

## Introduction

### Interpreting Klee:

### Fusing the Architectonic and the Poetic

Philosophy, so they say, has a taste for art; at the beginning I was amazed at how much they saw. For I had only been thinking about form, the rest of it followed by itself. . . . [But] the formal has to fuse [*muss verschmelzen*] with the *Weltanschauung*.

Paul Klee (D: 374)

Do not define today, define backward and forwards, spatial and many-sided. A defined today is over and done for.

Klee (N: 59)

The empowering experiencing of living experience that takes itself along is the understanding intuition, the *hermeneutical intuition*, the originary phenomenological back-and-forth formation of the receipts and percepts from which all theoretical objectification, indeed every transcendent positing, falls out. . . . Life is historical.

Martin Heidegger<sup>1</sup>

There are, in the flesh of contingency, a structure of the event and a virtue peculiar to the scenario. These do not prevent the plurality of interpretations but in fact are the deepest reasons for this plurality. They make the event into a durable theme of historical life and have a right [*droit*] to philosophical status.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (EM: 179)

**PAUL KLEE WROTE IN A 1902 DIARY ENTRY,** “Now, my immediate and at the same time highest goal will be to bring the architectonic and poetic painting into a fusion or at least to establish a harmony between them” (D: 125). If, as he put it elsewhere, “art plays in the dark with ultimate things and yet it reaches them,” rarely did the results of this synthesis of

the architectonic and the poetic achieve such brilliance. No painter of his time achieved such results more eloquently or provocatively and always by means of what he himself termed the experiments of “cool Romanticism” and his attempts to work his way out of the “ruins” of tradition (D: 314).

The works and writings of Paul Klee have been unique among painters of the twentieth century for the scholarly and critical scrutiny they have sustained by critics and philosophers alike. His theoretical interlocutors read like a litany of twentieth-century aesthetics itself: figures as diverse as Heidegger, Adorno, Gadamer, Benjamin, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Klossowski. All of these thinkers privileged his “constructive-impressive” venture in their analyses of art and philosophy; in some cases, they constructed their own philosophy on its basis (Figure I-1). Thus, ascertaining Klee’s influence on these thinkers is not only a historical matter but also a philosophically significant task. Indeed, the sequence of these philosophers’ interpretations of Klee reads like the descent of twentieth-century philosophy itself. In the same way, critics’ readings of Klee’s work reflect the history and permutations of modern criticism.

While commentators have focused on Klee’s art, little attention has been paid to their common interpretive project, the relationships between them, the differences constituted in their midst, and the philosophical implications of the enterprise that is divided between them. Insisting on such differences has led often enough instead to skepticism and claims of textual incommensurability. Where in this multiplicity of interpretive standpoints would the facts lie? What could be more problematic than to enter into this plurality, to insist on several paths into a history in which they ultimately diverge?

Still, intertwined in the plurality of these theoretical positions is something of the history or tradition they articulate, not simply in their texts but precisely in the event and the scenario of interpretation itself, truly a *theatrum philosophicum*.<sup>2</sup> We are reminded that the history at stake here involves not only the tradition of Klee interpretation and criticism but also the contested issues of twentieth-century philosophy, in both cases internally divided. Martin Heidegger read Klee to be thinking something similar to his *Denkweg*. In 1954 Will Grohmann, Klee’s friend and interpreter, agreed, claiming that Klee’s 1923 *Wege des Naturstudiums*, a Bauhaus book chartering a pathway beyond the optical, had articulated the “quartering” of artist and object, earth and cosmos “long before Heidegger.”<sup>3</sup> Had Klee

attempted this, and was it the same? Heidegger recognized the importance of Klee; he reportedly stated in 1959 that “in Klee something has happened that none of us grasps as yet” (P: 150). But Heidegger continually invoked the limitations of abstract or technological art. He would not be alone in this condemnation. On the other hand, no less a Klee historian than Otto Werckmeister claimed that Walter Benjamin was close to Klee’s account of abstraction in associating his own understanding of the tragedy of messianic history with Klee’s 1920 watercolor *Angelus Novus*; indeed, “Benjamin was able to gather Klee’s fundamental idea solely from his picture, as he related the picture to his own thinking.”<sup>4</sup>

