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CULTURAL SOURCES OF VERSE:
A POEM BY EUGEN GOMRINGER

Introduction

Eugen Gomringer is often considered a model German-speaking concrete poet. In the 1950s and '60s his poetry was strongly rooted in the contemporaneous culture of the region, namely in Swiss concrete painting, the Swiss style of typography, the functional design of the Bauhaus tradition, and the Stuttgart-based modern theories of aesthetics. Some of these cultural practices were for Gomringer just a point of departure, on the basis of which he constructed his own poetic means that would express aims and interests similar to his favourite visual arts and design. Yet some other elements of culture, which could be simply transferred to the field of poetry, such as the International Typographic Style, were directly implemented in Gomringer's poetic books. Finally, some examples of the affiliated visual works were themselves included in the volumes of his poetry, as cover designs or illustrations.

In this paper the cultural sources of Gomringer's poetry will be briefly examined, with special reference to the poet's book, *33 konstellationen*, and to the verse construction of one text from that volume. The paradoxical structure of that poem, simultaneously complicated yet simple, will be shown to be rooted in the cultural climate of Gomringer's artistic and professional environment.

Concrete painting

Gomringer's choice of the name "concrete poetry" was mostly inspired by "concrete art," as understood and popularized by Max Bill. Bill, as a painter,

created rational, geometrical, pure, and clear visual constructions that used their material – as he noted – "functionally." Bill's name for his works came from Theo van Doesburg's manifesto of concrete art from 1930, a manifesto which significantly reversed the most common understanding of the words "concrete" and "abstract." Van Doesburg distinguished between paintings abstracted from reality, gradually distancing themselves from a representation of world, and those already fully independent of any representative or symbolic functions, those which were simply themselves. For van Doesburg there was nothing more real than colours, lines and planes. This art was supposed to be a product of the spirit of geometry. "Concrete" here meant a materialization of something otherwise only to be found in the mind (Herwig 2001: 61, 81-90, 100).

Max Bill, however, did not limit his use of the word "concrete" to van Doesburg's works and other constructivist tendencies in art. Bill organized exhibitions of concrete painting at which he also included the early works of various artists that at some point had followed van Doesburg's idea of concrete art, such as Hans Arp or Wassily Kandinsky (Herwig 2001: 57, 99). There would have been nothing significant in Bill's exhibitions, in his preference for calling them "concrete" and in Gomringer becoming inspired by this type of thinking, if the above mentioned works had not previously been called "abstract." In fact, from 1910 to 1930 none of the masters of this art called their works "concrete" (Cobbing and Mayer 1978: 11). Perhaps at this point it should be underlined that Bill's tactic was not to call a specific group of "abstract geometric" works "concrete," but to reverse the thinking about all abstraction. His choice, as also Gomringer's choice, was ideological. They both noticed the fact that to call abstract works "abstract" or "non-representative" still assumes some kind of relation to the outer world, however negative or distanced. "Concrete" meant for them a conviction that the materials of art can be autonomous and absolute (Herwig 2001: 56-57). Nevertheless, Gomringer himself was largely inspired by Bill's version of concrete art: mathematical, reduced, constructivist. Later in his writings the poet admitted that his choice of the name "concrete poetry" had also been a tactical move and when the label had done its job, we could call concrete art and concrete poetry once again "constructivist" (Herwig 2001: 5).

Gomringer's idea of constructivist poetry was mostly dependent on the structure of language. The main task when writing constellations, ideograms, and stochastic texts was "a conscious observation of the material and its structure," with the material clearly defined as "a sum of all signs with which the poetry is created" (Gomringer 1997: 30). A constellation – although seemingly not a visual poem, a limited set of words repeated in various combinations – was an attempt at replacing the usual grammar with spatial connections and semantic associations. What mattered was the "simultaneous presence of certain words on a page," which allowed for a reflection on the semantic changes

appearing in new neighbourhoods of words (1997: 39, 119). The idea of materializing something otherwise non-existent was present in poetic reflections on the limits and ambiguities of a given notion, which could be noticed only in new configurations. Gomringer's use of mathematical means was supposed to result in uses of language otherwise non-existent and unthinkable if not written down.

For German-speaking readers, Gomringer's understanding of the word "concrete" seems to have been obvious. On the cover of Thomas Kopfermann's 1974 selection of theories of concrete poetry the paradox of calling abstract poetry "concrete" was mentioned. Although for Max Bense, a poet, theorist and philosopher, working with concretists in Stuttgart and Ulm, the definition of a concrete text was slightly different, he similarly claimed that "concrete" means presenting its own materials; and the materials, as he duly defined them, were to be both of a material and an immaterial nature, as long as they were distinguishable, discrete, and possible to manipulate (Bense 1998: 422). As we can see, for Bense, structures, meanings, morphemes, and words are a part of the linguistic material and an appropriate object of reflection for concrete poetry.

