

Variations of Ekphrastic Stance: Once Again, Poems on Paintings

Several thinkers on ekphrasis have developed categorizations in order to distinguish between various kinds of “representations in one medium of a composed in another medium.” The poet and literary scholar, Gisbert Kranz (1921-), in the 417-page “theory” prefacing his three-volume commented anthology *Das Bildgedicht: Theorie, Lexikon, Bibliographie*, categorizes “pictures on poems and other visual works of art” along a number of lines, only one of which can interest us here.⁹⁵ Kranz’s grid of cross-classification,⁹⁶ devised in the hope of being encompassing and

⁹⁵Lund has drawn attention to a crucial terminological problem in the German term *Bild*, which can mean both “picture” and “image.” To all of us who liked the term because it appears so much more user-friendly than the Greek *ekphrasis*, he points out correctly that it is problematic when applied to a product of the relationship between literary and pictorial representation since its frames of reference in art history and literary history are so distinctly different—a literary “image” is not a picture, to say it most briefly. Transferring the point to music, it seems to confirm one of the distinctions made between program music and musical ekphrasis in the preceding chapter: an image typical for the musical language is not the same as a picture; the cross-wise arrangement of pitches in symbolic suggestions of the Crucifixion are existentially different from a pictorial depiction of the Cross. Beyond this terminological problem with the term *Bildgedicht*, which Kranz may indeed have overlooked, his anthology serves as a unique source for scholars of ekphrasis, and his theoretical introduction provides a solid foundation for a differentiated approach.

⁹⁶To give a brief overview: Kranz offers a classification of ekphrastic poems along the lines of (1) what they achieve with regard to the visual depiction (transposition, supplementation, association, interpretation, provocation, play, or concretization); (2) what their intention is with regard to the work and its artist (to describe, praise, critique pejoratively, moralize about; to use as a didactic, political, or socio-critical tool; to express delight, etc.); (3) what speech attitude the poet adopts (allocutive, monological, dialogical, apostrophizing, or epic; genetic, meditative, or cyclical); (4) what stage of reality pertains to the picture represented in the poem (real and extant, fictitious, or cumulative); (5) for what occasion the poem was composed (including considerations regarding the situation of the author, of the pictorial work, and of the artist). Kranz concludes this discussion, on a somewhat different level but still classifying and categorizing, by listing various modes of reception ekphrastic poems may encounter: sampling in an anthology as “instances of a genre,” review in prose, translation, imitation, third-level poetic transposition: “Gedichte auf Bildgedichte” (poems on ekphrastic poems), parodies, and “Vertonungen” (musical settings of ekphrastic poems).

exhaustive, is complex; I will concentrate on only one of his multi-dimensional axes. Its seven divisions will serve as a basis for my short foray into examples of ekphrastic poetry. Following Kranz in his primary outline of seven ways of “achievement,” I shall sketch an imagined situation in which poems of each category might come into being, briefly discuss at least one example, and end with thoughts on how this type might be characterized if the transmedializing art is not poetry but music.

Consider the following four alternative scenarios for a situation I shall describe as “Gerhold’s poems about Venice”:

Scenario 1: As a student, my husband (who sometimes writes poetry) visited Venice. Mesmerized by the flair of the city, he returned to his hotel room one night and poured out his impressions in a poem.

Scenario 2: Preparing for a return visit to Northern Italy twenty years later, he seizes the opportunity to spend an hour at a friend’s house with a book containing Canaletto’s many depictions of his native Venice. Back home he writes a poem, in which he compounds the painter’s various representations to one whole that presents itself to him as “Canaletto’s view of Venice.”

Scenario 3: Under the impression of our artist friend Jim Cogswell’s most recent exhibition, Gerhold visualizes how Jim would react to Venice—what he would notice, how he might react to it. Having engaged this fantasy for some time and fleshed it out with many details, he writes a poem on “Jim’s view of Venice.”

Scenario 4: During a visit to Dresden, still haunted by Canaletto’s rendering of the 18th-century city and learning that his painting *Il Campo dei Santi Giovanni e Paolo* hangs in the Gemäldegalerie, Gerhold takes an afternoon to explore the work in depth. He has brought his note book and, right there in front of the canvas, attempts to transform into poetry what he thinks Canaletto saw and painted.

Many more scenarios could be imagined, and I will be exploring some of them below as an incentive to distinguish between the categories within the genre of ekphrasis. The four variations above, however, serve to clarify once again where exactly ekphrasis is situated.

- Scenario 1 is, very obviously, not an instance of ekphrasis at all, since the poem expresses Gerhold’s own—and not another artist’s—experience of Venice.⁹⁷

⁹⁷In the context of my present concern, I am disregarding for a moment that this particularly beautiful city is the “art work” of an ingenious architect.

- Scenario 2 is known as “cumulative ekphrasis”: several primary representations of a scene or story inspire the poet to a single reaction to or recreation of the compound artistic rendering. While music knows examples that may be regarded as comparable to a degree, they constitute a case particular enough to merit special attention in a separate study.⁹⁸
- Scenario 3 will also not concern us here; it describes a case of what is referred to as “fictional ekphrasis,” a phenomenon that is very much considered to qualify as an instance of “verbal representation of visual representation,” no less intriguing for the fact that both the painting and the poem stem from one mind—the poet’s.
- Scenario 4, then, presents the only case of a transmedialization from a single (extant and identified) work of art to a poem based on it.

Calling to mind the various relationships between poet and object, the scenarios sketched above are intended as a referential background for the actual cases of *transmedialization* to which I now turn, exploring some possible variants with examples from 20th-century poetry.

Transposition

Scenario 4a: When contemplating Canaletto’s Venice painting, *Il Campo dei Santi Giovanni e Paolo*, Gerhold is intrigued not only by what is represented (the details, the atmosphere, the overall effects, etc.) but also by the structural means the artist has employed. In writing his poem, he attempts to find a way that would reproduce both content and form.

The term transposition, as one of the ways in which one art form can relate to an artistic expression in another medium, has been used widely. Jean Tardieu, one of the most prolific writers of ekphrastic poetry in early 20th-century France, prefaces his 1944 volume *Figures* by stating that his collection aims at discovering a way to define in poetic terms, through the transposition of sounds into images, of colors and forms into verbal

⁹⁸Musical compositions that can be said to deal “cumulatively” with an artist’s view or style include, e.g., Henri Lazarof’s piano concerto *Tableaux after Kandinsky*, Murray Schafer’s “Paul Klee: From the Diaries” (from *Three contemporaries*), and Finnish composer Einojuhani Rautavaara’s tribute to van Gogh’s centennial in his opera, *Vincent*.

sonorities, the particular messages of some of the great artists.⁹⁹ Tardieu emphasizes the ephemeral nature of what we experience in the visual world. Artists capture some of this, often in a form of an “inner mirror,” interpreting the world of phenomena in their individual ways. Poets can now transpose these artistic interpretations into their idiosyncratic language. In his own ekphrastic poems, Tardieu believes, rhythm, vocabulary, and syntax take the place of a painter’s lines, hues, and texturing.¹⁰⁰

Transposition, then, aims at recreating through other means what is expressed in the primary art work. This recreation can happen on any point of the scale from the very direct to the very subtle. The following two examples were chosen to mark the external boundaries of this scale. One is a transposition of a parabolic depiction with moral undertones, the other a reaction to an early surrealist painting full of humor and irony.



