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## “Bittersweet Island” as Encoded Epithet: Klee in the Making

**Abstract:** Present article offers a new way of ‘reading’ Paul Klee’s work “Insula Dulcamara” (1938) in its ‘pictorial language’. After a critical evaluation of a similar approach on the same work in its pros and cons the essay suggests that the very title of the work is actually encoded in the picture, providing a criterion and a visual mapping for its proposal. The method consists in obtaining the group of signs which forms a certain gestalt in the picture as Latin letters hidden in pseudo-Arabic script. In this way Latin letters are deformed to a point where it is not possible to be recognized immediately in their limits of legibility. After reading the whole sign group letter by letter the essay then goes on to compare Klee’s famous “making visible” remark with Cézanne’s much discussed “*la réalisation*”. Drawing conclusions from there, the article ends in showing how this masterpiece of Klee might be considered as an epithet of the artist in its etymological origin as an “emplacement”; a dwelling place of his own making.

**Keywords:** Paul Klee, Insula Dulcamara, Encoding & Decoding, Epithet, Cézanne, *la réalisation*, Making & Being, Being & Becoming.

## Kodlanmış Rumuz Olarak “Bittersweet Island (Acı-Tatlı Ada)”: Klee’nin Oluşumu

**Öz:** Mevcut makale, Paul Klee’nin “Insula Dulcamara” (1938) çalışmasını ‘piktografik dil’de ‘okuma’nın yeni bir yolunu sunuyor. Aynı çalışma hakkında artı ve eksi yönleriyle benzer bir yaklaşımın eleştirel bir tarzda değerlendirilmesinden sonra, makale, eserin tam da başlığının aslında resimde kodlandığına dair bir okuma önerisini bir kriter ve görsel bir harita ekseninde şekillendirerek çiziyor. Bu şekillendirme girişimi için kullanılan yöntem, sözde Arap alfabesinde gizlenmiş Latin harfleri olarak resimde belirli bir bütünlük oluşturan işaretler grubunu elde etmeye dayanıyor. Bu minvalde, Latin harfleri, okunabilirlik sınırları içinde hemen tanınmanın mümkün olmadığı bir noktaya kadar deforme olmaktadır. İşaret grubunun tamamını harf harf söktükten

sonra makale, Klee'nin ünlü "görünür kılmak" ifadesini Cézanne'ın çokça tartışılan "*la réalisation*" (*gerçekleştirme*) fikriyle karşılaştırmaya devam ediyor. Buradan elde edilen sonuç bakımından da araştırma, Klee'nin bu şaheserinin bir "yerine koyma / yerleşme" olarak, bir "rumuz" cihetinde, sanatçının kendi oluşumunun mekanı olarak nasıl açılabilirliğini göstererek sona eriyor.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Paul Klee, *Insula Dulcamara*, Kodlama ve Kodlamanın Sökülmesi, Rumuz, Cézanne, *la réalisation*, Yapma ve Olma, Olma ve Oluşagelme.

"*Insula dulcamara*" (1938)<sup>1</sup> without doubt is one of the masterpieces of 20<sup>th</sup> century art and most probably intended as such by Klee himself especially considering its dimensions which is highly unusual for painter's oeuvre being his largest work (88 x 176 cm). The painting carries Klee's typical style by all means: unorthodox mixing techniques allowing surprising chemical processes to happen between variety of applied and supportive materials and latest period's hallmark of growing urge to combine sign and image under letter forms. However, whether this allogamy as a 'pictorial language' should be taken as an intense metaphor - which Sartre deemed impossible as an identification of writing and painting -<sup>2</sup> or as a pure literal expression is a deciding factor when it comes to "*Insula Dulcamara*". As such, it is my intention in this essay to show that we are faced with a pure literal expression when it comes to this very intentional, to the point masterpiece.

Since I made my intention clear from the outset, I should start by an impressive interpretation of this work by Chris Pike in his essay (2014): "Signing Off: Paul Klee's '*Insula dulcamara*'". It is impressive in the sense that Pike literally reads the name "Paul" beginning with a 'letter-sign' of what seems to be a "P" which lies exactly at the middle of the painting occupying an obvious central role (Pike 2014: 6). He then goes to complete the rest of the letters with the help of the

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Klee, *Insula dulcamara*, 1938, 481. Oil and colored paste on paper on burlap; original frame, 88 x 176 cm; Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern.

