. But in *Einst dem Grau*, where such a case occurs, the dissociation of the iconic is clearly apparent. So we have to wonder about strictly transposing the structure of natural language onto the tableau, whether such an operation does not obscure the order of language which functions in the tableau.

For Klee, reaching the level of the perceptible, making a visual text, was always a matter of some form of articulation, even if undiscernible and asystematic. The statement from his "Creative Credo" (1918) that "abstract formal elements are put together like numbers or letters to make concrete beings or abstract things; in the end a formal cosmos is achieved."⁹⁰ exemplifies this. Cosmos is order, opposed to chaos, but it seems to be achieved here by reading itself to a closed order of distinctive features.

To define a universally valid *langue* for painting escapes our capacities. Even if we can examine isolated systems and

the speech acts, the visual texts, they generate, we are unable to reduce painting to a combination of distinctive features. At best we can say, searching for syllables in the distances of sleep, the painter corrals them within the constraints of the tableau, giving us the many letters of the image, which we have always already gone beyond.

NOTES

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke*, edited by Karl Schechta (Munich: C. Hanser, 1954–1956; 3 vols.), 3:311.

2. Jacques Lacan, "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious," in Richard de George and Fernande de George, eds., *The Structuralists* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972), p. 290.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 290–91.

4. John Coward and Rosalind Ellis, *Language and Materialism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 1.

5. E. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 87.

6. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, translated by Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), p. 16.

7. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 7.

8. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 16.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 11.

11. Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. viii-ix.

12. Jonathan Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 126.

13. Braque, as quoted in *ibid.*, p. 128.

14. Paul Klee, "Creative Credo," in *Notebooks. Volume I: The Thinking Eye*, edited by Jürg Spiller, translated by Ralph Manheim (London: Lund Humphries, 1961), pp. 77–78.
15. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, p. 7.
16. Julia Kristeva, "The System and the Speaking Subject," in *The Tell-Tale Sign: A Survey of Semiotics*, edited by Thomas A. Sebeok (Lisse: Peter de Ridder Press, 1975), p. 47.
17. Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language*, p. viii.
18. Coward and Ellis, *Language and Materialism*, p. 12.
19. Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language*, p. 22.
20. Coward and Ellis, *Language and Materialism*, p. 12.
21. Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, p. 25.
22. Louis Hjelmslev, as quoted in Paul Ricoeur, "Structure, Word, Event," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 110.
23. Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), p. 117.
24. Hjelmslev, as quoted in Ricoeur, "Structure, Word, Event," p. 110.
25. Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language*, p. 33.
26. Lacan, "The Insistence of the Letter," pp. 291–92.
27. For a critique of the "arbitrariness" of the signifier, see Roman Jakobson, *Six Lectures on Sound and Meaning*, translated by John Mepham (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978), p. 51; Adam Schaff, "De la spécificité du signe verbal," in *Language et Connaissance. Suivi de six essais sur la philosophie du langage*, translated by Claire Brendel (Paris: Editions Anthropos, 1969), pp. 319–36; Adam Schaff, *Introduction to Semantics*, translated by Olgierd Wojtasiewicz (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1962), pp. 76–84.
28. Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure*, p. 15.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Ricoeur, "Structure, Word, Event," p. 110.
31. Coward and Ellis, *Language and Materialism*, p. 13.
32. Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language*, p. 145.
33. Lacan, "The Insistence of the Letter," p. 295.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 292.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 297.

36. Kristeva, as defined by Hubert Damisch, "Eight Theses for (or Against?) a Semiology of Painting," in *Enclitic* 3(1):2, 1979.

37. Lacan, "The Insistence of the Letter," pp. 295–96.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 296.

39. As clearly Klee himself was aware. See his letter to Lily Klee of March 22, 1916: "Such poems, mostly drawn linear with a pen, which I want to publish one day in book form, you should not give to Goltz. I want to keep these works for myself for the moment." In Felix Klee, ed., *Briefe an die Familie* (Cologne: DuMont Schauberg, 1979), 2:794.

40. Damisch, "A Semiology of Painting," p. 3.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

42. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, p. 174.

43. See Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, p. 122.

44. See Klaus Oehler, "An Outline of Peirce's Semiotics," in Martin Krampen, Klaus Oehler, Roland Posner, and Thure von Uexküll, eds., *Classics of Semiotics* (New York: Plenum Press, 1987), pp. 1–21.

45. Peirce, as quoted in Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, p. 122.

46. *Ibid.*

47. Saussure, as quoted in Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure*, p. 99; see also Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 68 (for original text, see Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique generale*, edited by Tullio de Mauro [Paris: Payot, 1986], p. 100); Mauro's remarks on "convention" and "arbitrariness," *ibid.*, p. 442.

48. See n. 27 for a critique of the "arbitrariness" of the signifier.

49. Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, p. 118.

50. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, p. 310.

51. Not to mention *Carousel* in which Klee's later style—repetitive structures, balanced constructions, fantasy—lies latent.

52. Paul Klee, *Diaries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), p. 146.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 237.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 287.

56. Klee, *Notebooks*, vols. I and II.

57. Klee, *Diaries*, pp. 176–77.

58. Paul Klee, *Pedagogical Sketchbook*, translated by Sibyl Moholy-Nagy (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), p. 23.

59. Klee, *Notebooks*, I:217–22.

60. Paul Klee, *Notebooks. Volume II: The Nature of Nature*, edited by Jürg Spiller, translated by Heinz Norden (London: Lund Humphries, 1961), p. 293.

61. *Ibid.*, II: 229.

62. *Ibid.*, II: 264.

63. *Ibid.*, II: 238.

64. *Ibid.*, II: 264.

65. *Ibid.*, II: 264–65.

66. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, p. 206; see also the chapter on the reception of the *Cours* in 1916, as presented by Thomas M. Scheerer, *Ferdinand de Saussure* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1980), pp. 30–36.

67. Klee would not have needed to read Saussure, though it is most likely that he did, since from 1917 onwards we find an increasing number of paintings and drawings which deal with the intricate relationships between letters, words, and numbers and pictorial structure (see his poem-paintings). Through a number of his close friends in Bern, scholars in literary history, Klee could have had access also to Georg von der Gabelentz' *Die Sprachwissenschaft. Ihre Aufgaben, Methoden und bisherigen Ergebnisse*, 2d ed. (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1901), the classic study on linguistic theory, one which is widely regarded as being extremely influential for Saussure's results, since it points out for example the difference between *langue* and *parole*; see, e.g., R. Hiersche, *Ferdinand de Saussures langue-parole-Konzeption und sein Verhältnis zu Dürckheim und von der Gabelentz* (Innsbruck, 1972).

68. Klee, *Notebooks*, I: 265–66.

69. *Ibid.*, II: 37.

70. *Ibid.*, II: 283.

71. *Ibid.*, II: 32.

72. Note the tendency of the vertical band on the right to detach itself from the rest of the composition, as described above.

73. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, p. 192.

74. Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October* 9: 51, 1979.
75. Klee, *Notebooks*, I: 235.
76. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, p. 194.
77. Edward Fry, *Der Kubismus* (Köln: DuMont Schauberg, 1966), p. 120.
78. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
79. Maurice Raynal, "Conception and Vision," in *ibid.*, p. 95.
80. Klee, *Notebooks*, I: 262, 291.
81. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, p. 193.
82. C. Geelhaar, *Paul Klee and the Bauhaus* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973), p. 48.
83. Although by no means for the first time in Klee's oeuvre. See *Architecture (yellow-violet stepped cubes)* (1922), *Resonance of the Southern Flora* (1927). This latter work indicates how the regular grid can be individualized solely through color movement and how the grid format can encode other than architectural contents.
84. For a fuller analysis of this painting, see Joseph Koerner, "Paul Klee and the Image of the Book," pp. 45–84 below.
85. Will Grohmann, *Paul Klee* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1955), p. 48.
86. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, p. 266.
87. Michel Rio, "Images & Words," *New Literary History* 7(3): 509, Spring 1976.
88. *Ibid.*
89. Essential for an understanding of the following thoughts on *Einst dem Grau der Nacht enttaucht . . .* is the careful and elaborate description of this watercolor, a product of my graduate seminar on Paul Klee in 1983 (University of California, Berkeley). See Koerner, pp. 56–65 below.
90. Klee, "Creative Credo," in *Notebooks* I: 79.

Paul Klee and the Image of the Book

J O S E P H L E O K O E R N E R

I

What sort of sign has Paul Klee constructed in his 1937 painting entitled *Zeichen in Gelb* (*Signs in Yellow*) (figure 12)? On one hand, Klee has fashioned a pattern of yellow and orange planes that covers the whole surface of the composition up to the gray framing border. Although these rectangular forms vary in size and are not arranged in any strict order, the horizontal and vertical lines that their borders describe, and that often carry through the painting, structure the picture's space. On the other hand, here and there, outlining and sometimes entering into the space of the colored shapes are black linear figures. While these hieroglyphic forms assume a variety of shapes, from the simple dot or line to the complex figure, say, at the center of the picture's upper edge, they seem all to speak the same language. In 1922 Klee wrote of his own art: "For the most part we deal with combined forms. In order to understand combined forms one must dismember

them."¹ *Zeichen in Gelb* combines black figures and colored planes in its composition, and it is difficult to discern which of these two distinct pictorial elements rules. For instance, the black lines seem in certain places to accommodate themselves to the structure formed by the planes, while elsewhere they appear to subvert the rectilinear structure of the painting: an edge of a colored plane is only curved where there is a curved line delimiting it. And while at first sight it seems that many planes stand free from any contact with a black figure, closer observation reveals that hardly a single plane is not somewhere bounded or at least touched by a black line. (The two squares that are not quite bordered by a line actually stretch out at their appropriate edge to establish some contact.) One of our pleasures as viewers resides in observing and testing out this conceit: watching how the yellow patches are indeed caught in the apparently loose and random web of black lines allows us to experience a secret reciprocity between apparently disparate systems. Like the relationship between the dividual and individual elements of a painting as formulated by Klee himself, the two pictorial components of *Zeichen in Gelb* appear to strike a "compromise"² in structuring and being structured by one another. Klee goes further than this, though, in sharpening the dialectic between the hieroglyphic lines and their colored ground.