As these names and dates attest, at stake is not simply a metahistory theoretically constructed but, between them, history itself. In their plurality they articulate and differentiate the events of their mutual history. It is this history, the history that conjoins philosophy to its time in a *mise-en-scène* that often belies it, that conjoins thinkers too often distinguished. Historically this is true of both common and violent examples, as is testified by such notorious agonistics as those, for example, dividing Husserl and Natorp, or Heidegger and Carnap—or more recently, Derrida and Searle. In the case of Klee’s interpreters, there are sufficient issues ciphering differences between thinkers less remote: the differences, for example, between the interpretations of phenomenologists and critical theorists, existentialists and surrealists, hermeneuts and poststructuralists, neo-Marxists and neo-Thomists.

In Klee’s case, this plurality reflects less the failure of transcendental necessities than the force of circumstance, the simple empirical facts. Indeed, Klee’s interpreters emerge from all of these positions and more. Perhaps no painter of the twentieth century provoked such a plurality of voices (“*entrietiens*,” to invoke Blanchot’s term) or revealed such perspective multiplicity. Moreover, Klee himself belongs here; in seeking a fusion between the architectonic and the poetic, he looked to philosophy itself when attempting to transcend the formal. Not only was his self-interpretation up to his interrogators’, arguably emerging from and transforming the same aesthetic archive in classical German thought, but these thinkers themselves heavily relied on its transformation in Klee’s own writings.<sup>5</sup> Whatever else one wants to say about the relation between philosophy and painting, Klee’s work reminds us that philosophers and painters, knowingly or not, do not lead separate lives. Historians and philosophers, artists and critics find themselves sharing a similar lot, their mutual expertise always at risk.

As a result, no one-sided adjudicative perspective will suffice. The hope for a successor theory that might unite or reject all these competitive positions in revealing the meaning of Klee's work is internally undone: granted the differences out of which such claims would emerge, which might be held to definitively survive the *agon* of refutation unscathed? The hope for simple rational analysis or resolution seems to have waned. Against this there seems to be only the melancholia of withdrawal, to cite the title of a 1925 work by Klee, a *Crescent Moon over the Rational* (see the cover of this book). Here the constructivist requisites of the Bauhaus are employed to articulate their own incompleteness, limit, and finitude, once again a synthesis of the poetic and the architectonic that complicates interpretation whenever it arises.<sup>6</sup>

Such complications have led many to abandon the task of interpretation for the high ground of pragmatic or received professional wisdom or disciplinary standards.<sup>7</sup> Such reductions seem equally implausible however—and in any case not simply a matter of pragmatics. Here too, observations remain theory-laden. The leading critics are evidence that the separation of the critical historical and the philosophical task is mythical. Even were we to limit the argument to formal standards (or, to speak the language of neo-Kantianism on which it relies, the “form” of received knowledge), the results would remain tautological and leave the question of interpretation begging.<sup>8</sup>

The interpretive protocols of thinkers no less contested than Heidegger and Benjamin have already intervened against such attempts to purify or professionalize the standards or form of knowledge. There would be others. Gadamer would argue for the renewal of the classical aesthetic tradition in Klee's work, while Adorno would find in it evidence for the neo-Marxist criticism of modernity. Sartre, on the other had, aligning Klee with the surrealism Klee influenced, would see in his work the failure of artistic modernity to engage its own history. Merleau-Ponty would invoke the complicated relation between the poetic and the architectonic in Klee's work as a model for enriching the phenomenology and the imaginary symbolics of embodied experience. Deleuze instead invokes Klee's ironies to contest such self-sufficient “organics,” while Lyotard focused on what he called the figure-matrix in Klee's work, whose exhibitions of the unconscious contested the imaginary symbolics of Phenomenology's lingering Romanticism. And Foucault invoked Klee's work to contest the similitudes of classical resemblance in general.