<sup>2</sup> "Sartre's condemnation of Klee's "greatness and error" —which lies, he claimed in "Klee's attempt to make a painting both a sign and an object." (Watson 2009: 90).

neighborhood signs towards -viewer's- right. However, in order to find the last two letters "u" and "l", Pike in his reading of the word "Paul" includes bottom part of the right side of a rather intertwined 'sign group' that elongates over letter/sign "P" towards left side of the picture (Pike 2014: 6). Yet he doesn't stop there and suggests an Arabic script with the change of alphabet from Latin to Arabic in order to introduce the last name "Klee" with the whole right and upper part of the intertwined group of signs (Pike 2014: 7-9). In this way Pike is able to pick out the whole name "Paul Klee" in the picture partly Latin and partly Arabic. He then goes on to suggest a Derridean reading for further interpretations as well as an interesting comparison with Poussin's "Et in Arcadia Ego" (1637-38) (Pike 2014: 26-30). However, rather than tackling with the semantic side of his interpretations I will focus critically on his visual reading of the letter shapes "P-a-u-l K-l-e-e" in the painting and hopefully suggest my own instead which is not essentially different from Pike's in terms of basic approach but differs radically in its method and outcome.

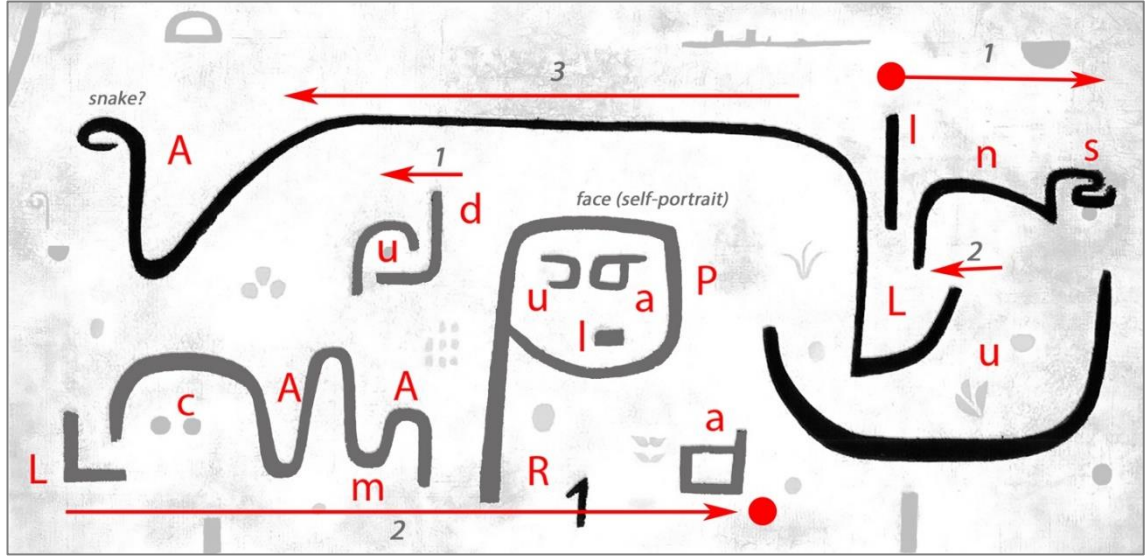
Let me begin by arguing that although Pike's interpretation of signs as alphabet letters (both Latin and Arabic) has certain merits, I believe he mistook the "P" sign by reducing it to be an indicator of the name alone. He is right in his identification of letters "a", "u" and "l" in Latin alphabet though but wrong in assuming that these belong to the name "Paul" at least in an exclusive sense. I also agree that the middle sign stands for letter "P" but I think that it is a broken (its 'broken leg' being number "1") yet somehow legible letter "R" as well. More to the point, while I grant that the right and upper 'sign group' has an apparent Arabic feel to it, I don't think we should take them literally either wholly or partially, as Pike does, as an Arabic script. Although that 'sign group' clearly gives the impression of Arabic letter shapes, they do so but formally; rather they are Latin letters in Arabic disguise, and this seems to be the way Klee hides his painting under a riddle as a mystery in broad daylight. In other words, apart from the apparent sunrise/sunset and ship image at the top and the two upright short lines

at bottom, all signs of the picture gather into a meaningful 'gestalt' the parts of which do not add to the whole. Echoing Cézanne, "the truth in painting" is missing here. This is because they are meant to be read literally as much as they are looked at visually and that should, I believe, includes not only Klee's first (not full) name but also the very title of the painting. That's why I strongly suggest that the title "Insula dulcamara" can be read literally into the visual 'gestalt' not as an extra in the sense of being a mere interpretation but as an extra in the literal sense; "on the outside" as an epithet;<sup>3</sup> an epitome of the artist as his art in the making. In that sense "Insula dulcamara" becomes the archetypal and symbolic work of his career in which Klee the artist becomes his art as a result of a lifetime achievement.