Klee entitled his composition *Zeichen in Gelb*, rendering the strict polarity between figure and ground unstable. The painting might be read as an arrangement of black "signs" in a yellow field, or, conversely, the true signs might be *written in yellow paint* and are only separated or interrupted by the accompanying black shapes. *Zeichen in Gelb*, or *Yellow Signs* as it is usually called in English, asserts that the sign exists exactly where the "written" forms (the black hieroglyphs) are *not*, or better, that the sign emerges only diacritically, through the necessary combination of figure and ground in which

each term is dependent on the other. Significance becomes located in the interruption between what we thought were written signs, between lines, letters, words, or books.³

Klee's overturning of figures and ground, letter and page, as it were, finds a useful parallel in the Jewish mystical tradition and its meditation on the origin of writing. According to the talmudic *aggadah*, prior to creation the whole Torah was written in black figures on white fire. Later interpretations from the thirteenth century onward came to regard the white fire as the true text of the Torah. It follows then that the authentic written Law has become completely invisible to human vision and is concealed now in the white parchment of the Torah scroll, the black handwritten letters being nothing more than a commentary on this vanished text.⁴ Like Klee's *Yellow Signs*, this legend brings into question the ground against which signs are readable. Writing becomes a play of presence and absence: words and letters are only visible and therefore meaningful in their *difference* from the surface upon which they are written. In the Jewish story of the white fire, as in Klee's painting, we see that where we thought we saw a figure on a ground, we find that ground is itself a figure or a sign.⁵

It is easy to locate such meditations within contemporary theories of the sign. Since Ferdinand de Saussure, language and writing are regarded as being diacritical, as being meaningful insofar as they are expressed within a relation, i.e., between signifier and signified, *langue* and *parole*, diachrony and synchrony, etc. It is in the play of differences that reading and interpretation becomes possible. The story of the white and black fire refers specifically to the practice of interpretation. What we read, the black letters of the Torah, constitutes only a *commentary* on a hidden text. It is interesting that the overturning of figure and ground in Klee is also instantiated in a form of commentary or writing outside the image. For it

is the title, a text absent from, yet informing the image, that forces us to read the painting as a composition of yellow signs.

It may seem strange that we should speak of Klee's composition in terms that are more appropriate for a discussion of writing or the book than for an interpretation of a painted image. Yet Klee's juxtaposition of signs against a neutral ground (or rather, of significant ground against sign-like shapes) is perhaps closer to the structure of writing than it is either to "nature" or to the tradition of illusionistic painting in the West. In nature we do not privilege one object as being more real or more significant than another, except insofar as nature itself is regarded as a book. And in Western painting since the Renaissance, figure and ground, or rather "objects" placed in the foreground and "objects" located further back in illusionistic space, tend not to constitute two separate spheres of signification but inhabit merely unique positions in the *res extensa*. Cartesian "continuous" space that formed the basis or ground for the pictorial tradition since the Renaissance gives way in Klee's art to a painting composed through the deliberate combination of two discontinuous systems—black linear figures and colored planes. While such a move might be relatively new within the history of painting, Klee's composition and the issues it raises have resonance within the very long tradition of discourse about the nature of writing and the book. It is within this discourse that we shall situate our discussion of Paul Klee's "signs."

II

The question of the book as a metaphor or cultural idea has assumed an important place within contemporary philosophy and critical theory. The book has not only come to be regarded as *the* exemplary vehicle for the transmission of



FIGURE 6. Paul Klee, *Architecture Red-Green (yellow-purple gradations)* (1922/19).

Oil on canvas with red watercolor border around edges of canvas, laid down on cardboard mat. 34.4 × 40.3 cm; with border: 37.9 × 42.8 cm. New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Collection Société Anonyme (1941.533). © 1989, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.



FIGURE 12. Paul Klee, *Signs in Yellow* (1937).

Pastel on burlap, 96.3 × 50.6 cm. Basel, Collection Beyeler. © 1990, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.



FIGURE 10. Paul Klee, *The Vocal Fabric of the Singer Rosa Silber* (1922/126).

Gouache and gesso on canvas, 51.5 × 42.5 cm. (irregular). Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Resor. © 1989, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

Einmal dem Grau der Nacht enttaucht
Abends voll im Gell und gebeugt / dem überbrugs von blau umarmet, / entschwinde
über Finnen, zu Klugen geschlossen.



FIGURE 11. Paul Klee, *Once emerged from the gray of the night . . .* (1918/17).

Watercolor, pen drawing (in India ink) over pencil on paper cut into two parts with strip of silver paper between, mounted on cardboard. Paul Klee Foundation, Museum of Fine Arts, Bern. © 1989, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.



FIGURE 16. Paul Klee, *Composition with Windows* (1919).
Oil over pen and India ink, varnished, on cardboard, 50.4 × 38.3 cm. Bern,
Kunstmuseum, Paul Klee Foundation (1919.156). © 1989, copyright by COS-
MOPRESS, Geneva.

culture. From the early writings of Maurice Blanchot to the work of Jacques Derrida, the dismantling of the form of the book, enacted within radical literary forms in which such dismantling is itself expressed, has also become a primary locus of the critique of culture as a whole.⁶ In the "Absence of the Book," Blanchot writes:

Culture is linked to the book. The book as repository and receptacle of knowledge is identified with knowledge. The book is not only the book that sits in libraries—that labyrinth in which all combinations of forms, words, and letters are rolled up in volumes. The book is the Book. Still to be written, always already written, always paralysed by reading, the book constitutes the condition of every possibility of reading and writing.⁷

The preoccupation with the question of the book is not limited to French philosophers and their Anglo-American adherents. E. H. Curtius devoted a central chapter of his monumental study *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* to the history of the book as a symbol.⁸ Tracing the image of the book from its inauspicious beginnings in ancient Greece to its apotheosis in Dante and the High Middle Ages, Curtius demonstrates how the book in figurative language not only represents different writers' regard for the medium of their art, but also reflects the changing way a culture regards itself and its own production. The optimism of, say, a Dante in believing that his own book can express the whole corpus of human knowledge is mirrored in the closing image of the *Divine Comedy*, in which the entirety of Creation and history reveals itself to be contained in a single book: "In the depth [of eternal Light], I saw contained, bound by love in one volume [*legato con amore in un volume*], that which is scattered in leaves through the universe" (*Paradise* XXXIII:85–88).⁹ The book is that wherein the diversity of nature is unified into a single, all-encompassing structure.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe observed the loss of the book as a viable symbol, and saw in this loss a symptom of cultural decay. In the *Maxims and Reflections* he laments that whereas in Shakespeare's time, the book was still able to be regarded as something sacred and therefore worthy of being used as a trope in poetic language, today "we put everything between covers [*Wir . . . broschieren jetzt alles*] and are hard pressed to respect either the bindings or the content."¹⁰ The book, itself the primary receptacle of culture, can mirror in its physical form the spiritual state of that culture.

And yet, the vigor of a civilization cannot always be measured by how highly it values its books. Goethe himself, in a letter from 1769 to Friederike Oeser, juxtaposes bookish knowledge to knowledge acquired more freely through the confrontation with nature: "Upon simple paths I come to the knowledge of truth—often as far and further than others with all their library knowledge [*Bibliothekarwissenschaft*]."¹¹ To read from the Book of Nature is to reject the notion that knowledge is mediated only through human writing; it is to turn from the blind and belated culture of books to an unmediated source of truth. And yet the metaphor of nature as a "book" belies how the book, which must be read, has not only appropriated the whole sphere of culture as its province, but has subsumed the whole of nature as well.

As Gabriel Josipovici has shown for literature,¹² and as Hans Blumenberg has shown for philosophy and natural science,¹³ the image of the book defines the way man has (or does not have) access to meaning in the world. It is not within the scope of this essay to consider the complex history of the metaphor of the book. It might, however, be helpful to indicate a few important stations in this history as a way of establishing a context for Klee's particular vision of the book.

1. Central to the Christian tradition from Augustine to Hugh of St. Victor and St. Bonaventure is the notion that God's creation consists of two books: the Book of Nature, or the universe, and *the Book*, or the Bible. After the Fall, human beings were unable to read the signs of nature, and so God wrote Scripture to replace this lost source of truth. If an individual assumes a proper attitude toward the world, however, he or she can regard nature itself as a scripture that is sufficiently meaningful. The world, like the Bible, is a sign left by its Creator which enables His noblest creation, the human being, to find its way back to grace.

2. The rise of modern science, enacted within the thought of Nicholas Cusanus, Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler, is marked by a rejection of bookish learning in favor of an idea of the direct observation of nature.¹⁴ Nature comes to be regarded as a perfectly legible text in which everything has its proper place, its beginning, middle, and end.¹⁵

3. The German romantics, most notably Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel, regarded the visible world as a hieroglyph or sign that, if properly deciphered, could lead the beholder to God. In *Die Lehrlinge zu Sais* from 1797, for example, Novalis writes how one may find in the forms of the physical world (forms which were then being discovered and explored by the natural sciences, with their own particular belief in the readability of the world) the key to a magical writing or *Wunderschrift*.¹⁶ To read the deeper significance of the world's script, the sciences must combine with art to create a new *gnosis*.

4. Hegel appropriates the whole mystery of nature and its significance, subsuming it as one element among many that are to be enclosed in his own unfinished *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*.¹⁷ The *Encyclopedia* seeks not only to contain all organic and rational knowledge and to convey the

unity of this knowledge through the singularity of the book; it also aspires both to contain the knowable world in its structure, and, in accordance with its idea of totality, to give birth to itself.

5. Stéphane Mallarmé's "Book" or *Livre* claims to be, like the romantic encyclopedia, all-encompassing, but also acknowledges that, by definition, it can never come into being. The *Livre* represents an idea of a complete representation, *the* map of words as well as *the* mark of the mapmaker, around which all Mallarmé's literary efforts revolved, as around a fictional center.¹⁸ His poems and prose works are fragments that, as he wrote to Verlaine, serve only to prove that this notional Book exists, "and . . . I have known what I have not been able to do."¹⁹ Everything aspires to the condition of the *Livre*: "At bottom, you see, the world is made to end up as a beautiful book."²⁰

It would be good here to recall Klee's words in his 1924 lecture to the Kunstverein in Jena:

Sometimes I dream of a work on a vast scope, spanning all the way across element, object, content, and style. This is sure to remain a dream, a vague possibility. . . . We must go on looking for it. We have found parts, but not the whole.²¹

Klee's incomplete, uncompletable project, like Mallarmé's *Livre*, suggests an ideal of wholeness or totality that, while still haunting modernist art, exists only as a fiction against which actual works of art assume a fragmentary appearance. This notion of a totality outside of nature is founded on the mythic dimensions of the Book as it was formulated in Judeo-Christian theology and as it was appropriated by secular philosophy in the form of the encyclopedia. Now, however, the book cannot hold the Book. Dante's closing vision of *un volume* that is, in a sense, a vision of the closure of his own book, gives way to an idea of writing that always remains

outside the book.²² It is at this point that the metaphor of the book as something that can “contain” or embody knowledge reaches a crisis in its history; the book, as it were, can no longer be a *metaphor* at all. And if Goethe is right about the link between a culture and the way that culture can or cannot metaphorize its books, then the crisis expressed in Mallarmé’s extravagant *Livre* will resound through Western culture’s self-understanding.

Modern culture is haunted by a ghostly paradox in the image of the book. On one hand, the book no longer is capable of holding the totality which is its claim. The book becomes an object among other objects, mute and material. On the other hand, the book expands to become inescapable, creating a culture and a universe that cannot extricate itself from the tyranny of writing. Though engaged in an ongoing critique of the book, modern culture thinks of itself as being tragically embedded in the book. Far from being an object among objects, the book inscribes objects with its signature, so that where we thought there was nature, now there is only writing—a grim version of the Duke’s happy words in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*: “And this our life . . . finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in the stones” (II, i, 15–17).