PLATE 4: Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Parable of the Blind* (1568)
Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples.

⁹⁹“Les quelques pages de ce recueil n’ont pas d’autre objet que de chercher à définir en termes de poèmes, par la transposition des sons en images, des couleurs et des formes en sonorités verbales, le propos particulier de quelquesuns de nos maîtres.” Jean Tardieu, *Figures* (Paris: Gallimard, 1944), p. 14.

¹⁰⁰Jean Tardieu, *Les Portes de toile* (Paris: Gallimard 1969), p. 13.

Brueghel's painting, *The Parable of the Blind* (a.k.a. *The Blind Leading the Blind*; see Plate 4), has inspired Gisbert Kranz to compose a figurative poem that recreates both the optic effect of the image and its allegorical message, in what I perceive as a moving unity of form and content, interpretation of a source and original inspiration.

Gisbert Kranz, *Der Blindensturz*

i
 i
 n
 ks
 liegen
 läßt die kirche
 augenlos,der sich
 hält am stab von
 augenlos,der sich
 hält am leib von
 augenlos,der sich
 hält am leib von
 augenlos,der sich
 hält am stab von
 augenlos,der sich
 hält am leib von
 augenlos,der
 stürzt
 bo-
 den-
 los

An attempt to render both the visual imagery and the beautifully simple message in English would come to something like this:

i
 g
 n
 or
 ing the
 church to the left is
 eyeless, who holds
 on to the staff of
 eyeless, who holds
 on to the body of
 eyeless, who holds
 on to the body of
 eyeless, who holds
 on to the staff of
 eyeless, who holds
 on to the body of
 eyeless, who
 falls
 bot-
 tom-
 less

Kranz himself explains that both the painting and the poem are inspired by the biblical parable (Matthew 15, 12-14). In the context in which it appears, Jesus must clearly be understood to be speaking against the Pharisees, that is, against contemporary theologians. These he considered “blind men leading the blind,” because they revered man-made laws more than God’s commandments and because they took offense with Jesus’ teachings and did not see the light of truth. In Brueghel’s painting we do not see merely two (as in Jesus’ parable) but six men falling into a ditch. The leading man (read: erring theologian and leader) causes the one holding on to him (read: theology student following a blind teacher) to stumble after him. This man, however, has himself become the support for another person who does not see any light for himself and hopes to find the way by holding on to the man in front of him—and so on to the last. If only one of them would have the courage to let go of this deceptive leadership and no longer “ignore the church” (read: the symbol of salvation and divine revelation), he would become seeing and would no longer falter. Brueghel, says the poet, visualizes the parable and keeps its symbolic content. (The German expression “links liegen lassen” is particularly powerful, since it covers both the literal observation that the blind men pass the church, “leaving it behind to their left,” and the figurative meaning of “deliberately not taking notice of it.”)

Among the examples of musical ekphrasis I have collected, Elliott Carter’s *Concerto for Orchestra* achieves a similar, structural as well as thematic transformation of Saint-John Perse’s poem, *Vents*. I will discuss this work in some detail in part II of this study.

When Kris Tanzberg, one of contemporary Germany’s most prolific writers of ekphrastic poems, recreates Giuseppe Arcimboldi’s 1591 painting *Vertumno* (see Plate 5), he emulates both the message and the means employed by the painter, both the characteristics of the emperor Rudolf II (as seen by the artist and as known historically) and the highly idiosyncratic manner of putting together an image on the canvas exclusively of produce of the earth. Reading the unpunctuated text as a continuous lyrical description, we learn (by means of events narrated, but even more so by means of syntax) about the chaos and ambiguity in the life of the portrayed monarch. Rudolf II of Habsburg, Holy Roman Emperor during the years 1552-1612, was a staunch Catholic and as such instrumental in opening Germany to the northbound foray of the Counter-Reformation. A weak and impractical ruler, he eventually lost all effective power and was forced to recognize his brother Matthias as monarch of Hungary, Austria,

and Moravia. The poet's language captures the unfit emperor's scattered mind, his pathetic mix of bragging grandiosity and cries for assistance. Beyond this, however, there is another layer. Just as Arcimboldi's painting deceives our eyes with a composition that appears like a portrait but, upon close inspection, is an assemblage of various kinds of crops, so is there also a second layer in the poem. Focusing on the (partially disjunct) words that stand out by their capitalization, we discern the names of thirty-three fruits, vegetables, and grains. The poet, then, has transposed into verbal language what the painter expressed visually: a portrait of, at the same time, the Emperor Rudolf and Vertumnus, the God of the crops. This would seem like a particularly craftsmanly transposition: a mannerist poem on a mannerist painting.



PLATE 5: Giuseppe Arcimboldi, *Vertumno* (1591)
Skoklosters Castle, Styrelsen, Stockholm.

Kris Tanzberg,¹⁰¹ *bildnis rudolfs des zweiten* (portrait of Rudolf II)

vertumnNUS SCHALmeien lauscht
denkt an palerMO EHREN will AUCH er
die künstler denkt an tivOLI VENERische
krankheiten nimmt man in kauf
wenn man wie auf cAPRI KOSEN kann
neulich schlug ein anaTOM ATEmlos
heisSA LATerna magica entzWEI ZENTAuren
galoppierten vorüber noch wirkt in ihm das
trauMA ISraelit kaM OHNe seinen sauren
kaftAN AN ASTrologe wollt er sein
wollt ihm einen faKIR SCHENken
saß auf seinem diVAN ILLEgitim

vertumnus lauter lachend WEINT RAUBEN will
man mir mÄHREN aufruhr ach du tOBST
in ungARN IKArus SPAR GELd so RETT ICH
noch prag proBIR NEpoten neppen gLAUBen
ich bin im kamPF LAU MENschen mich betRÜBEN
mein schlafgeSELLE RIEf sie sind schon hüben
der willKÜR BISchöfe mich schnöd betrogen
mein bruder mich betROG GENEalogen
rekognoszieren habsburgs schimMEL ONEra
ins meer versenken selbst ein kAP FELonie
als ein auGUR KENn ich als sieGER STEH ich
und bleibe EREmit ja alles seh ich
so arcimboldi male mein gesicht
mein FRUCHTig konterFEI GENier dich nicht.