In order to elucidate these claims, let me give you my own 'reading' of this "pictorial language" as a whole. My suggestion is simple: the title of the painting "Insula Dulcamara" is hidden in the picture under the visual signs that look like Arabic script, yet they all are Latin letters disguised in Arabic letter shapes. In other words, Klee used one alphabet as an image (Arabic) to hide other as a sign (Latin) by way of encoding Latin letters in pseudo-Arabic script. This way he can bend Latin letters out of their shape forcing their legibility to their limits including at times Arabic script's reverse writing direction which he applied to Latin letters not only in their direction but also in their shape as if seen from a mirror as he sees fit. Klee actually did it also later in "Tod und Feur" (1940) but this time in an obvious manner when he used capital and small letters of "Tod" (Death) both inside and outside of the skull -shall we say- self-portrait. After these preliminary clarifications my 'reading' imposed on the picture visually looks like this:

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<sup>3</sup> "Epithet" as *epi* (on) + *tithenai* (placed): adjective, attribute, title, surname, nickname.



[Figure 1 – Visual Mapping/Decoding/Reading of Paul Klee, *Insula Dulcamara*, 1938, 481; oil and colored paste on paper on burlap; original frame, 88 x 176 cm; Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern.]

In this visual mapping which serves more or less as a decoder we must not rely on a single formula but beware of every surprise that artist presents in order to achieve the gestalt figure of sign/image-letter synthesis. In that sense as an encoder Klee is not only writing but also drawing at the same time. And he is deforming the Latin letter shapes by giving them the impression of Arabic script and in this way, he reveals the truth of writing in its bare essentials; letters are first and foremost visual forms, and they are born out of the pictures that evolved into signs and then into abstract letter forms especially with the invention of modern alphabet which relies solely on phonemes. In a way he is covering the whole evolutionary cerebral process and historical period from the first sign/image to the letter forms of the writing and alphabet in one single act.<sup>4</sup> But before going into semantic context I must explain the suggested encoding in detail.

We begin with the upper right side of the sign group in the picture. We find the "I" there (hence the irony; the beginning is already contained) at the top right

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<sup>4</sup> "When I write the word wine with ink, the ink does not play the primary role but makes possible the permanent fixation of the concept wine. Thus, ink helps us to obtain permanent wine. The word and the picture, that is, word-making and form-building, are one and the same." (Klee 1961: 17).

and then proceed towards right finding out that the next two letters "n" and "s" are connected as in a handwriting but surprisingly reversed in their appearances. We then go downward continuing with the letter "u" which looks like a section of a large bowl and a little over towards left we find the letter "l" (in agreement with Pike but for different reasons). And now comes the biggest contortion of the whole picture: from "l" to "A" and in order to complete the first name of the title "Insula" we see an elongation of the letter "l" from its vertical line extending to the far left by bending considerably and then turning into capital letter "A" which is turned upside down giving it an Arabic script impression with a fine twist (which also seems to give the impression of an image of snake; just a curious inhabitant of the "Insula" or a symbol of a dystopian Eden?). As one can see the only formula that we can rely on for this kind of free forming depends on the assumption that relatively rigid and inflexible Latin letters are concealed/encoded visually in fluid and flexible Arabic letter shapes and these letter shapes can in turn become visual sign/images. Coming to the second name of the title "dulcamara" we see a strange doubling shape/sign at the top left of sign/image-letter "P". The letter is both "d" and "u"; "d" as both signs and "u" as a single sign yet upside-down. Then we come to "L" at the far left at bottom which also looks like a rigid corner sign. And before reaching the ambiguous "P" and/or "R" there is this winding line which is more like a signature containing a number of letters; inverted "c", inverted "A", capital and curved "M" which is made up of two upside-down capital and curved "A"s.

So now we reach to the sign/image-letter "P" which is also "R" as we mentioned but in what sense? Firstly, I propose "P" as Klee's self-portrait in 'sign/image-letter' the letters of which are contained in the enclosed shape of the "P" rather than laying outside of it as Pike suggests.<sup>5</sup> Then number "1" I took as the leg of "R" but broken off in order to serve two things at once in their sheer

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<sup>5</sup> Although this cannot be ruled out since I agree with the letters; "a", "u" and "l". May be Klee too was aware or discovered on the way this doubling of the letters which has given him the inspiration for skull in "Tod und Feuer" (1940).

ambiguity; number "1" as the symbol of individuality as well as identity and also a proper "R" would be too obvious for decoding. So "P" as broken "R" is the first letter of "Paul" and also three signs in the enclosed part of "P" -which looks like a face- can be read as letters; "a", "u" and "l". This way we finish our 'topographical text' with the letter "a" at the bottom right of "P" completing the word; "dulcamara". When we look at the 'sign group' of the visual map as a whole we see that it can be divided into two sub groups corresponding exactly to the words "Insula" and "dulcamara". This is the gist of the 'gestalt figure' here: whole and parts (both the words and the individual letters) work against each other in such a way that the whole is always already missing yet also there to guide our perception giving it an ideal sense in its uncanny presence/absence. This 'ideal sense' is further enhanced by Klee in a somewhat transcendental manner by embedding the very title in the picture constructing the "pictorial language" in the literal sense. In this way the word is encoded in a sign/image and opens up a horizon of possibilities for further 'meta' readings.