One form which modern meditations on the book has assumed is a tendency to stress the “thingness” of the book, as if by seeing the book in its “exterior deployment”²³ as object in the world one could measure its power and its limits. Mallarmé’s *Coup de dés* destabilizes the notion that meaning is located “beyond” or outside of the presence of the text by creating a poem in which the material elements of writing—the paper and print—produce the effect of the poem in a new way. Like the rabbinical myth of the significance of the Torah written in white fire, the text of *Coup de dés* is suspended on the abyss (“l’Abime”) of the white page which

is as much or more of a significant "text" than are the printed words.²⁴ Perhaps the greatest example of a sustained confrontation with the question of writing in this century is James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. The punning, neologistic text of this massive work is always bringing into question the relationship between the printed page and the construction of meaning on the part of the reader. At one point in the book, a narrator with the voice of a scholar describes a certain manuscript (a parody of the *Wake* itself) that has been discovered in a junk heap outside of Dublin. Joyce illustrates the instability or errancy of the scholar's text by printing the acrobatics of the text's letters within the actual text of *Finnegans Wake*: the upside down and reverse *F*'s intrude on the written discourse of the scholar as he attempts to make out the manuscript's text. And yet the scholar desperately tries to separate his own writing from the wandering of the letter. He writes of the "eff," "aich," and "toppelfoul,"²⁵ as if to name the letter outright would be to admit that the text which talks "about" writing is itself writing, and therefore is also capable of errancy and subversion of its own authority. Thus in seeming to hide the materiality of writing, Joyce exposes the fabric of his text: the punning book of the *Wake* demonstrates in its own text a language always richer than knowledge, a language contained in the autonomy of the written sign.

The potential concreteness of writing has, in recent years, strayed out of the domain of literary language into the field of philosophy. Derrida carries out his critique of the "logocentrism" of Western thought by producing texts which call attention to their own material basis. In his "anti-book" entitled *Glas*, he juxtaposes on each page various texts by himself, Hegel, and Jean Genet, attempting thereby to show how philosophical texts (with Hegel symbolizing the culmination of a tradition stretching, as Franz Rosenzweig put it, from Ionia

to Jena) are dependent on or trapped in the form of the book.²⁶

In contemporary discourse on the question of the book, one arena of cultural practice has received rather little attention: namely, pictorial representations of the book in twentieth-century art.²⁷ The problem of how modern art does or does not come to grips with the book as symbol is, of course, a hugely complex phenomenon, one that involves, among other things, changing ideas about the so-called "sister arts" (poetry and painting) in this century, as well as the more general question of the relation between language and physical reality. One might want to ask, for example, whether a separation of the visual image from the culture of books is really asked for by the art of the twentieth century itself. The line, say, between the *Calligrammes* of Guillaume Apollinaire and the roughly contemporary poem-paintings from 1916 by Klee is thin indeed.²⁸ And yet it would be a mistake to simply regard this blurring of the boundaries between image and text as a fulfillment of the Horatian dictum *ut pictura poesis*. For Klee, at least, the book might represent the *idea* of readability and totality which haunts the image, yet the foundations of this idea are always already undercut by the material form in which the book becomes visible in the painting. What follows is an attempt to work out how, within five paintings by Klee, the book enters into the painting, and how thereby the word and the image are transformed.

III

As early as his 1914 painting *Teppich der Erinnerung* (*Carpet of Memory*), Klee played with the possibility of including linguistic signs—letters, punctuation, etc.—in his compositions. In 1916 he produced a series of paintings which

were themselves texts: a Chinese poem in translation, for example, would be "painted" in a manner that both rendered the text readable and illustrated the poem's content or mood. This project reached its most complex expression in Klee's 1918 watercolor entitled *Einst dem Grau der Nacht enttaucht . . .* (*Once Emerged from the Gray of Night*) now in Bern. In this small composition we see a work that is at once a book and a painting.

Einst dem Grau has a double structure (figure II). At the top of the painting, Klee has inscribed the text of the poem that within the painting he has composed in lines and colors. The inscription, written in black on white, frames the colorful painting, while the painting itself "contains" or frames the text of the inscription. Taken as a whole, Klee's poem-painting, a modern experiment in the *ut pictura poesis*, expresses the difficult, shifting relationship between image and poem, picture and book, as it were.²⁹ As beholders, we must engage in a double task: we must learn to "read" the painting as constitutive of a poem, and, more difficult, we must learn to still regard the poem as a painting, as a material thing with its own significant structure.

The painting itself is suitably *double* in its composition. It consists of two rectangular color planes separated by a silver strip of paper. Thus divided, the image forces us to shift our glance between the upper and lower sections. The silver strip resists our eye, causing our vision to glance off its shining surface like light on metal. Klee once wrote that "silver vibrates from dark to very light, and is also determined through movement. . . . Metallic values are remarkable pictorial medias."³⁰ The silver in *Einst dem Grau* sets our eye in motion between the two halves of the painting's double structure.

The two halves are formally alike. They consist of patches of color organized in neat, horizontal rows of equal widths. The horizontal rule remains always inviolable. Such strict

horizontal organization has its "natural" model in the book or printed poem. Indeed this structure is echoed in the inscribed poem at the top of the sheet. Like a pupil writing in an exercise book, Klee has drawn faint lines to organize and contain his ordinary handwriting. The horizontal axis of the painting is further emphasized by the oblong format of the two rectangles and by the silver paper that separates them.

The horizontal rows are divided into colored squares which create a loose grid or checkerboard effect. Where there is no letter, the square has its own solid color. Wherever a letter appears framed in a square (every letter except the *W* is contained within a single square), the unity of color is broken. The lines that make up the letter mark off separate planes of different shapes, each of which can have its own color. Klee is not rigidly consistent in this matter: the upper and lower halves of the *H*, for example, and the left and right sides of the *T* are rendered in the same color, while each of the three planes marked off by the letter *R* has its own color. Nor are the same letters treated in the same way throughout: the *B*, for instance, is variously represented in two and three tones. And, of course, Klee is free to write each letter in whatever colors suits his purposes in that particular place in the composition. The principle of improvisation at work in *Einst dem Grau* may be a vehicle for Klee's expression, yet it threatens the readability of the poem-painting. In writing, the letters of the alphabet are legible insofar as they repeat and preserve the same recognizable shape. Klee lets his letters express themselves as individual, unique forms, as well as imitating the conventional shapes of the alphabet. The drama between text and image, expressed in that juxtaposition of the conventional writing at the top of the page and the poem-painting itself, is replayed in each letter of Klee's composition. Each written mark struggles between its re-presentational function as letter in a readable text, and its expressive or presenta-

tional function as part of a pictorial image.³¹ For when taken as a whole, the patches of color that constitute the poem create a structure on the level of the painting as a whole. The center of the top rectangle is dominated by warm tones (reds, oranges, and yellows) with cool colors collecting around the periphery. The lower rectangle is dominated by cool colors (greens and blues) spreading out from the center, with warm colors checkering the edges. There are, on the whole, more jarring color contrasts in the upper rectangle than in the lower, where the colors seem more ordered—due, perhaps, to the greater number of empty, solid squares there. If “read” from top to bottom, *Einst dem Grau* thus proceeds loosely through the spectrum: violet, red, orange, yellow, green, and blue. (It is interesting that Klee, in his own writings on the color wheel, makes the center of his “12-part [color] circle” the color gray; the “Grau” of the poem “Einst dem Grau . . .” and the silver of the dividing band of the painting itself may have reference to this organizing principle.) The improvisations around this basic structure serve often to balance the composition, as in the isolated red points around the C in the word “entschwebt” and in the few greens and blues in the center of the top rectangle.

In viewing the arrangement of colors in Klee’s painting, we must let our gaze roam freely about the surface of the image, finding echoes and correspondences and discovering therein a pictorial structure. At the same time, by virtue of its being a poem as well as an image, *Einst dem Grau* has a predetermined structure laid down by the conventions of reading. To read the poem in Klee’s painting, our eyes must make that familiar abecedarian journey from the left of the sheet to the right, proceeding in an orderly fashion through the painting. When viewed in this manner, the painting’s overall structure becomes bound up with the movement and meaning of the

poem. Here is the poem as it is written in the inscription at the top of the sheet:

Einst dem Grau der Nacht enttaucht / Dann schwer und
teuer / und stark vom Feuer / Abends voll von Gott und
gebeugt // Nun ätherlings vom Blau umschauert, / ent-
schwebt über Firner / zu klugen Gestirnen.

[Once emerged from the gray of night / Then heavy and
costly / and strong with fire / In the evening full of God
and bent // Now towards heaven showered about with
blue, / Carried away over the glacier / to the wise stars.]

The poem is divided into two parts, each with its own movement and temporality. Klee expresses this caesura pictorially by cutting the poem-painting in two just where the first series of three sentences or phrases ends and the second movement begins. It is interesting how in the poem, as it is modestly inscribed above the painting, Klee chooses not to put a period between sentences, using rather bars to denote verse lines and a double bar to signify the end of the movement. This casual notation takes on epic proportions in the two-edged bar of silver paper that divides the painting. The first lines of the poem move through three successive "moments," establishing the sense that the poem, and with it the painting, describes a process and a transformation. The three temporal qualifiers which begin each sentence or phrase—"Einst" [once], "Dann" [then], and "Abends" [in the evening]—posit a movement from beginning to middle to end. Because they lack both a subject and a verb, the phrases describe, for no specific subject at no specific time, a *pure process*: the passage of a day, the life of an individual or epoch, or what you will.

The painting embodies this process in its colors, taking advantage of hints within the poem. "Einst dem Grau/ der

Nacht / enttaucht" is painted suitably, in gray colors. Here and there, lighter tones begin to appear, heralding the emergence from darkness. Earlier we suggested how the letters in Klee's composition break the otherwise solid color with their lines. The letters of the opening words seem not only to "represent" the coming of light as they speak of an *Enttauchen* [emergence] from darkness, but in the way they disturb the rhythm of the squares, they invoke light by breaking the monotony of their surroundings. Klee's painted words have the power of the fiat, the divine *logos* that says, "Let there be light" and there *is* light. The painting grows brighter and warmer with the day, its light colors changing from pale yellow to hectic red. In "Dann schwer/ und teuer/ und stark/ von Feuer," the middle of the day or life is marked mostly by reds and oranges. With the coming of evening ("Abends / voll von Gott") the tones become more subdued again.

In all these correspondences between word and image, the possibility of overreading is always present, if not invited. The word "Abends" has, for example, a dark *E* at its center which we could easily read as a tonal analogy to the darkness of night. What do we do, though, about the yellows in "Abend," or the greens and yellows in "Blau," for that matter? Perhaps we must at present just go on cheerfully with our overreading, hoping at least to see in our failed encounter with the image the very caesura that Klee presents in his painting, that is, the tension between word and picture, book and painting.