The poem's continuous text (disregarding line breaks) translates approximately as follows:

vertumnus listens to shawms thinks of palermo he too wishes to
honor artists thinks of tivoli venereal diseases one takes in stride if
one can fondle on capri recently an anatomist breathlessly hurry
broke a laterna magica centaurs galloped past the trauma still reso-
nates in him israeli arrived without his sour kaftan astrologer wanted
to make him the present of a fakir sat on his throne illegitimately //

¹⁰¹This poet, listed as "born" in 1943, is none other than Germany's foremost scholar of ekphrastic poetry himself; note that "Kris Tanzberg" is an anagram of "Gisbert Kranz." Another pen name under which this poet has published (for the short "life time" of 1950-1973) is Carlo Carduna, the name under whom the poem on the "Parable of the Blind Men" was primarily reviewed. One wonders how many more pseudonyms conceal the identity of Kranz.

vertumnus laughing more loudly weeps they want to rob moravia
 from me uproar oh you rage in hungary icarus save money so i may
 save prague try nepots swindle believe i am lukewarm in battle
 humans dishearten me my sleeping buddy shouted they are already
 this side the bishops of arbitrariness betrayed me shamelessly my
 brother betrayed me recognize genealogists drown the white horse
 onera of habsburg in the ocean even a cap felony i know as augur i
 stand as winner and remain hermit yes i see everything thus
 arcimboldi paint my face my fruity counterfeit don't be shy

The capitalized words that form the secondary layer of this poem in its German original (and reproduce many of the crops in the painting) are:

nutshell carrots leek olives apricots tomato salad wheat maize
 poppy pineapple cherries vanilla // grapes corn-ear fruit arnica
 asparagus radish pear foliage plum turnips celery pumpkin rye
 melon apple cucumber barley berry crop figs.

I find a musical equivalent to this kind of poetic transformation in Walter Steffens's 1966 composition *La Femme-Fleur* for flute and piano, after Pablo Picasso's 1947 oil painting by that title. As Monika Fink has shown in her analysis of the piece, the composer achieves a stunning translation of the pictorial structures. Picasso's painting traces a process of abstraction that takes as its point of departure a naturalistically rendered female nude and converts it, in a series of consecutive retouchings, into a sunflower with a woman's face. In correspondence with this pictorial transformation, Steffens uses serial technique to transmute an original melodic idea into a pointillist abstraction of itself. Just as the contours in the portrait are distorted and then restored to form new shapes, so also is the serially developed melodic line broken up and regrouped into new musical entities. Fink argues convincingly that the conclusion of Steffens's piece, in which the flute returns to the elegant melodic phrase of the beginning, is a musical interpretation of the fact that the gaze of the appreciator, having taken in Picasso's transformation of woman into flower, ends by returning to the woman when it discerns her face among the petals.¹⁰²

¹⁰²Monika Fink, *Musik nach Bildern: Programmbezogenes Komponieren im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Innsbruck: Edition Helbling, 1988), p. 105.

Supplementation

Scenario 4b: While Canaletto is a master in rendering all that can be represented visually, there is much about the city of Venice that is by necessity left out in a pictorial representation: the sound of the bells of San Marco and the singing gondolieri, the taste of the salt-laden air and the smell of the water licking the walls of age-old, somewhat dilapidated mansions. Do the houses and the canals have stories to tell? This is where the poet may come in.

The term supplementation¹⁰³ is used loosely. It does not seem to suggest, either that one phenomenon is incomplete in itself, or that there is anything that might make it whole, or raise it to a higher unity. When a poet supplements a work of visual art, he or she adds some of the innumerable non-spatial dimensions that cannot so easily be expressed visually. Supplementations range from sensory experiences (with descriptions of sound, smell, taste, and touch that the image may suggest but not make explicit) all the way to the poet's reading complete gestures into arrested postures, a possible "before" and "after" into the captured moment, feelings and thoughts into depicted characters, etc.

Here are two poets who may stand for two very different ways in which a literary text can flesh out what is visually conveyed.

Richard Wilbur, *L'Étoile*¹⁰⁴

A rushing music, seizing on her dance,
Now lifts it from her, blind into the light;
And blind the dancer, tiptoe on the boards
Reaches a moment toward her dance's flight.

Even as she aspires in loudening shine
The music pales and sweetens, sinks away;
And past her arabesque in shadow show
The fixt feet of the maître de ballet

So she will turn and walk through metal halls
To where some ancient woman will unmesh
Her small strict shape, and yawns will furn her face
Into a littler wilderness of flesh.

¹⁰³Kranz uses "Suppletion." If there is indeed a distinction between the apparently artificial German word and the more common "Supplementation," this native German speaker is not aware of it. It did thus not seem meaningful to reproduce the artificiality in English.

¹⁰⁴*The Poems of Richard Wilbur* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), p. 208.



PLATE 6: Edgar Degas, *L'Étoile* (1876),
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

The American, Richard Wilbur (1921-), reacts to one of Degas's well-known paintings of ballerinas. Describing her posture, he comments on the music she seems to hear, and speculates on her future. Wilbur's imaginative treatment of the painting depicting a dancer frozen in her enraptured movement to a music that remains silent to the viewer is in many ways parallel to the way in which C.M.T. Loeffler transmudializes Maeterlinck's Symbolist marionette play, *La mort de Tintagiles*, to be discussed in part II of this study.

Among the collected poetry of the Chilean Nobel prize-winning poet, Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957), is the following sonnet on Auguste Rodin's famous statue, *Le penseur* (The Thinker), in which the poetess explores the contents of thought that she imagines to be hidden in the sculpted form.

Gabriela Mistral, *El pensador de Rodin*

Con el mentón caído sobre la mano ruda,
el Pensador se acuerda que es carne de la huesa,
carne fatal, delante del destino desnuda,
carne que odia la muerte, y tembló de belleza.
Y tembló de amor, toda su primavera ardiente,
y ahora, al otoño, anégase de verdad y tristeza.
El "de morir tenemos" pasa sobre su frente,
en todo agudo bronce, cuando la noche empieza.
Y en la angustia, sus músculos se hienden, sufridores.
Los surcos de su carne se llenan de terrores.
Se hiende, como la hoja de otoño, al Señor fuerte
que le llama en los bronces ... Y no hay árbol torcido
de sol en la llanura, ni león de flanco herido,
crispados como este hombre que medita en la muerte.

With the chin fallen into the rough hand, / the Thinker remembers that he is
flesh of the bone, / fatal flesh, in front of a naked fate, / flesh that hates death, and
trembled with beauty.

And trembled with
love, all through its ard-
ent spring, / and now, in
autumn, drowns in truth
and sadness. / The “we
must die” passes across
his forehead / in very
sharp bronze, when the
night begins.