The list obviously could be extended. Heidegger apparently found Klee's writing too neo-Kantian. If neo-Kantians or positivists themselves seemed too disconnected from "particularism" to be concerned with a painter such as Klee, even these found effect in such critics as Herbert Read and Clement Greenberg. Read, on the one hand, emphasizing Klee's formalism, compared Klee's writings to Newton's accomplishments in physics and referred to them as the *Principia Aesthetica* of a new era.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, if Greenberg famously understood modern painting through the tenets of purity, abstraction, and the scientific, he claimed that one has to bring in "the history of German idealist philosophy . . . in order to account for him. *Multum in parvo*: Klee is a beautiful example to refute those who talk about modern art's poverty of content."<sup>10</sup> As will become evident, Klee refused to choose between form and content, the architectonic and the poetic. As a result, it is astounding how so many figures, with so many theoretical protocols and agenda, would invoke Klee on their behalf.

In the specter of contemporary debates, the interpretation of Klee's work thus must embrace both this plurality and the concrete, denying the antinomies of form and content, universal and particularism outright. Such antinomies miss the complexity of the problem raised by the interpretation of the works of art. Among other things, some will argue, this overlooks the significance of the materiality or sensuousness on which it relies. The problem of the sensuous cannot be mistaken for the instantiation of a concept, token of some type; classically understood, the link between the mimetic and the sensuous remains more complex, overdetermined not only by history and concept but by power and desire. The problem inherent in art's sensuality thus cannot be divorced from all that remains unsayable in such rationalist reductions, nor from the violence that seemed to accompany them. This was Klee's explicit understanding of abstraction, linking it (as had Worringer before him) to the "ruins" of history: "The more horrible this world (as today, for instance), the more abstract our art" (D: 313).

The task of interpreting Klee thus relies, as did many of these figures for whom Klee became so significant, on the difference and the virtue of the particular.<sup>11</sup> Beyond the antinomies of the universal and the particular or form and content, this task relies on the particular not in order to derive what the former account seeks, namely decidability and objectivity, to the extent that we can have it. Moreover, it does not deny that the concrete is

contestable and underdetermined, that is, multiple, as these interpretations bear witness. Nor, finally, should such appeals to the concrete be confused with the myth of the given, to immediacy—or even Phenomenology’s *die Sache selbst*. Doubtless the phenomenology of lived experience, however necessary for understanding the art work, involves an appeal to the concrete. The contrast is that not only are such matters not intuited but interpreted; they are multiple and historically divergent and constructed. But what does this entail?

Undertaking an analysis of Klee’s work in isolation becomes as futile as attempting to find a successor theory or final interpretation. To read Klee only through Benjamin, or only through Heidegger, or Adorno or *any* one perspective, would be insufficient. As Wittgenstein famously put it, “interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning.”<sup>12</sup> Thinking so ignores the multiplicity out of which each author writes; thoughts encroach on one another, contest one another, and respond to one another, knowingly or not. In this encroachment they echo or refute, extend and deepen each other, adding new insight and challenge to one another’s viewpoints. Like any linguistic expression, such encroachments in this way link them to meanings beyond their initial context, even beyond their initial natural language or cognitive grasp. In this respect, the particular and the concrete are never isolated, nor given independently or unconditionally, an *abstractum*. The particular is never particular *simpliciter*—even when the universal is problematic. To isolate figures, to subsume Klee beneath the unity of an *oeuvre*, is no less mythic than to isolate facts. With Klee’s musicological tropes in mind, granted his denial of painting as a spatial art, the task at stake involves less the construction of a timeless propositional space than the articulation of the history and the multiplicity constituted in these figure’s “interludes.”<sup>13</sup>