The second sentence of the poem begins with "Nun," a temporal qualifier that lets the poem's drama unfold in the now of its utterance. "Nun" plunges us into the absolute present, making all that has gone before, that whole process from "Einst" to "Abends," seem past or distant. The break between the unspecified time in the first part of the poem ("Einst") and the deictic discourse that begins the second is represented by the silver strip in Klee's composition, the "re-

markable" medium of representation that reflects and resists the gaze. The silver marks yet another opposition in the poem, for the threshold which we have crossed is that of death itself. "Nun ätherlings" represents, among other things, a movement into the present as transfiguration through death. Whatever is the real "subject" of the poem is now carried towards the wise stars. The various double structures in Klee's composition (e.g., word and image, written poem and poem-painting, opposed rectangles of color above and below the silver bar, etc.) have a resonance *now*, a resonance in the relation of life to death.

It is interesting that the blue into which the subject of the poem soars is not something "outside" that is imagined as destination; rather, it is a presence that "covers" the subject: "Nun ätherlings / vom Blau umschauert." Klee's composition is itself "vom Blau umschauert," making the blue more present, more mysteriously substantial than it ever could be within a merely written book. Klee, that is, can write blue with blue.

The poem opens up to the sky and with it the painting becomes clearer, more open. Where in the top half of the painting every horizontal line had at least two words on it, two whole lines of the bottom rectangle are empty of writing. The painting aspires to the condition of pure, unbroken colors. How are we to read these wordless spaces? What meaning is grasped, what is heard when our eyes pass over the row of colors after the word "umschauert"? When we read a poem our eyes are paced, their movements structured in a particular tempo. To read Klee's painting as constitutive of a poem we must temper our vision to just such a rhythm. When we reach a wordless section of the painting, this rhythm is maintained despite the absence of written signs, and we find ourselves beholding the pure colors with the gaze of a reader, not a viewer. The book that we decipher, however, has become something palpable, something that engages our vision

in its own exterior deployment as sign. Though empty of linguistic marks, the squares in Klee's painting become regarded as signs, pure signs which retain their signification only in the way they show themselves to an eye that is in the habit of reading. "The eye listens," wrote Paul Claudel, and if one pays attention one can hear sounds in Klee's colors. (Klee himself referred to his poem-paintings as "compositions" in the sense of a musician setting a poem to music.) The *ä* of "ätherlings," for example, expresses in its warm colors that are distinct from the surrounding values the shrill sound of the umlauted vowel. Indeed many of the open vowels appear as light in Klee's composition. Later, in his 1921 composition *Er küsse mich mit seines Mundes Kuss* [He kisses me with the kiss of his mouth] (figure 13), the vowels that would be stressed in reading this poem-painting of a verse from the Song of Songs are rendered in lighter tones. The poem's acoustic climax, the long drawn-out work "Öl" [oil] in the verse's final simile, is given strength by rendering the umlauted *O* in the warm orange that contrasts with the general gray tonality of the painting. And in this flame-like color, we are asked to sense both the sensuality of the biblical metaphor and the ignitable substance of the oil itself.

Here, though, we reach a difficulty. If it indeed is related expressively to the poem at all, is Klee's composition expressive of the poem's sound or its sense? Surely we might again be overreading if we say that the *ä* of "ätherlings" suggests a tone-color, while the blue of the rest of the word suggests the color of the "äther" [ether] itself. On what level does Klee ground the link between the poem and its visible presentation? I think it is appropriate that the poem itself expresses a similar aporia. Each of the two halves of the poem hang as qualifiers, as descriptions of a subject or action which are grammatically absent. What or who emerged from the gray only to arrive, in the evening, bent and full of God? What or

who now travels in the blue towards the sky? The poem is a sphinx. It speaks a riddle which always breaks off, always borders on the very moment when the subject should take its place in the sentence. Perhaps Klee, in giving a living form to the poem, makes the picture itself, the book as image, stand in the place of the absent subject. As such, the painting does not really illustrate the poem, but expresses that which the poem leaves out as an unfinished sentence. The painting literally fills the absence of the book.

And indeed, from a formal perspective, this is precisely what is happening in *Einst dem Grau*. The colors of Klee's composition take place where the letters are not. They fill the gaps between signs and between the parts of signs. In Klee's terms, the written letters are active lines that, within the painting, become passive edges of colored planes.³² The radical outcome of this technique of filling the spaces left by the letters is that the text becomes itself illegible in places. How can we tell the difference between one of Klee's *L*'s, as in the word "voll," from an empty space? How can we know whether a certain letter is an *H* or an *E* except by its semantic context? Such gaps in the text are precisely what necessitate the more conventional inscription of the poem at the top of Klee's picture. Words such as "zu" and "klugen" are only readable because we already know what they must be. Klee understood that this practice of sometimes distinguishing, through color contrasts, planes marked off by the lines of letters, while at other times rendering certain planes in the same color as their adjacent plane, would create a text that is difficult to read. In the *Notebooks* he specifically states that "Where planar units meet in a line a change of element [by which he means color, tone, or material] is necessary."³³

Klee writes his poem-painting *sous rature*, as it were, under the erasure of pure color. His meditation on the relationship of a text to its material support is linked to all those twentieth-

century experiments in the form of the book that we have mentioned, from the *Coup de dés* of Mallarmé and the picture-poems of Christian Morgenstern to Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. What is at stake is the play between the sensible and the intelligible, between materiality and ideality. It is important that the painting goes beyond the text in the completion of its structure, resting as it does on those rhythmical squares of color in the bottom line which now have been invested with the meaning and space of the stars. Yet to reach this extravagant stage of signification it was necessary that the painting once descend and be touched by the book.

Klee represents the book, or creates a painting which is a book, only to show the book's limits. As in *Zeichen in Gelb*, the painting *Einst dem Grau* is there exactly where the poem (the lines of the letters) is not. Though it seems to illustrate the text, invoking colors and contrasts that are proper to the poem's constative message, the painting makes present exactly what was missing in the poem: the subject and the verb of the action. It is part of Klee's genius that *Einst dem Grau* should, along with all other levels of signification, also sustain a more conventional illustration of the poem. For when taken as a pictorial whole, Klee's composition does conjure up the world as described by the poem: the sun, radiating at the "horizon" from the center of the upper rectangle's lower edge, is reflected on the ice-covered earth that is the lower rectangle. And the silver strip at the center is the horizon, the invisible threshold between heaven and earth.

The "illustrative" aspect of Klee's painting is, however, more of a *coup de grâce* than the true center of his artistic intentions. In this painting-book the artist has both invoked the notion of images at the service of texts, and asserted the autonomy of the visual sign. In a passage by Robert Delauney which Klee translated for *Der Sturm* in 1913, we read that the movement beyond the object in art is linked to a movement

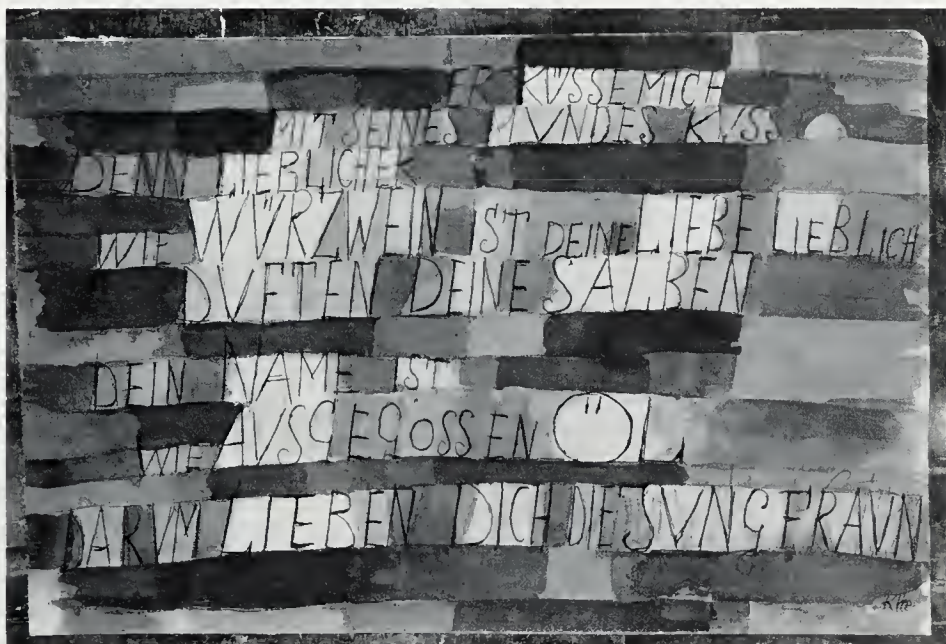


FIGURE 13. Paul Klee, *Let Him Kiss Me with the Kiss of His Mouth* (1921).

Watercolor over pen and India ink and pencil on paper, 16.1×23 cm. Lucerne, Angela Rosengart Collection (1921.142). © 1990, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

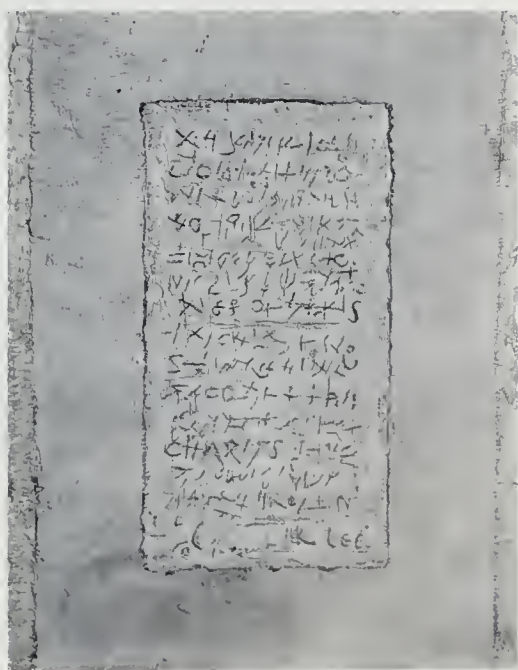


FIGURE 14. Paul Klee, *Document* (1933).

Oil, watercolor, and plaster on gauze and wood, 22.8×19.1 cm. Lucerne, Angela Rosengart Collection (1933.Z.3). © 1990, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

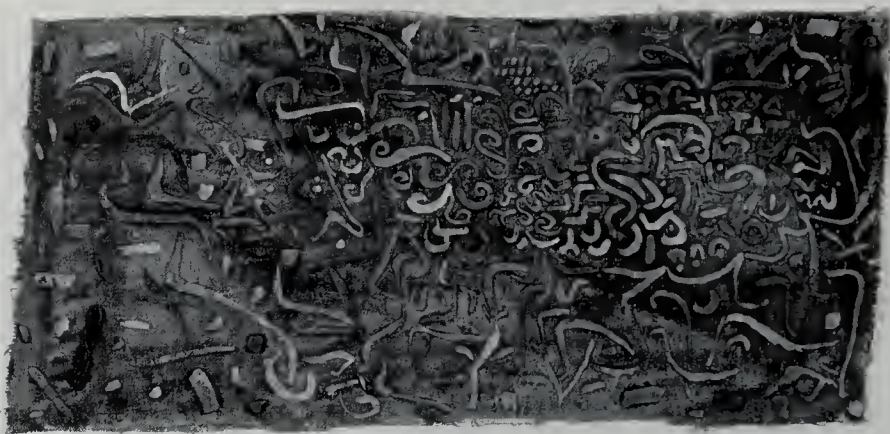


FIGURE 15. Paul Klee, *Plant Script Picture* (1932).
Watercolor on colored sheet, 25.2 × 52.3 cm. Bern Kunstmuseum, Paul Klee
Foundation (1932.61). © 1989, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.