And in his anxiety,
his muscles snap, suffer-
ing. / The creases of his
flesh fill with many ter-
rors. / Like an autumn
leaf, he cracks for the
strong God

Who calls him in the
brass ... And there is no
tree crippled / by the sun
of the plains, no lion with
injured haunch / that is
as twisted as is this man
who meditates about
death.¹⁰⁵

PLATE 7:

Auguste Rodin,
Le penseur (1876)
Musée Rodin, Paris



In a manner similar to Gabriela Mistral’s hauntingly beautiful lyrical supplementation of the thoughts captured in Rodin’s “silent” sculpture, Rakhmaninov in his *Isle of the Dead* employs not only the well-known “dies irae” tune, but also rhythms that evoke the sound made by the oars of the rowers moving the funeral barge. The composer thus deepens the impression created in Arnold Böcklin’s famous painting by supplementing a generic as well as a specific component of the soundscape connected with this particular kind of Venetian funeral.

¹⁰⁵Gabriela Mistral, “El pensador de Rodin”, in *Poesías completas*, ed. M. Bates (Madrid: Aguilar, 1970), p. 3. Translation mine.

Association

Scenario 4c: Immersed in Canaletto's depiction of Venice, Gerhold's thoughts begin to wander: to the friend with whom he first saw the city so many years ago, to the Venetian Carnival and its naughtiness, which had always fascinated him, and to Shakespeare's drama *The Merchant of Venice* and Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice*.

Association in ekphrastic poetry is used in the same (somewhat vague) sense as in other fields. A sensory or mental input—an image, a sound, a phrase, a thought—triggers memories or mental links that, if they proceed in several steps, may lead to intriguing domains that may often be rather remote from the stimulus. The pleasure of successful transformation of this kind is to find that the associated field is just far enough to startle and momentarily puzzle the observer, but derived from the stimulus in ways that allows an informed audience to recreate the path of association and delight in the recognition.

My favorite poem in the category of ekphrastic association is one by the Spanish Nobel prize-winning poet Rafael Alberti (1903-). He calls it simply *Giotto*, after the late-medieval painter, not revealing in his title which of Giotto's frescoes inspired him, or even which of the subject matters the artist painted. However, while the content does not disclose the answer to the first question—the poem does not describe any specific pictorial representation—the indirect clues speak a very clear language with regard to the second. As we notice the conspicuously repeated “Praised be, my Lord God” and the list of gifts for which the poet gives thanks, we are powerfully reminded of the famous *Canticle of Brother Sun* by Saint Francis of Assisi, “the earliest poem in any modern language,”¹⁰⁶ which is built exactly this way. Giotto, of course, has painted scenes from the life of Italy's patron saint on various occasions. Besides the extensive series in Assisi and the single panel of the *Stigmatization* in the Louvre, there are the frescoes in the Florentine church of the Holy Cross. The latter inspired Hindemith's symphonic composition *Nobilissima Visione*, a transformation I will explore in part IV of this study. Here are the two texts, along with my English translations.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶This description goes back to F.C. Burkett, one of many translators of the canticle.

¹⁰⁷For the medieval Italian text, I follow Gianfranco Contini, ed., *Poeti del Duecento* (Milan and Naples: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1960), vol. 1: pp. 33-34. My translation, too, is informed by the extensive explanatory notes Contini gives. In addition, I wish to thank my Italian fellow musicologist Roberto Fabbi for improving nuances of my interpretation.

Saint Francis of Assisi,
Laudes Creaturarum
(o Cantico di frate Sole); ca. 1225

Altissimu, omnipotente, bon Signore,
 tue so' le laude, la gloria e l'honore et onne
 [benedictione.

Ad te solo, Altissimo, si konfano
 et nullu homo ène dignu te mentovare.

Laudato sie, mi' Signore, con tucte le tue creature,
 spetialmente messor lo frate sole,
 lo qual'è iorno, et allumini noi per lui.
 Et ellu è bellu e radiante cum grande splendore:
 de te, Altissimo, porta significazione.

Laudato si', mi' Signore, per sora luna e le stelle:
 in celu l'ai formate clarite et pretiose et belle.

Laudato si', mi' Signore, per frate vento
 et per aere et nubilo et sereno et onne tempo,
 per lo quale a le tue creature dà sustentamento.

Laudato si', mi' Signore, per sor'aqua,
 la quale è molto utile et humile et pretiosa et casta.

Laudato si', mi' Signore, per frate focu,
 per lo quale ennallumini la nocte,
 ed ello è bello et iocundo et robustoso et forte.

Laudato si', mi' Signore, per sora nostra matre terra,
 la quale ne sustenta et governa,
 et produce diversi fructi con coloriti flori et herba.

Laudato si', mi' Signore, per quelli ke perdonano
 [per lo tuo amore
 et sostengo infermitate et tribulatione.
 Beati quelli ke 'l sosterrano in pace,
 ka da te, Altissimo, sirano incoronati.

Laudato si', mi' Signore, per sora nostra morte
 [corporale,
 da la quale nullu homo vivente pò skappare:
 guai acquelli ke morrano ne le peccata mortali;
 beati quelli ke se trovarano ne le tue sanctissime
 [volontati,
 ka la morte secunda no 'l farrà male.

Laudate e benedicete mi' Signore et rengratiate
 e serviteli cum grande humiltate.

Rafael Alberti,
Giotto; ca. 1968

Laude, Señor Dios mío,
 al hermano pincel. Él se ha mojado
 de tu divino rostro de rocío
 y al fundirle la sangre, iluminado.

Laude, Señor Dios mío,
 al sometido, abierto hermano muro,
 a la cal fresca, hirviente, resistida
 del aire, del calor, el agua, el frío;
 la hermana cal, su puro
 blanco y perenne sueño de la vida.

Laude, Señor Dios mío,
 al lápiz, a la pluma
 que al hermano diseño delinea.
 Laude al esbozo erguido de la bruma,
 laude a la hermana luz que lo recrea.

Laude, Señor Dios mío,
 a la humana figura,
 ardiente paralela, recta hermana
 de la infinita hermana arquitectura.

Laude, Señor Dios mío,
 al hermano color, a los colores:
 al fraternal violeta,
 al verde, al blanco, al rojo, al amarillo,
 al negro, al oro, al rosa
 y al que es la lengua pintando tus loores
 cuando se eleva airosa
 a humilde, a pobrecillo
 pájaro fiel mi mano:
 el claro azul, el buen añil hermano.

Laude, Señor Dios mío,
 al pausado, solemne movimiento,
 al hierático mar y rígido paisaje.
 Laude al ángel que boda sin el hermano viento,
 simétrico orden sin hastío
 y al salmo rectilíneo del ropaje.

Laude, Señor Dios mío,
 porque me armaste dulce, cariñoso,
 y en una edad oscura
 me concediste el hábito glorioso
 del hermano mayor de la Pintura.

Saint Francis of Assisi, *Canticle of Brother Sun*

Supreme, omnipotent, good Lord, / Praise, glory, honor, and all benediction are yours alone. / To thee alone, Supreme One, are they due, / And nobody is worthy to mention you.