I will deal with few of them beginning with the relation of maker and the work insofar the creative act is concerned. Klee himself never relied on the finished product in creativity. According to him "form" is dead so "gestalt" should be the proper name for it because it includes life and function and in that sense formation rather than form must be the locus of concern for the artist (Klee 1961: 8. 59). This is further specified by Heidegger -when he saw Klee's work- calling them "Zustände" (Young 2014: 161). Apart from Heidegger's typical hermeneutical style when it comes to interpret this word as "stand-ready-before-one" (Young 2014: 161) it means: "state of things in their becoming". In other words, objects are always already subject to becoming in their standing out in existence. This I think perfectly defines what Klee is after in his art. The abstract is the formal principle that gives what he calls chaos or motion an order. In that sense forces of nature are measured, quantized by mathematical, geometrical principles by the artist (Klee,



1961: 8. 79) who molds them into a form<sup>6</sup> but this form cannot be final; a mere *ergon*. In order to satisfy his artistic urges which are outlined in his "creative credo" (Klee 1961: 8. 76-79) Klee in a way hangs abstract forms pending in-between 'absence/presence' as they gain figurative signs obeying the free flow of imagination which rely on unconscious symbolism and mimetic impulses in their surrealistic and otherworldly poetic aspect.

In that sense, unconscious symbolism and mimetic impulses aside, Klee's famous maxim "making visible" rather than "reproducing what is visible" seems to be nothing but a reformulation of Cézanne's "*la réalisation*". As a meticulous student of Cézanne, Klee learned from him that an artist should rather dwell in a limbo of a peculiar sort; he has to construct his work like a suspension bridge between being (that which stands, remains etc.) and becoming (that which flows, changes etc.). While the impressionists fully realized the 'becoming' part with their "in one session" *alla prima* technique, post-impressionist Cézanne equipped with the same technique plus his "*la réalisation*" as a method is concerned with both parts of this perennial philosophical problem in its plastic aspect under form and formation. The famous apple image in a Cézanne painting is 'just there' in its rhythmic and almost vibrational stance; it never claims to be final as a form being always on the verge, yet there it is; it appears. His restless brush strokes weave the image of apple into the pictorial space in their inseparability over the principle of harmony achieved between the balance of warm and cool color contrast as a way of construction that was 'realized' for the first time in the history of painting. In other words, he used *alla prima* not to depict but to construct and his construction as a painting leaves behind the traces of becoming on the 'constructed' depictions.

This is the underlying meaning of Klee's 'making visible' who made his early career as a painter a dedication to conclude Cézanne premises with the lessons learned from Cubism. When it comes to the later and more mature period Klee

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<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to see how Klee defines his creative state of mind in the manner of a demiurge echoing Platonic cosmogony in *Timaeus*.

realized that his inner thirst for poetry cannot be satisfied unless he has formulated his painting in this ultimate direction. The allogamy of sign/image-letter hybridization typical to this period is nothing short of a visual poetry. To be sure before that he used letter shapes in many occasions in a purely visual manner. In that sense we must not look at his urge in his mature period to synthesize sign/image with letters and words as a mere painterly interest. His passion is rather a lifelong striving towards an 'ideal creative individual' he outlined long before at the beginning of his career when he was only twenty-two years old:

First of all, the art of living; then as my ideal profession, poetry and philosophy, and as my real profession, plastic arts (...). (Lazzaro 1964: 16).

Hence, the title "Insula dulcamara" in its meaning as bittersweet (Lat., dulce (sweet)+mare (bitter); the unity of tragedy and comedy; art of living?) island (insula: topography; topos (place)+graphos (drawing); stage?) and the rather open symbolism of sunrise/sunset with a ship close to the later appears to be a symbol *per se* in the form of an encoded epithet in which Klee the artist aims to realize himself in that particular period of life as the totality of these roles (a lofty ambition) he outlined in this quotation. The etymology of epithet (*epi* (on) + *tithenai* (placed)) is especially helpful here when we see that this 'realization' is indeed the kind that takes place within the *topos* of the painting as 'placed on' or better yet as 'emplaced': the artist literally dwells in his art. When Cézanne named his artistic experience as "*la réalisation*", the "mental habit" of understanding art from the end product since Kantian formalist aesthetics naturally tends to focus on the 'making' without 'realizing' the fact that this famous expression indeed is all about 'being' and in-between the two is the 'coming to be' of the artist in his own making.

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