FIGURE 17. Caspar David Friedrich, *Cemetery in the Snow* (1827).
Oil on canvas, 31 × 25.3 cm. Leipzig, Museum der bildenden Künst.



FIGURE 18. Caspar David Friedrich, *View from the Studio of the Artist, Right Window* (1805/6).
Pencil and sepia, 31 × 24 cm. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.

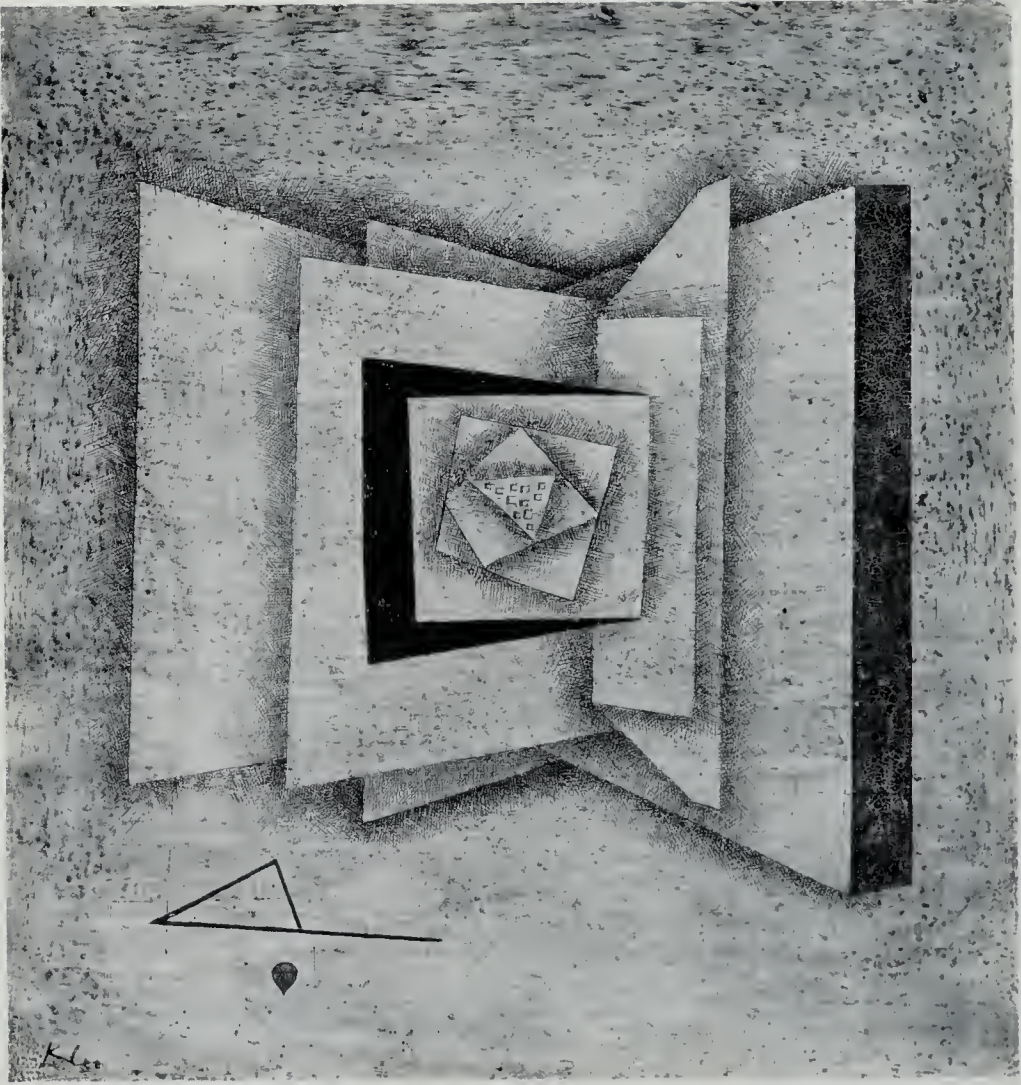


FIGURE 19. Paul Klee, *Open Book* (1930).

Gouache over white lacquer on canvas, 45.5 × 42.5 cm. New York, Guggenheim Museum. Photo: David Heald. © 1990, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

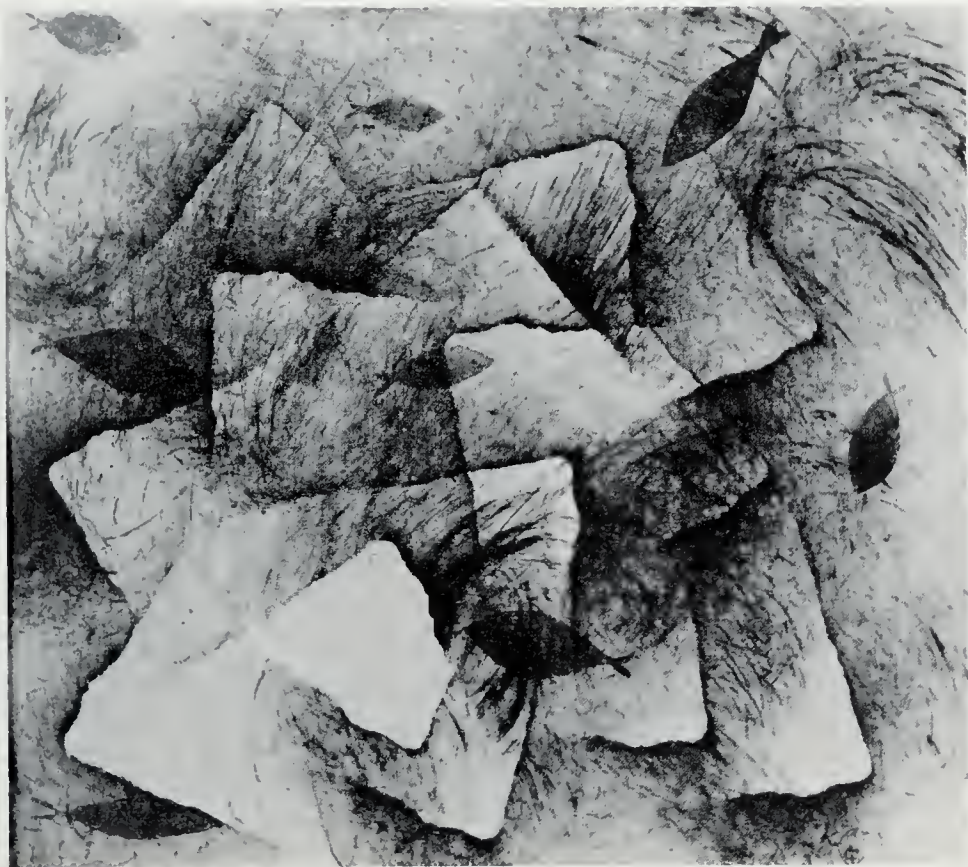


FIGURE 20. Paul Klee, *Aquarium with Silvery-Blue Fishes* (1924).
Ink and wash, 22.5 × 12.1 cm. Bern, private collection. © 1990, copyright
by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

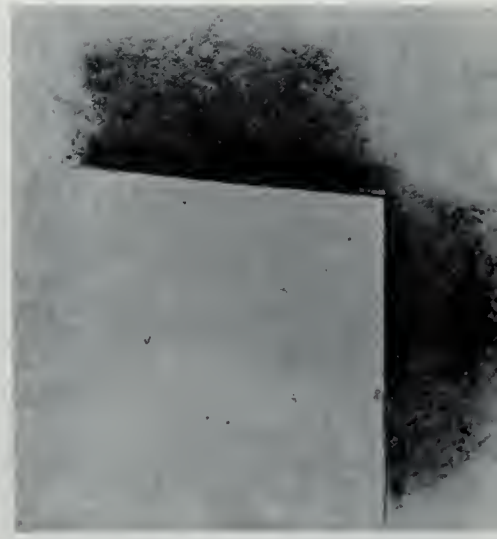


FIGURE 21 . Paul Klee, illustrations from *Notebooks, I:52*, of "endotopic" and "exotopic" treatment of the plane.
© 1990, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

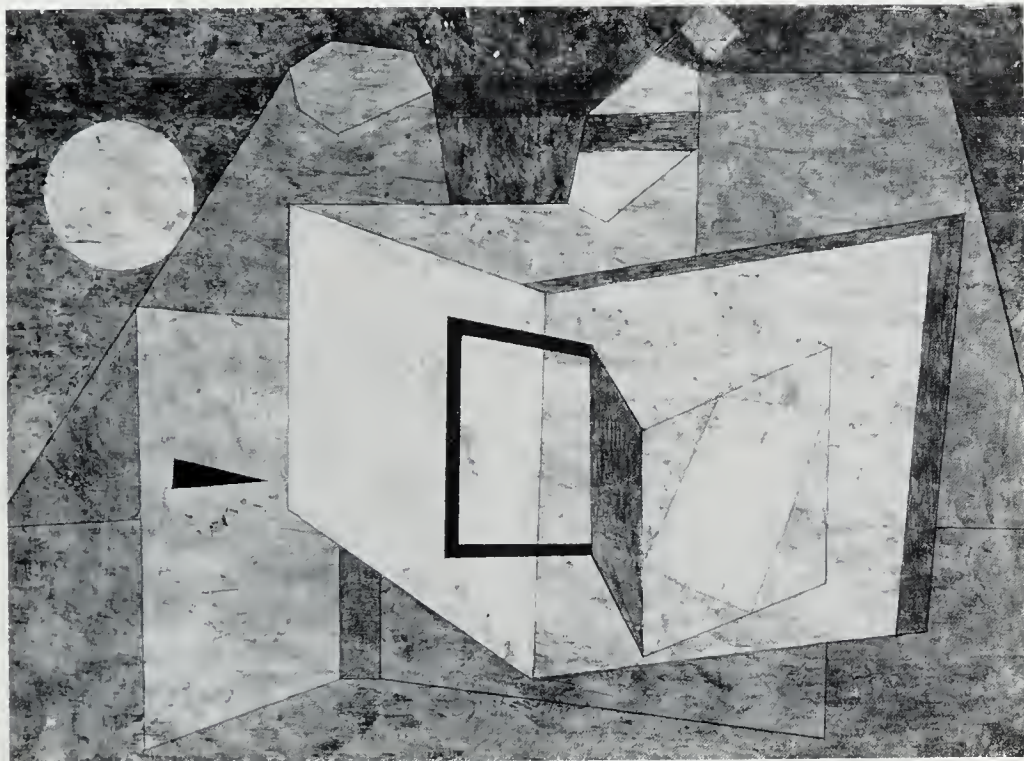


FIGURE 22. Paul Klee, *Open* (1933).
Watercolor and wax, muslin on wood, 40.7 × 55 cm. Bern, Felix Klee Collection (1933.A6.306). © 1989, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