Be praised, my Lord, with all your creatures, / Especially Sir Brother Sun, / Who is the day and you illumine us through him; / And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor, / Of you, Supreme One, he bears the likeness.

Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the Stars, / You created them in the sky, brilliant, precious, and beautiful .

Be praised, my Lord, through Brother Wind / And the air, the cloudy weather, the serene and every weather, / By which you give sustenance to your creatures.

Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Water, / Who is very useful, humble, precious, and chaste.

Be praised, my Lord, through Brother Fire, / Through whom you brighten up the night; / And he is beautiful, joyful, sturdy, and strong.

Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Earth, our Mother, / Who sustains and maintains us / and produces manifold fruits and colored flowers and herbs.

Be praised, my Lord, through those who forgive by virtue of your love, / and endure infirmity and tribulation. / Blessed be those who endure in peace, / for they shall be crowned by you, supreme Lord.

Be praised, my Lord, through our Sister the Death of the Body / From whom no living man can escape; / Woe to those who will die in mortal sin; / Blessed those who will find themselves in your holiest will, / For the second death shall do them no harm.

Praise and bless my Lord, and give him thanks, / And serve him in great humility.

Rafael Alberti, *Giotto*

Praised be, my Lord God, / Brother Brush. He has moistened himself / with the dew of your divine face / and, mixing his blood with it, has illuminated himself.

Praised be, my Lord God, / the submissive, open Brother Wall, / the fresh, boiling lime-wash that resists / the air, the heat, the water, and the frost; / the Sister Lime, her pure / white and perennial dream of life.

Praised be, my Lord God, / the pencil, the pen, / which draws Brother Design. / Praised be the sketch emerging from the fog, / praised be Sister Light, who freshens it.

Praised be, my Lord God, / the human figure, / ardent parallel, upright sister / of the infinite Sister Architecture.

Praised be, my Lord God, / Brother Color, all colors: / the brotherly purple, / the green, the white, the red, the yellow, / the black, the gold, the pink, / and what is the language painting your laurel / when my hand rises graciously, / to humble, little bird faithful: / the clear blue, the good indigo brother.

Praised be, my Lord God, / the solemn, poised movement, / the priestly ocean and the rigid landscape. / Praised be the angel who rows without Brother Wind, / the symmetric order without disgust, / and the exquisitely lined psalm of the attire. / Praised be thou, my Lord God, / for you armed me to be soft and loving, / and in a dark age / granted me the glorious gown of the older brother of Painting.

Alberti's ekphrastic poem on Giotto's frescoes does not literally render what his eyes saw. Instead it captures what his mind associated with the depiction of the saint known for his humility and his respect for all aspects of nature, especially those that we tend to take for granted. These thoughts may have reminded the poet of the many preconditions without which art could not thrive, but which we hardly ever notice unless they are absent or disturbed. By fashioning his poem after the saint's poem also known as the *Canticle of Creatures*, Alberti's poetically expressed gratitude, formally addressed to God, also acknowledges Giotto (for his general gift and for his wisdom to have depicted Saint Francis in such a way as to trigger these thoughts in the viewer) as well as the "Little Brother Who Spoke With the Birds" for his message regarding the interconnectedness of all life on earth and his praise of all the basic values of life that we receive for free.

A case of musical ekphrasis that corresponds closely to the associative stance observed in this poem is found in Per Nørgård's composition, *Prelude and Ant Fugue: Hommage à M.C. Escher*. The Danish composer plays in a witty way both with Escher's 1953 print "*Ant Fugue*" (which, as he writes, "appealed to me as the title for a piece in which all parts of a fugue together, in a complementary way, fill out every moment, without ever 'getting in the way' of each other")¹⁰⁸ and with an indirect quotation from Douglas R. Hofstadter's well-known book, *Gödel, Escher, Bach*. Among the headings of musical passages that, in Hofstadter's book, alternate with the more technical chapters, there are two that appear as if linked by suggestive elisions. The first musical passage in Part II is entitled "Prelude . . ."; it is followed, after a chapter elaborating on "Levels of Description, and Computer Systems," by ". . . Ant Fugue." In this latter passage, Hofstadter reproduces the Escher print that also graces Nørgård's score. "Prelude . . ." is illustrated with Escher's 1963 woodcut, *Möbius Strip II*, in which ants are crawling over the unending surface of the famous twisted loop. Nørgård's own prelude, thus linked in more than one way to the following fugue, is a play on the first prelude from Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, associatively interpreted here in something like an endless loop.

Where the ekphrastic stance is informed by association, it brings the spectator to the fore and often introduces perspectives that the artist, if questioned, might reject as far from his or her mind. Yet even outside the fashionable view that disempowers authorial intention, associations that

¹⁰⁸Letter to the author dated 3 February 1998.

express the subjective framework valid for the beholder without disregarding the objective features of an art work and its “reasonable” context often add unsuspected depth to a depiction innocent of this aspect.

The English poet James Kirkup (1923-) composed the following ekphrastic poem¹⁰⁹ on Paul Klee’s 1939 pencil drawing *Vergeßlicher Engel* (Forgetful Angel):

the hands
in Zen meditation
eyelids lowered
in contemplation
that is self-
forgetting
mouth in the half
smile
of absence
absence of mind
presence
of nothingness
with all and
nothing among
the lifted wings
of unspoken prayer

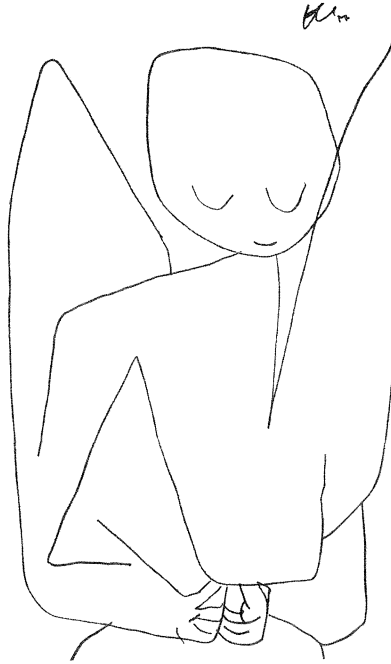


PLATE 8: Paul Klee, *Vergeßlicher Engel*, Kunstmuseum Bern/Paul-Klee-Stiftung

Forgetfulness—normally deplored as a shortcoming—is here interpreted as an asset: contemplation, which discourages distraction and thus aims at an utter contraction of the mind, suggests we “forget” all that is non-essential. The poet, we learn, has converted to Buddhism; hence his interpretation of the angel’s hands as signifying a meditative gesture. Klee himself most probably did not have Eastern religions in mind when he drew the sparse, delicate lines of this creature; for him, the downcast eyes may have denoted quite a different mind set. And yet, Kirkup’s poetic interpretation appears in surprising harmony with the work on which it is based.

¹⁰⁹The poem is published in Gisbert Kranz, *Das Bildgedicht* III, p. 28.