This is not to claim that such a history is devoid of formal implication. Thinkers from Husserl to Badiou have insisted that such multiplicity becomes a formal or structural matter. As will become further evident, humanists’ models of dialogue consequently would be as incapable of capturing this structural difference as scientists’ models of reduction or explanation.<sup>14</sup> Both realms dodge the problem of the plural as well as its adjudication. Instead, it would be necessary to articulate a concrete and structural plurality originating in the very diversity and contestability itself. To use Klee’s language, rather than simply isolatable individuals, we will need to articulate such a multiplicity through the tension (*Span-*

nung) of its “dividuals” (N: 239).<sup>15</sup> In doing so, to return to a term of Klee’s Romantic predecessors, we will confront the *Wechsel* or series of exchanges that Klee’s work outlines in its interpreters, one to which it is not only (legitimately) susceptible but also uniquely sustains.<sup>16</sup> In this regard, Klee’s work exemplifies what Merleau-Ponty, following Kant’s account of aesthetic experience (provoking thought without culminating in a final determination), sought to justify.<sup>17</sup>

As for the history of art works, if they are great, the sense we give to them later on has issued from them. It is the work itself that has opened the field from which it appears in another light. It changes *itself* and *becomes* what follows; the interminable reinterpretations to which it is *legitimately* susceptible change it only in itself. And if the historian unearths beneath its manifest content the surplus and thickness of meaning, the texture which held the promise of a long history, this active manner of being, then, this possibility he unveils in the work, this monogram he finds there—all are grounds for a philosophical meditation. (EM: 179)

Such assertions wax metaphysical. Still, what Adorno aptly calls the hieroglyphic character of Klee’s work, one he in turn generalized to characterize all works of art, justifies at least an instance for such characterization, the multiplicity it entails and the history that opens and develops through it (AT: 124). The *Wechsel* such a development presupposes was never very far from the interpretive renderings (and the problem of reading itself) in many of Klee’s interpreters. Arguably, their various claims concerning the interpretation of Klee’s art continuously depended on it. The remnants of this *Wechsel* can be seen in claims such as that regarding the circularity of intuition and concept, or the forehaving (*Vorhabe*) of tradition and its reinterpretation. But it can perhaps still be found more remotely in discussion of Klee’s art in the issues of the withdrawal and particularity of the sensuous in relation to the abstractions of instrumental rationality in Heidegger or Adorno, or the “oscillation” that Lyotard claimed takes place in Klee’s work between the primary processes of the unconscious and their artistic exhibition. The figuration and decipherment of such contextual interdeterminations is a task that is critical both to art and philosophy.

This book thus approaches its task within a certain polyvalence of both figures and levels; the texture of its subject matter is thus structured and divided between the history of concepts and facts. There is the task of interpreting Klee himself. There is the task of differentiating the diversity of voices, or “polylogue,” to use Julia Kristeva’s term, in which Klee’s

works became intelligible. Finally, there is the very problem of interpretation, which subtends and outlines the task of adjudication. None of these take place in analytic isolation. It emerges less, as is standardly thought, as a matter of the analysis of problems and figures than as a different history, an operative history that emerges in and through figures as historical as Klee himself. Logically, it means we can no more rest easily with the history of ideas than we can with the factual history of painting or thinking. While we do not, for example, usually think of figures such as Adorno and Merleau-Ponty together, we discover after reading their mutual analyses of Klee that we should. The same is true of thinkers equally thought to be distinct: Gadamer and Benjamin, Heidegger and Deleuze, or Sartre and Bataille. Such considerations reveal a general phenomenon concerning the difference between the rationality of our ideas and the history of ideas; our philosophical attempts to carve up the history of twentieth-century philosophy by figures, schools, and nations or continents makes for stable but incomplete history. Klee's various interpreters reveal that too. Their mutual works do not reveal the simple facts and categories of historical analyses but (again to cite Merleau-Ponty's terms) outline an encounter and a relationship of "thicker" identity. Clarifying or adjudicating the differences at stake requires, to use Klee's own terms, precisely the interplay of the poetic and the architectonic. And perhaps we would do well to let the problem that Klee's work itself opens sustain us here too.