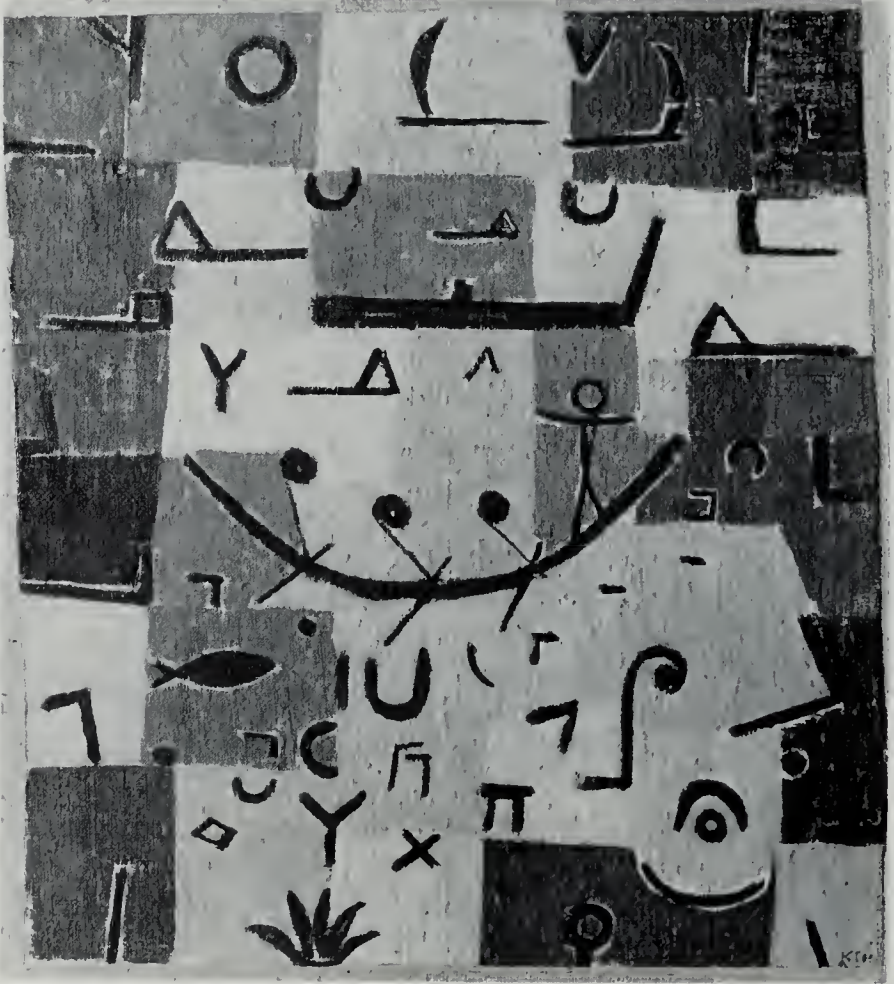


FIGURE 23. Paul Klee, *Legend of the Nile* (1937).
Pastel on cotton on burlap, 69 × 61 cm. Bern, Kunstmuseum, Hermann and Margrit Rupf-Stiftun (1937.215). © 1989, copyright by COSMOPRESS, Geneva.

beyond the book: "As long as art does not free itself from the object, it remains description, literature; it lowers itself in the use of imperfect means of expression and damns itself to the slavery of imitation."³⁴ This statement, fundamental for an understanding of twentieth-century art and the rise of abstraction, suggests that it is precisely against literariness, against the culture of the book that the visual image must create its images. It is perhaps not coincidental that the "end" of the book in *Einst dem Grau* is that series of squares of undisturbed color. They prefigure one of Klee's most radical departures from the art of the Occident: his series of "magic squares" that were done throughout the years between 1923 and 1937.³⁵ In these compositions, which Will Grohmann places at the "innermost circle" of the artist's oeuvre, we see painting at its furthest remove from any narrative or illustrative elements, and yet the grid that makes up *Einst dem Grau* suggests that what might now be abstract once ("einst") was more bookish.

IV

In *Einst dem Grau* the painting is a kind of book. What happens, though, when Klee represents the book as an object *within* the painting? In Klee's 1933 composition entitled *Urkunde (Document)* (figure 14), now in the Angela Rosengart Collection in Lucerne, the artist has placed a brownish-white rectangle, vertical in format, exactly in the center of the composition. The vertical edges are rough, and in the way they are accented unevenly in brown, they give the impression of casting a shadow in the pinkish background. The rectangle thus looks as if it were a separate thing pasted on to the composition: a piece of papyrus, carefully centered, there for us to inspect. The brown colors are signs of the page's antiquity, and the gauze-like texture of the rest of *Urkunde* suggests the actual fabric of papyrus. Covering the rectangle and

written in the same brown that renders the edges of the “papyrus” are cryptic signs arranged like writing in horizontal rows. Although certain of their hieroglyphs resemble known signs (e.g., one can make out *O*'s, *F*'s, *H*'s, deltas, as well as certain mathematical symbols like the equals sign and the sign of congruence), the writing is of an unknown or fictional alphabet. Like an inscription in a lost language for which we have no Rosetta Stone, Klee's signs in *Urkunde* are impossible to read, yet recognizable as *writing*. They cannot be mistaken for “mere” decoration.

One language, though, that we can read in Klee's painting is the cultural language of things-on-display, or objects that are privileged for our gaze in the manner of an exhibition or *ostensio*. Klee places the “document” at the center of his composition and frames it with a pinkish border that acts like a matt and with two strips of brownish-white (the same color as the “document” itself) that form the right and left borders of the painting. Klee presents his cryptic writing to us with the straightforward symmetry and understated color of a museum display. Just as the document seems spatially separate from the rest of the painting by the *tableau objet* character of the white rectangle fringed in brown (i.e., it seems pasted to the painting as a separate thing), the invocation of the language of the museum distances the object from us temporally, as well. The document becomes now an artifact designated for our inspection because of the value that age or rareness has given it. Both acts of distancing or framing, the *trompe l'oeil* aspect and the language of the museum, also sustain the document's materiality, its thingness. It is something on display, something which has survived intact as an object and is therefore worthy of display and study. This emphasis on the materiality of what Klee puts before us is not, of course, specific to the painting *Urkunde*; Klee's general tendency to display the edges of the pieces of paper, canvas, or fabric

upon which he works suggests always an insistence on showing the material basis of his art. What, though, is on display in *Urkunde*?

The word “*Urkunde*” is compounded from the prefix *ur-*, which means “original” or primal, or stresses the word with which it is linked, and *kunde* which means “information,” “knowledge,” or “science” (as in, say, “*Pflanzenkunde*”). An *urkunde* can be anything that mediates human thought, from an inscription or piece of writing to a proof of ownership or academic degree. The Magna Carta is an *urkunde* as is the certificate of excellence that hangs above the cashier’s desk in a family restaurant. Thus at its loftiest and most general level, an *urkunde* is a written document, a book whose “message” is unreadable. Instead of mediating a particular thought or proclamation, it documents writing itself in its primary or original state. There is something ironic about this display of the book as primal object or epistemological mediation. For at the lower left of the rectangle, written in the same brown as the rest of the inscription is Paul Klee’s own signature. Like the forger’s nightmare of dating his fake work, “Made in 2000 B.C.,” Klee’s signature, present not at the corner of the whole composition, but within the *urkunde* itself is an anachronism that calls the “originality” of the document in question. The signature acts at once like a proof of the document’s authenticity (as one signs an official document), and as a writing that brings the “truth” of the *urkunde*—that primal knowledge sustained by writing—into question.

Unless, of course, the *urkunde* is a document of Klee’s writing, preserved and displayed for posterity to see. At the opening of his discussion of active, passive, and medial lines in the *Notebooks*, Klee writes: “For the present let us content ourselves with the most primitive of elements, the line. At the dawn of civilization, when writing and drawing were the same thing, it was the basic element.” (italics added)³⁶ It is

interesting that we should find such a statement written within a text like that of the *Notebooks*. Klee's "book" itself (re)establishes a kind of primal unity between analytic drawing and descriptive or ecphrastic writing. And yet, helpful as it is, Klee's vision of the original equivalence of drawing and writing is a fiction: as soon as writing is regarded as writing, as soon as the first person who ever wrote or inscribed a "sign" on a stone that was to be "read" as document of something else, as soon as this happens and the fundamental shift between vision and seeing constitutive in writing is enacted, then drawing (the interest in the line as line) vanishes into the absence that is writing. *Urkunde* represents a kind of reappropriation of that fictional unity. It presents us with a writing which, because it is unreadable, has become purely a sign (divorced from the otherness that meaning could give it) and thus is equivalent to drawing. *Urkunde* documents Klee's primal scene of writing-as-drawing, the pure exteriority of the book. As Maurice Blanchot would say, such a script is "writing outside of language, writing which would be in some sense originally language making it impossible for there to be any object (present or absent) of language."³⁷ The theme of an indecipherable writing or a lost or unreadable document haunts modern literature. In Kafka's *The Castle*, for example, letters and documents are constantly being misplaced or fail to reach their destination. Their failure to mediate a message, to find their proper reader, mirrors the effect of Kafka's novel itself which, as a book, is incomplete and uncompletable and which, like the novel's hero K., can only circumscribe but never attain full significance. In *The Trial*, too, the Law rests in a book (the parable of the *Türhütter*) which is at once binding in its significance and impossible to interpret: "Die Schrift is unveränderlich, und die Meinungen [the interpretations it engenders] sind oft nur ein Ausdruck der Verzweiflung darüber. [The text is unalterable, and the opinions about it

are often only an expression of despair about this.]”³⁸ Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* has as its thematic center a lost or unreadable text, as well. The “plot” of the novel, the true story about the guilt or innocence of the hero, is contained in a letter (or “litter” as Joyce puns it) which was lost in a dump yard, and when it is retrieved, it is a torn and unreadable text, a “proteiform . . . polyhedron of scripture.”³⁹ At one point, the narrator asks us to “stoop if [we] are abecedminded, to this claybed [i.e., to the clay tablet that is the lost letter/book]” and observe its writing: “A middenhide hoard of objects! Olives, beets, kimmells, dollies, alfrids, beatties, cormaks, and daltons.”⁴⁰ The “objects” which we see are not only roots, fruits, etc., but in their *sounds* as words, they echo the letters of both the Hebrew and the Greek alphabets: the Hebrew alphabet begins with aleph, beth, daleth, and the Greek with alpha, beta, gamma, and delta. Language is, following Joyce’s guiding philosopher, Vico, grounded in the arbitrary *objet-trouvé*. Letters, the raw material of the book, are returned to the inert thingness of objects. And in this giving over of writing to nature, Joyce uncovers the materiality of his own book.