In music, Leoš Janáček's composition *Otce nas* (*The Lord's Prayer*) relates to its pictorial source, Josef Kresz-Mecina's panels by the same title, in a similar, subjectively associative way. As Monika Fink has shown,¹¹⁰ the Czech composer has reinterpreted the Polish artist's devout depictions in accordance with his own convictions. Where Kresz-Mecina portrays Christ as one who protects the earth and distributes to the poor their daily bread, Janáček's people do not turn to divine grace for their food but have a right to it on account of their work. "Give us today our daily bread" is uttered as a demand and leads, in a *crescendo* that develops over an ostinato figuration, into the full choir's shouts for "Bread! Bread!" In this and other instances, the composer departs from the painter's idealistic depiction of a world in which trust in a divine father is comforting to communicate his own, political message.

Interpretation

Scenario 4d: Pondering the seemingly secondary choices Canaletto made in one of his Venice canal paintings, Gerhold reads certain pictorial details in the light of the larger context that surrounds the painting in terms of biography, history, and symbolism. The imposing barge represented is most likely the vessel belonging to the *doge*, the elected ruler over the citizens of the republic of Venice. The role this sovereign played is indicative of the influence and wealth of the city state, long the dominating economic power in the southern Mediterranean. Looking at the other side of this coin, one thinks of the fact that the entire city is precariously built on stilts, forever imperiled by the sea from which it reclaimed its area and to which it owed its affluence.... The Venetian painter would have been acutely familiar with all these subtexts, and Gerhold's next poem on "Canaletto's Venice" will take them into account.

Ekphrasis of the interpretive type can work in at least two ways. In one case, it relies on knowledge shared by painter and spectator, background information accessible to both the spectator and the poet from sources other than the depiction itself. Scenes pointing to historical events or to legendary and mythological accounts lend themselves particularly well to this kind of transformation; places and persons about whom all denizens of a certain culture know much almost invite a reading that may far transcend what a visual artist can freeze into any one moment. (A

¹¹⁰Monika Fink, *Musik nach Bildern*, pp. 122-124.

prime example for this category, unfortunately by far too long to be included in this study, is the 78-page ekphrastic poem by the Spanish poet Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936), *The Christ of Velázquez*.¹¹¹)

W.B. Yeats's *Leda and the Swan* (on the copy of a lost Michelangelo [by Rosso Fiorentino?]) may serve here as a brilliant example for the interpretive type of ekphrastic poetry as briefly outlined above. Whether one thinks of the Michelangelo copy in London's National Gallery, or of Titian's attractive, voluptuous nude entangled with a swan, which is often reproduced beside Yeats's poem, it would almost certainly be impossible for a viewer not raised in a tradition that included familiarity with the myths of antiquity to understand some of the symbols the poet points out to us. Here is the text:

William Butler Yeats's *Leda and the Swan*

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.

. Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

The startled young woman in the first quatrain and the suggestion of her yielding to arousal in the second can still be imagined as following from the visual portrayal. Yet what about "the broken wall, the burning roof and tower" ... "the brute blood of the air"? And what brings

¹¹¹Miguel de Unamuno, "El Cristo de Velazques," *Obras completas VI: Poesía* (Madrid: Escelicer, 1969), pp. 415-493. For a fascinating discussion see C. Cannon, "The mystic cosmology of Unamuno's 'El Cristo de Velázquez'," *Hispanic Review* (January 1960), pp. 28-39. As a complement and contrast, one may wish to read the sonnet *Der Antichrist* by Reinhold Schneider (1903-1958), in which the German poet combined his reaction to the Signorelli fresco in the Cathedral of Orvieto with a not too veiled criticism of Hitler. (R Schneider, "Der Antichrist," *Gesammelte Werke, vol 5: Sonette* [Frankfurt: Insel, 1981].)

Agamemnon into the picture? The clue is found not in the seduced nude but in her encounter with a most unlikely lover: the swan. Confirmed in the painting's caption, this is Leda. In the guise of a swan, Zeus, the highest god in the Greek pantheon, impregnated Leda, who subsequently gave birth to two daughters: Helen and Clythemnestra. The abduction of beautiful Helen caused the Trojan War and the destruction of the city of Troy, "broken wall, burning roof and tower." During that same war, Clythemnestra, left at home in Greece with not much to distract her, became the lover of Aegistos, thus betraying her husband Agamemnon, whom she then murdered upon his return. War and destruction, royal adultery and murder, all caused—or so Yeats seems to say—by the lustful act of a god who, in disguise, approaches a beautiful human female and seduces her. As the poet expresses unambiguously, her sexual fulfillment, "the shudder in the loins," is the direct cause of the momentous destruction brought to both parties of the war. It is also the logical precursor of those "shudders in the loin" that prompted Paris to long for and abduct Helen, and led Clythemnestra and Aegistos to become lovers. Giving in to sexual arousal regardless of love ("the indifferent beak could let her drop") makes humans feel "caught up" and results in causing multiple deaths: of the natives in Troy, the Greek warriors come to reclaim Helen, and of the safely returning King Agamemnon by the hand of his unfaithful wife.

An analogous example in the field of musical ekphrasis exists in John McCabe's *The Chagall Windows* (published in 1975). Here as in Yeats's poem, the artist, the ekphrastically transmedializing composer, and the appreciator are all assumed to share in the same cultural background, which includes the knowledge of the stories that inform both art works. The stories of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, depicted in the order in which they are addressed in Genesis, are present in the titles but not explicitly stated in either the stained-glass depictions or the music. (The Israeli composer Jacob Gilboa who, a decade before McCabe, wrote *The Twelve Jerusalem Chagall Windows: 2 x 12 miniatures for voices and instruments*, makes his and Chagall's works available to a wider audience by setting every other movement as a texted piece in Hebrew, English, and German.)

A second type of interpretive ekphrasis highlights not the reading of the subject matter but that of the representation. Here the poet approaches the painting with a critical eye, commenting on the choices he/she believes the artist to have made, and exploring possible reasons that may