In Klee’s oeuvre, we find a striking parallel to Joyce’s “middenhide” (“midden” as prehistoric junkheap + “hide” as the concealing and revealing fabric of language) in the painting of *Pflanzenschriftbild* of 1931 (figure 15). Against a dark brown ground, Klee has painted the figures in various sizes, shapes, and colors. The title announces that what we see is a picture of plant-writing. The colored forms, in which we can “read” such letters as *t*, *u*, *v*, *w*, *y*, and *z*, as well as forms reminiscent of Arabic script, Klee recalls the notion of the “natural” signature of the world present in Novalis and explicit in the just-quoted passage from Joyce, where olives are alephs and beets are beths. The brown background of Klee’s composition is literally *ground* itself—the earth or soil out of which the sign-plants are growing. Of course, the

presence of an "alphabet" in Joyce's and Klee's "books" remains only a surmise. The forms, written and painted, do not give their significance unambiguously to the interpreter. To see a *y* or a *w* in the colored shapes in Klee's painting, or to *hear* the letter "aleph" in the word "olive" in Joyce, is to discern the relationship between writing as material thing and its potential to signify something else.

What is important in these examples is not just the "theme" of the book in works of art in this century. The book, whenever it is invoked, deconstructs the very discourse or image which invokes it. The undecipherable "litter" unearthed in *Finnegans Wake* becomes, when written about in Joyce's own partly decipherable book, a synecdoche for the artist's work as a whole. Similarly, Klee's *Urkunde* situates Klee's art (as it is "documented" in the signature at the lower right corner of the written text) at an aporia between writing and drawing, between the book and pure painting.

V

Let us look more closely at Paul Klee's signs. Near the center of Klee's *Composition with Windows* a sign that seems to be an exclamation point has started to bud (figure 16). What surprise does it register? What statement or exclamation does it announce? Perhaps only surprise that the sign itself is turning into a plant: on the top of the figure and off to both sides, groups of three leaves are sprouting clones of the exclamation point's shape. The dot below this lush signifier remains inert, but takes on the character of a bulb or root. The inert literality of linguistic signs has become, as it were, naturalized. The written mark, that is, has taken on a life of its own and installed itself in the landscape as a thing among things. What is more surprising is that Klee does not provide a landscape in which the exclamation point/plant can be

surprised. The painting is called *Composition with Windows* (*Komposition mit Fenstern*) and we struggle to find the windows thus named. What we do find are many cross-like designs within squares, often with two diagonal lines cutting the upper left and right corners of the square. The image looks schematic, like a child's drawing of a window with curtains drawn aside. The windows in Klee's composition have endured the opposite fate from that of the exclamation point. They, the "real-world" subject of the painting, have become schematized, sterilized into conventional signifiers. No wonder the painting is surprised! Conventional signs have returned to nature, while real things are becoming signs.

The lines that form the "windows" play a role in structuring Klee's painting. In general, *Composition with Windows* is organized around a network of lines that run vertically and horizontally across the canvas; in their intersection, they close off rectangular planes of color which vary in size, color, and density of tone. The patchwork of colored squares is most concentrated at the center. Each is rendered in a distinct tone—red, white, black, and brown—which sets it off against its neighbor. Elsewhere on the canvas Klee creates a pattern of rectangles with different means: at the upper right, for example, white lines—which we have encountered in their function as depicting windows—divide the large patch of red into four or more smaller squares. Where the central planes of color were distinguished from one another by their distinctive color, here Klee "draws" boundaries on a solid plane by using a white line. (Glaesemer has used Klee's own notion of active, medial, and passive lines to explain these different effects.)⁴¹ Actual lines and the lines implied by the edges of planes act together dialectically to create the structure of the composition. The network of horizontals and verticals is not rigid, but bends and curves in various places. The composition takes on an aspect like a patchwork cloth that has not

been smoothed flush with the picture plane, but has waves and raised spots. These distortions give the painting a sense of depth. In addition, other forms play about the composition. The black arch shape just right of center, in the negative of an arch to the right of the exclamation point and in the two semicircles that make up the letter *B*, is echoed by the curving pattern of brush strokes and lines at the top of the painting. The movement that circulates through the strong white diagonal rises up to the right of the lower frame. This diagonal is echoed throughout the painting by all those white lines which indicate the "curtain" in the window, as well as by the diagonally sprouting buds of the exclamation point and the branches of the schematic tree at the lower right.

Klee unifies his composition through his use of color as well as line. Dark red, black, brown, and white dominate the painting while shades of blue, green, and purple play here and there over the surface. Each color serves a particular function. Black renders the peculiar "signs" which appear in the composition (the *B*, exclamation point, the delta, etc.) as well as a few of the smaller planes near the very concentrated center. Red appears either in well-defined planes or else, more often, it is spread out over larger surfaces which are themselves divided into smaller squares. Brown appears as a kind of ground tone that ties the composition together. And the pale blues, purples, and greens punctuate the composition rather like washes of color. Klee uses white in a very complex manner. Rather than being a highlight that emphasizes the solidity of particular planes, white appears within colored planes as a place where light seems to *shine through*. "Solid" forms are represented in single, solid colors (e.g., the central squares) while squares with white on them (as in the area at the center of the lower portion of the painting) appear transparent. Chiaroscuro, shading from dark to light, has just the opposite effect in Klee's composition than its use in tradi-

tional pictorial representation.⁴² Things modeled in light and shadow appear thinner and less solid than flat surfaces of color. In *Composition with Windows* the white acts as if it were light shining through a window wherever the color has been wiped away.

This is because Klee's *Composition with Windows* is itself like a window or stained glass which seems to let light through its colored surface. The white acts as if it marks a point where color is thin or has been wiped away so that the light can shine through to us *from behind the picture plane*. How strange, then, that the window itself—whose schematized squares with crosses in them—should be rendered in white lines. That which is opaque and solid in real windows becomes transparent in Klee. That is, the frame and lattice represented in white in *Composition with Windows* seems to let light in while the glass itself keeps light out.

Conventional signs have become natural objects in Klee's painting (the exclamation point), while real objects (the window) have been reduced to mere signs. And these signs, in turn, operate in just the opposite manner as their natural model. The sign for the window is transparent where it should be solid, invisible where it should be visible. What, then, do we see in Klee's window?

In a sense, the abstract composition of Klee's painting can be read to constitute a "landscape." In what would then be the foreground, a very schematized flower rises from what could be construed as either the landscape's ground or a windowsill. Higher up and to the right are two trees, one drawn as a single line with diagonal branches growing out from either side, the other rendered as a sort of y shape with small dots for leaves. These two figures represent either two different species of trees, or two distinct conventions for representing trees. The sense of the landscape as a catalog of signs becomes clearer in the various cryptograms scattered

about the painting: the *B* with an equals sign; the curious quasi-mathematical delta with a point under it; at the right of center, the *X* with a horizontal line running through it, etc. The arch-shaped top of the composition organizes the picture into a narrowing structure which lets the “landscape” be read as if it receded into space. Indeed I can see another kind of scene in Klee’s composition. The crosses, which I have hitherto identified as window-lattices, form, if read as crosses in space, a picture of a cemetery with Christian grave markers receding into the distance. The diagonal lines of the “curtains,” within this reading of things, would then become the roof of the cross—a design of grave markers common in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland. Klee’s composition becomes a cemetery with distinct echoes of the romantic graveyard tradition such as we see in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich (figure 17).

Ghosts of the romantic tradition are present in the central subject matter of Klee’s *Composition with Windows*, as well. The open window, with its suggestion of a longing for nature and for the infinite, is one of romantic painting’s favorite visual emblems (figure 18).⁴³ We need not stop with Friedrich in tracing Klee’s ancestry, however, for since the Renaissance Western painting has been metaphorized as the transformation of the flat surface of the canvas into a *window* onto the world. Already in the fifteenth century Alberti called painting a “kind of window”; and Albrecht Dürer, in translating the Latin word *perspectiva* as “Durchsehung” (a seeing-through something), regards the picture plane as something through which one looks.⁴⁴ Klee turns this whole tradition of representation on its head. We do not see through *Composition with Windows* as through a window, but rather we see flat, transparent *signs* of windows which let light in exactly where they should frame the hallowed illusionistic “space” of the painted

image. Illusionism, the painting-as-window, appears here as mere convention and in the place of the naturalistic panorama, arbitrary signs have taken root as the solid inhabitants of a visible world. The window, that mediator between nature and culture, between the closed dwelling place of man and the endless prospect of the universe, has thus revealed quite a different prospect. The mimetic depiction of nature in the form of landscape or view, becomes here a cultural construction, a conventional sign, while the clearly arbitrary signifiers (the letter, mathematical symbol, written mark of punctuation, etc.), endowed with an uncanny materiality, seem filled with the life of nature. To say that Klee reduces the painting to conventional signs would be wrong, for these signs, freed from their bondage to a purely representational function, stalk about the landscape with as little codified meaning and as much life as beasts in a forest.

VI

Up until now we have discussed the image of the book in a very broad sense, as encompassing any reference to the materiality of writing. Let us now examine Klee's most explicit invocation of the book in his 1933 painting *Offenes Buch* [*Open Book*] now in the Guggenheim Museum (figure 19). The painting is composed of a series of overlapping planes that recall, generally, the pages of a book as they cover, fold over, or stand at an angle to one another. Each plane is distinguished from the one "behind" it through cross-hatchings that radiate outward from the pages' edges creating a shadow on the surface behind. The volume or thickness of the book is indicated, synecdochically, as it were, by that dark brown vertical rectangle at the right of the composition that runs parallel to the picture's frame. Less like a mimetic

rendering of a book from a certain angle, Klee's *Offenes Buch* assembles *signs* of the object's qualities. Thus the dark strip indicating volume is juxtaposed to the image of flat, overlapping planes as two alternative modes of representing the book as object.

The planes themselves, set off against one another by the hatchings, themselves create a sense of depth in the composition. This technique of overlapping and paradoxically volumetric planes has precedents within Klee's oeuvre, for example in the 1924 *Aquarium with Silvery Blue Fishes* (figure 20). In his *Notebooks* Klee explains the need for such a device for creating a sense of depth when the convention of perspective is abandoned. Through the use of what the artist calls "endotopic" and "exotopic" treatments of surfaces, in which modeling or cross-hatching radiates either inward or outward from the edges of the planes, the eye, drawn from a lighter point to a darker outer space, is given a sense of movement from inside to out, fore to rear (plate 21).⁴⁵ In the *Open Book*, the "exotopic" hatching lets the central planes appear raised towards us at the same time as they effect a movement from the center toward the edges of the composition. The book, engaged in a movement which seems to grow from the center, is opening for our gaze.

The arrangement of overlapping planes at various angles to one another becomes in Klee a "sign" of openness itself. In the painting entitled *Offen* from 1933, in the Felix Klee Collection, we have a similar effect of book or door-like structures standing at various angles to the picture plane (figure 22). At the same time, though, Klee's *Open Book* seems to be "closing" inward toward the center. The pages do not grow smaller as they become more distant from our eye (as they would in conventional perspective). Like boxes in boxes or mirrors in mirrors, the pages of the book shrink as they

reach the center, that is, as they display to our reading eye that page to which the book is opened. Each plane contains the plane which is "in front" of it within its boundaries until, at the very center, we reach that peculiar triangle with eleven small squares inscribed on it. It is as if the foreground (rather than the horizon) were the painting's vanishing point. Our eye travels into the open book as if into an infinite regression. How can we read this Piranese-like prison book?

The title of the painting, *Offenes Buch* or *Open Book*, is a *mot* for readability. For something to be an "open book" its meaning or intention must be immediately accessible to the beholder. When I say, "Er las in ihrem Gesicht wie in einem offenen Buch [He read in her face as in an open book]," then I am invoking the image of the book to denote a situation of the complete transparency of signification. What we find in Klee's book, though, are only more books. At the center of the composition we discover, instead of writing, that group of tiny squares which repeat the rectangular structure of a book. It is as if the book contained only itself transformed into a sign, as if at the "center" of the book there were only more books. The sign of the book, the empty squares which are inscribed in Klee's book, have replaced writing or meaning as that which is "contained" in the open book. It is interesting that, according to the conventions of perspective, the central group of four planes offset by the black area around its left side, creates just the opposite effect of an opening book. That dark black which, so prominent in the composition, could represent either the shadow cast by the front "page," or the page behind, is larger than the page which would be in front of it. The *Open Book* would thus seem to be closing at its center. Unless, of course, the central group of four planes is read as opening up *behind* the picture plane onto a darkness represented by that black surface. The book opens up to

nothingness, Mallarmé's "l'Abîme." Jacques Derrida, in his essay "Ellipses," writes of the emptiness of the book in the book:

The center of the first book should not have been repeatable in its own representation. Once it lends itself a single time to such a representation—that is, once it is written—when one can read a book in the book, a center in the center, an origin in the origin, it is the abyss, is the bottomlessness of infinite redoubling.⁴⁶

Klee's painting *Offenes Buch* displays the book emptied of the signs that would take us beyond the book. Instead of containing something, the book opens onto the abyss of its own self-representation. What it leaves behind is only its material structure (the planes of the pages and the lines that they describe) which organizes Klee's own composition. This is a common strategy in Klee's art: to take an object laden with cultural or symbolic significance (as, say, the book, the window, or the grave), and employ it as a mere structuring element in the painting. And though he pretends to erase history from his symbols, their traditional content always haunts them still. The abyss sustained by Klee's *Open Book* is not merely the appropriation of the symbol of the book as, willy-nilly, a vehicle for an abstract construction of empty forms. The abyss of the book expresses the crisis of the culture of writing in this century.

VII

Klee's art returns again and again to the theme of writing and the book, sometimes to empty the book of its privileged cultural significance, sometimes to fill his paintings with the mere referential energy of writing. In his paintings from 1937 on, Klee becomes increasingly interested in the formal and

symbolic potentials of representing bold graphic signs, modeled often after Arabic script or Egyptian hieroglyphs, that delimit and structure flat planes of color—a formula which we see in *Yellow Signs* of 1937. In *The Legend of the Nile* of the same year, the artist arranges various orange-brown signs on a field of blue and gray rectangular planes (figure 23). The title suggests that the painting “tells a story” from the world of the Nile and therefore of great antiquity. What the story says we do not know for we have no Rosetta Stone with which to translate its symbols. We can, however, make out at least one story in Klee’s painting: the legend of the origin of writing itself. The signs that appear in the painting span the whole evolution of the linguistic symbol. We see the pictograph (like the “fish” at the lower left or the “boat” with oarsmen and a standing passenger) that refers to its meaning simply by imitating in its form the object represented. We also see various abbreviated or abstracted forms of pictures which, according to some accounts, were the origins of the modern alphabet and which refer synecdochically to their reference, as in the shape reminiscent of a ship’s prow which could signify “boat” at the lower left. And finally, we have letters of the Greek and Roman alphabets proper: the pi and gamma as well as the *x*, *y*, *u*, etc.

What can also emerge in Klee’s painting is the pictorial setting for this legend of the book: the boat rides over a “water” in which a fish swims under a sun (that pink circle at the upper left). The fact that we can read the scene in this way is revealed to be as much a function of signification, and therefore of writing at its origins, as any legend which might be inscribed in a scroll or book. The blue squares are given significance as sky and water because they are interpreted by both the work’s title and by those other written pictographs which, assembled on the canvas, together create a sign for space itself. What we read in this tale is the story Klee tells

again and again in his artistic career: the legend of painting bound up inextricably with the book.

One final note on the purpose and scope of this essay. I have tried to do two things in my reading of Paul Klee and his engagement with the book (or written text) as an image. First, I have located the discussion of the artist's work within literary critical discourses about writing and the book. While this does not exclude an approach to the artist's oeuvre from the perspective of its relation to other *painters* of his time working along similar lines, it provides a useful reduction for evaluating the very new conception of art as it is formulated explicitly and implicitly by Klee—a conception, moreover, that specifically refuses to separate written language from visual image in as strict a manner as does the discipline of art history itself. Second, I have tried to suggest the areas in Klee's pictorial work that are most open to such an analysis. In this regard, I have barely touched on the most obvious area of Klee's output as a visual thinker, as it were. A sustained reading of the book in Klee would have to address the question of Klee's own writing (the *Notebooks* and even the diaries) and the implications of this tendency to analyze his art in light of the culture of writing. Such a study would, I think, be an important contribution not only to the understanding of Klee, but also for the question of twentieth-century art's supposed emancipation from illustration and the culture of the book.

NOTES

1. Paul Klee, *Notebooks. Volume I: The Thinking Eye*, edited by Jürg Spiller, translated by Ralph Manheim (London: Lund Humphries, 1961), p. 453.

2. *Ibid.*, I: 291.

3. For the interruptive character of writing, see Jacques Derrida, "Edmund Jabès and the Question of the Book," in *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 70–72.

4. See Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1974), p. 174. While it is not important whether Klee actually knew of this legend, he may have encountered it in Martin Buber's very popular *Legende des Ballschem*, published in 1907. For Buber's position in German culture of the time, see Scholem, "Martin Bubers Auffassung des Judentums" in *Judaica* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), II: 133–92.

5. For the question of "ground," see Martin Heidegger, "Vom Wesen des Grundes," in *Wegmarken*, 2d ed. (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1978), pp. 123–73; see also Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), pp. 64–66.

6. For the form assumed by Derrida's books, see Hartman, *Saving the Text*.

7. Maurice Blanchot, "The Absence of the Book," originally published in *L'Entretien infini* (1969), translated in *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays*, translated by Lydia David (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1981), p. 146.

8. Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, translated by Willard Trask (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 303–38.

9. Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, translated by John D. Sinclair (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939).

10. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Werke*, edited by Ernst Beutler (Zurich: Artemis Verlag, 1949), 9: 523, as cited in Curtius, *European Literature*, p. 303.

11. Goethe to Friederike Oeser, February 13, 1769, in *Werke*, 18: 121.

12. Gabrieli Josipovici, *The World and the Book: A Study of Modern Fiction*, 2d ed. (London: Macmillan, 1979), pp. 25–51, 286–311.

13. Hans Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1981).

14. For the role of Nicholas of Cusa in establishing and legitimating a "method" for the natural sciences as distinct from the reading of biblical texts, see Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit. 4. Aspekte der Epochenschwelle: Cusaner und Nolaner*, 2d ed. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982), pp. 34–108; for Copernicus, see Blumenberg, *Die Genesis der kopernikanischen Welt*, 3 vols. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1981).

15. For the relationship between the image of the book and a notion of closure, see Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 3–89.

16. Friedrich von Hardenberg [Novalis], *Die Lehrlinge zu Sais, Gedichte, und Fragmente*, edited by Martin Kiessig (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1975), p. 3.

17. For an important discussion of the claims of Hegel's *Encyclopedia*, see Jacques Derrida, "Outwork, prefacing," in *Dissemination*, translated by Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 47ff.

18. Judy Kravis, *The Prose of Mallarmé: The Evolution of Literary Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 179–80.

19. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 663.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Klee, *Notebooks I*: 95.

22. For the notion of "writing outside the book," see Blanchot, "The Absence of the Book," p. 151.

23. I take this term from Michel Foucault's reading of Saussure's emphasis on the acoustic quality of the signifier, in "What is an Author?," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited and translated by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 116.

24. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Poem, Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, facsimile ed. (Geneva: D'Albert Kundig, 1943), p. 3a.

25. James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Viking, 1958), pp. 120–21.

26. Jacques Derrida, *Glas* (Paris: Editions Galiléé, 1975).

27. For a brief survey of the image of the book in Western art, see Jan Bialostocki, *Bücher der Weisheit oder Bücher der Vergangenheit. Zur Symbolik des Buches in der Kunst* (Heidelberg: Abhandlungen der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaft, Philosophisch-historische Klasse, 1984), 5.

28. See Ann Temkin's discussion of the conjunction of painting and poetry in her essay, "Klee and the Avant-Garde 1912–1940" in the exhibition catalog of *Paul Klee*, edited by Carolyn Lanchner (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1987), p. 17.

29. For Klee's stated position on the relation of the Sister Arts and his quarrel with Lessing's *Laocoon*, see *ibid.*

20. As quoted in Jürgen Glaesemer, *Paul Klee, Die farbige Werke im Kunstmuseum Bern* (Bern: Kornfeld und Cie, 1976), p. 30; translation my own.

31. For the relation between representation and expression or discursive and presentational forms, see Susan Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*, 3d ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 79–102.

32. See Paul Klee, *Pädagogisches Skizzenbuch* (Paris: Florian Kupferberg, 1965), pp. 6–11.

33. Klee, *Notebooks I*: 249.

34. Robert Delauney, "Ueber das Licht," translated by Paul Klee in *Der Sturm, Wochenschrift für Kultur und die Künste* 3(144/5): 255–56, 1913; reprinted in Klee, *Schriften, Rezensionen und Aufsätze*, edited by Christian Geelhaar (Cologne: DuMont, 1976), p. 116; translation my own.

35. See Robert Short, *Paul Klee* (New York: W. H. Smith, 1974), p. 28.

36. Klee, *Notebooks I*: 103.

37. Blanchot, "The Absence of the Book," p. 103.

38. Franz Kafka, *Der Prozess*, in *Die Romane* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1969), p. 436.

39. Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, p. 107.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

41. Glaesemer, *Paul Klee*, p. 52ff.
42. See Jim M. Jordan, *Paul Klee and Cubism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 82–115.
43. See Loren Eitner, "The Open Window and the Storm-Tossed Boat," *Art Bulletin* 37: 281–90, 1955.
44. See Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), I: 3–4.
45. Klee, *Notebooks*, I: 51–52.
46. Derrida, "Ellipses," in *Writing and Difference*, p. 296.

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Party a name meta-assembly of the assemblage

- coordination
- philosophy (a retreat, a...)

* transition to...

stage

→ need of ~~the~~ constant reflection of the self
 → a constitution that cannot inform itself.

aspect of assessment, freedom, nativity

→ in terms of buying options
 → CONSUMER CHOICES

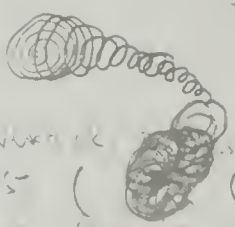
... relative moments (where...)
 - an information

* SUCH A SPLENDID SEDUCTION A FATAL CARESS

→ EMJ move is instrumental
 → ... complex, is 'infinite'
 → ... structured

Iterations & Repetitions

- ...
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