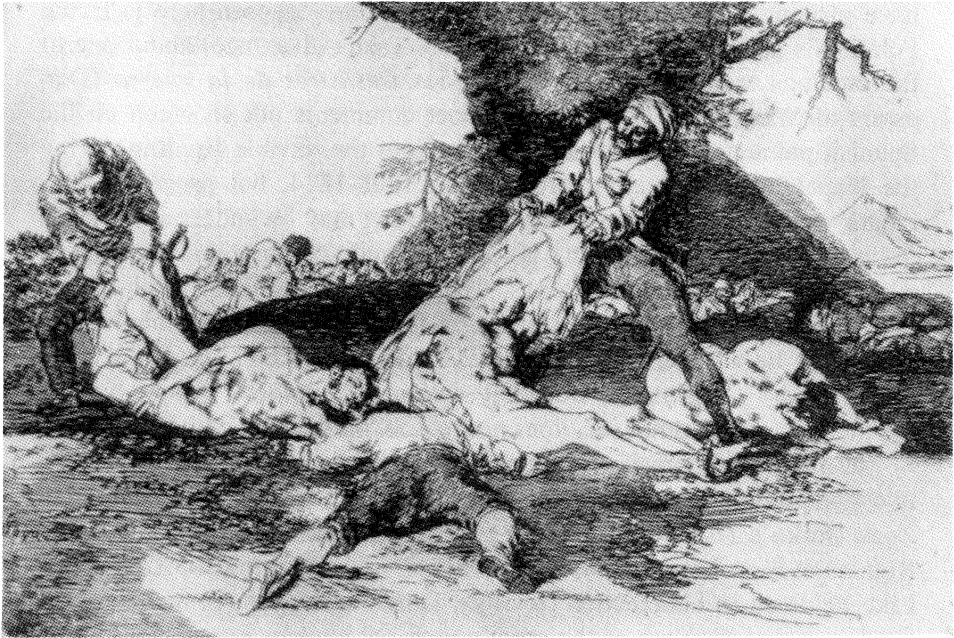


PLATE 9: Francisco Goya, *Desastres de la guerra*, no. 16
Davison Art Center, Wesleyan University

Irving Feldman, “*Se Aprovechan*”

‘They take advantage’—the soldiers need clothes,
while corpses don’t, who have their repose
And nakedness like a second birth,
And nose-down sniff new science from the earth.
So what if nakedness admits the crows!

Such handsome athletic figures,
Twenty centuries of nudes! which now the soldiers
Like bungling apprentices of the muse
Or drunken helpers in a museum cellar,
Yank and tug at to uncover.

And doing so, give that hopeless bric-a-brac
A little of the rhetoric of passion back.
A giant tree with haunches of a mother,
In her anguish torn and flowering and black,
Rears up!—but the head is out of the picture.¹¹²

¹¹²Irving Feldman, *Works and Days and other poems* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1961), p. 85.

have prompted such choices. The example I have chosen here is Irving Feldman's poem "*Se Aprovechan*" (They Take Advantage) about one of the etchings from Goya's aquatint series *Desastres de la guerra* (Disasters of War, plate 9 above). The poet comments not so much on the Spanish painter's rendering of a scene from the terrible fighting during the Napoleonic occupation of Spain in 1808-1814, but provides comments: in the first stanza, on why such looting may be understandable; in the second stanza, on the long tradition of nude painting and drawing to which this representation belongs, despite its not primarily aesthetically motivated topic; in the third stanza, on the rhetorical and symbolic figures. Here he also reflects on the psychological choice he sees the artist making, who projects the tree—the archetypal mother's head—outside the picture: she does not see, does not reason, only reacts with her body.

In musical ekphrasis, a similar stance can be observed, I believe, in two composers' transmedializations of paintings by Turner: Hungarian Zsolt Durko's *Turner Illustrations for violin solo and 14 instruments* and Rumanian-born Marius Constant's *Turner: Three Essays for Orchestra*. Like Feldman in his reaction to Goya, Durko and Constant also seem to focus on what they see as the artist's pictorial choices rather than on the subject matter of the depicted scenes.

A separate category for Gisbert Kranz, a subcategory of the interpretive stance as I see it, is that defined by emotional reactions to a pictorial representation. The impact, effect, or reverberation a depiction may have relies, of course, on interpretation, usually one dependent on details not contained but at best symbolically suggested in the depiction. Just as the interpretive response to a work of visual art draws on information that the beholder has available, ekphrasis that expresses dismay and shock draws on moral reaction or ethical evaluation, empathy and spiritual distress, etc. It can provoke responses from dejection to outrage, and is in this respect distinctly different from the potentially dispassionate transformation of a painting into poetry that shows its author basking in a sophisticated web of erudite allusions. Yet rather than polar opposites, the two modes exist to my mind on a continuum from a primarily rational, value-neutral to a primarily emotional, evaluating response.

Before turning to the essentially different fifth category, a brief comment about ekphrasis in prose is in order. Mack Smith, whose study I mentioned earlier, investigates primarily examples in which verbal representations of visual representations are *included within* a narrative. Even more fascinating to my mind are those few cases in which an entire prose

narrative has come into being *as* the verbalization of a painting. My own favorites in this genre are Maurice Maeterlinck's short story *Le massacre des Innocents*¹¹³ and Gert Hofmann's book-length narrative *Der Blindensturz*.¹¹⁴ Both, interestingly, take up paintings with tragic content by Pieter Brueghel. Maeterlinck's story tells of peasants near Nazareth living through the horrific experience of child slaughter; the Belgian poet's "transformation" thus restores the sixteenth-century Dutch scene painted in *Le massacre des innocents* to its original geographic and historical context. By contrast, the German novelist's critical "interpretation" of *The Parable of the Blind* is grounded not so much in the moral and spiritual message conveyed in the depiction, but in the story he imagines to have happened on occasion of the creation of the painting. He presents the perspective of a group of blind men chosen as models for a painter eager to capture the impression of sightless men stumbling, desperately groping, and helplessly falling—exploited subjects who vacillate between the hope for a good meal in payment of their service and the uncomprehending horror over an artist who requests, for his own benefit, a repeated and thus exacerbated version of the traumatic experience of blind men falling that we see in his masterwork.

Play

The fifth kind of transmedialization is the most light-hearted one. The choice of this stance is often dependent on the expressive intention the visual art work itself communicates. The poetic solutions are characteristically very witty, despite the fact—or perhaps because of the fact—that their explicit verbal content is negligible. Particularly when referring to a work of abstract visual art, a poet may decide to obtain his result in an abstract way, one that leaves out real vocabulary just as the artist deliberately left out the natural world of real objects.

Ekphrastic poems whose main approach to the work of art on which they are based is play may express this stance in ways that could be arranged on a scale between the witty reference with strong depictive components (in the arrangements of lines on a page, words in a line, letters, in a word, etc.), through verbal utterances whose primary objective is onomatopoeic, to purely graphical art created with the typewriter. An

¹¹³First published in *La Pleiade* in 1886.

¹¹⁴Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1985.

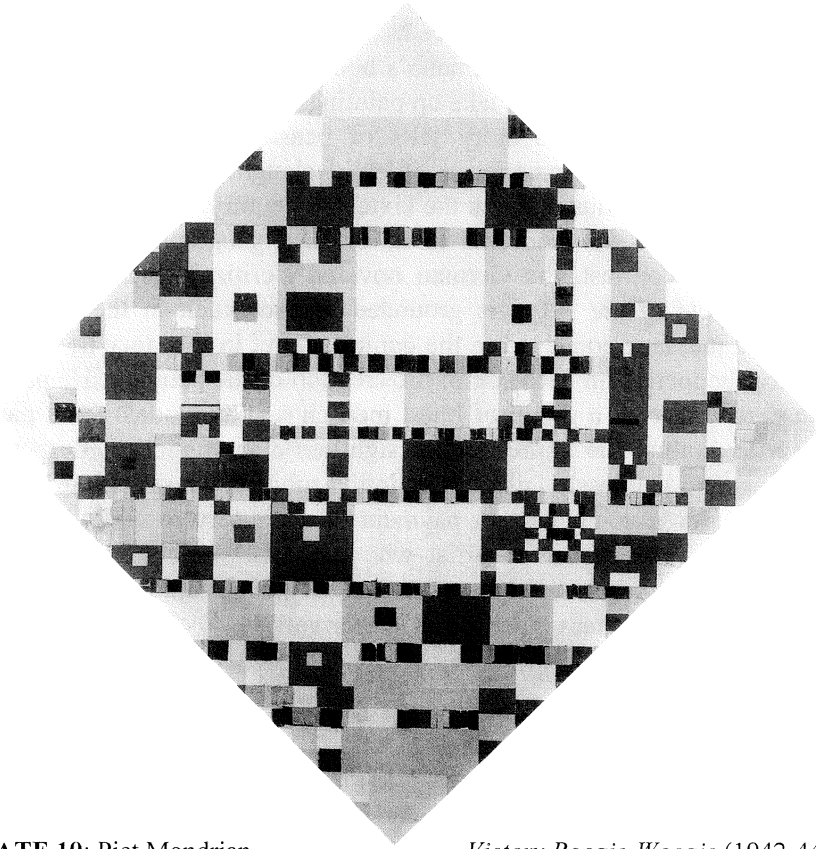


PLATE 10: Piet Mondrian,

Victory Boogie-Woogie (1942-44)

example of the first kind is the piece with which the Belgian poet Ivo Vroom honors the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian. *hommage à mondriaan* is both transposition and play, in that the verbal picture uses for its text the title of a painting on which Mondrian was still working when he died (a variation of his famous *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*), and for its structure a compound of many works in Mondrian's mature style.¹¹⁵

Another Belgian poet, Paul de Vree, reminds the readers of his letter-painting, *For Jean Tinguely* (plate 11a),¹¹⁶ of the Swiss installation artist's clankingly gay contraptions of steel wheels, mallets, and knives that, while

¹¹⁵For an insightful discussion on this example of ekphrasis, see Claus Clüver "Painting into Poetry," in *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 27 (1978), pp. 19-34.

¹¹⁶Published in Paul de Vree, *Verzamelde gedichten* (Nijmegen-Brugge, 1979), p. 293.

Ivo Vroom, *hommage à mondriaan*

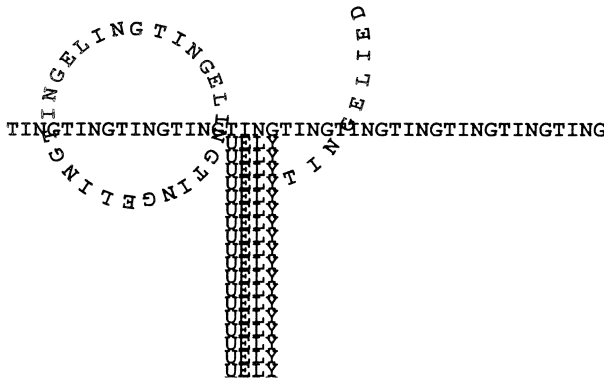
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      b           w           b           w
v i c t o r y v i c t o r y v i c t o r y v i c t o r y
i       o           o           o           o       r
c       g       b       g       w       g       b       g       o
t       v i c t o r y v i c t o r y v i c t o r y v i c t
o       e           o           e           o           e       c
r       g       b       g       w       g       b       i
y           v i c t o r y v i c t o r y v i c t o r y v
v       e           o           e           o           e       y
i       g       b       g       w       g       r
c           v i c t o r y v i c t o r y v i c t o
t       e           o           e           o           e       t
o           g       b       g       w       c
r           v i c t o r y v i c t o r y v i
y       e           o           e           o           v
v           g       b       g       w y
i           v i c t o r y v i c t o r
c       b           w       e           o           e       o o
t       o           o           g       b       g t
o       o           o           v i c t o r y v i c
r       g           g           e           o           e i
y r o t c i v y r o t c i v y r o t c i v y r o t c i v
e           e

```

achieving very entertaining effects of joyous noise and senselessly busy whirling, are devoid of any pretense at artistic “meaning.” Correspondingly, the syllables not only reproduce on the page shapes typical for Tinguely, but add a play based on the letters of his name which includes the circular “tingeling-tingeling-tingeling” (reminiscent both of “Tingeltangel” = honky-tonk and of “tingeln” = making one’s life as a fairground performer), the stuttering “tingtingtingting...” and a cheerfully rising “tingelied” (which suggests that the sounds might even form a song).

The final step in the direction towards typed images without semantics are letters that do not even form syllabic sounds but achieve a purely visual effect. One of the most ingenious examples is Gerhard Rühm’s famous “poem,” *Infinit*, written in response to Constantin Brancusi’s *Endless Column* (plate 11b). Made up entirely of lines of digits that grow and decrease around the central column of zeros, it recreates the visual impression of the sculpture without adding any linguistic message. The piece thus epitomizes an essential aspect of this type of ekphrasis: the retreating of the lyrical contents behind the mere play with the (visual) components of the notational system in which our verbal utterances are normally cast.



0000006
 00000007
 000000008
 0000000009
 0000000001
 0000000009
 000000008
 00000007
 0000006
 000005
 00004
 0003
 002
 01
 0
 10
 200
 3000
 40000
 500000
 6000000
 70000000
 800000000
 9000000000
 10000000000
 9000000000
 800000000
 70000000
 6000000
 500000
 40000
 3000
 200
 10
 0
 01
 002
 0003
 00004
 00005
 0000006
 00000007
 000000008
 0000000009
 0000000001
 0000000009
 000000008
 00000007
 0000006
 000005
 00004
 0003
 002
 01
 0
 10
 200
 3000
 40000
 500000
 6000000
 70000000
 800000000
 9000000000
 10000000000
 9000000000
 800000000
 70000000
 6000000

Plate 11a: Paul de Vree, *For Jean Tinguely*

Plate 11b: Gerhardt Rühm, *Infinif*

In music, a very similar approach is being taken by two of the three composers who, apparently independently of each other, have composed pieces inspired by Paul Klee’s famous *Zwitschermaschine*. Just as Mondrian’s subject matter, in mentioning a “boogie-woogie,” alludes to a musical genre the essence of which he recreates on canvas, inspiring Ivo Vroom to his much-discussed “poetic” transformation, so also do the Englishman Peter Maxwell Davies and the American Gunther Schuller react with wit and (musical) humor to Paul Klee’s interpretation of bird song in the age of modernity, while, as I will show, the German Giselher Klebe takes the same topic much more seriously.