Typography

Gomringer was well aware of the meanings imposed by the choice of all the elements of a book: paper, format, font size, print, and proportions (Gomringer 1997: 64). In his theoretical writings, he described the diverse possibilities of constructing a volume of poetry and underlined the importance of good design, which often required the cooperation of both poet and typographer (58-59, 69). In nearly all of his publications, a few elements remain unchanged: Helvetica typeface, lower-case writing, grid typography and left flush. This holds true not only for his poetry, but also for his manifestos and criticism (e.g. Gomringer 1995; 1997).

Gomringer's strong preference for this type of layout needs to be explained in the context of the time and place in which he created his texts. In Switzerland in 1946 a significant typographical debate took place. Max Bill's text "über typographie," published in *Schweizer Graphische Mitteilungen*, can be treated as the beginning of the so-called Swiss style in typography. In his manifesto, Bill highlighted the differences between the pre-war New Typography and his own convictions about layout, which he felt ought to be asymmetric, grid-based, geometrical, sans-serif, lower-case and most of all – functional. No decorations, such as thick lines or large dots, from the New Typography, were needed any longer. Bill's text not only described the elements of an appropriate layout, but also enacted them. The manifesto was printed in accordance with the author's postulates (Niggli 1999: 46, 165; Hochuli 1993: 72-77; Shaw 2011).

A square-format, black-and-white hardcover volume of Gomringer's *33 konstellationen, mit 6 konstellationen von max bill* (1960) shows definite traces of the typographical style chosen. Paratexts inform us not only about Bill's specific role as the author of the additional six constellations, but also about his work as the designer of the book maquette, which is mentioned in the editorial notes on the fourth page. On this page too, the typeface chosen for the book, Neue Haas Grotesk (later renamed Helvetica), is clearly stated. The credit for Bill's co-authorship is not surprising. His concrete painting had inspired Gomringer long before. Moreover, in the years 1954-1958, when Bill was director of the Ulm Hochschule für Gestaltung, Gomringer worked there as his secretary (Gomringer 1972: 52).

The insistence on functionalism as well as consistent lower-case orthography (which is especially striking in the German language) were rooted in Bill's continuing belief in the avant-garde programme. Bill came across a proposal for lower-case writing at Bauhaus, and at his school in Ulm all internal texts were written in lower case (Niggli 1999: 30-33). Gomringer himself was also convinced that this way of writing belonged to the quickest, the most pleasant and the most modern methods of communication, as he claimed in one of his manifestos (Gomringer 1997: 12-18).

Of course, Bill's and Gomringer's ideas were not strictly "avant-garde." It is useful to think of their work with the help of a term suggested by Perloff, "arriére-garde," a "rear-guard," which tried to save some of the pre-war achievements (Perloff 2010: 56-58). In the case of Bill and Gomringer an avant-garde shock strategy was no longer employed, and thus an aporia of many avant-garde activities was avoided. The artists' utopian idea of improving people's lives used the easy and pleasant means already adopted by society, although they were at the same time connected with the world of commerce.

The utopian and modernist character of their project is vividly exemplified in the series of booklets *konkrete poesie / poesia concreta*, published by Gomringer using his own press in the years 1960-1965. Each issue of *konkrete poesie* is a collection of poetry in a brochure-like publication, in which we can also find some advertisements. Nearly all the poems presented in the series are printed in Helvetica – as were the advertisements, among which one can find an advert for the Helvetica font itself (at that time still named "Neue Haas Grotesk"). The advertisements inform the reader about cultural events, exhibitions, galleries or publishers, but more often they advertise armchairs, chairs, cutlery, crockery, or suitcases. In the second issue, a clock – designed by Bill himself – is presented, and in the first issue a non-caffeine type of coffee (offered in a gendered context). Most shocking, however, are the geometric, perfectly modernist garden flowerpots, containers and armchairs, offered in issue ten – all of them made of asbestos, which is now known to be a carcinogenic substance.

Gomringer's poetic programme

The cultural context discussed above was the period when Neue Haas Grotesk had just been invented and when the formalised, mechanised attitudes to the humanities, art and design were popularised. No wonder that Bill's design was a perfect supplement to Gomringer's poetry, which was one of the first post-war German-speaking literary projects that employed these ideas. In fact, Bill himself merged the two spheres that interested Gomringer: a geometric, mathematical "art for art" – exemplified in *33 constellations* by Bill's drawings, and design that targeted practical, everyday uses – exemplified in the functional layout of the book.

However, Gomringer's poetic programme was aimed at merging these goals on a deeper level. A close reading of Gomringer's theories allows us to see that the poet's works were only superficially similar to everyday texts. Indeed the poet encouraged other authors to use ideas that had already been invented and tested by design and commerce, in order to renew the means of poetry (1997: 64). Yet, by using these new means, a poet was supposed to create a concrete reality for the poem, that is a semantic, meta-linguistic, anti-mimetic world. The sense of the poem was to be strictly dependent on the new spatial and material means of poetry, such as the use of combination, juxtaposition, or repetition, together with a reduction of syntax, inflection and the range of words used. A reflection on language was to be inspired by each poem, a reflection based on both a mathematical pattern and a playful departure from this pattern.

The poem as a mental object was thus supposed to be an autonomous (concrete) being, although its semantic autonomy could not be separated from the specifically written and printed text (Gomringer 1997: 12-18, 21-28). In this way the dual nature of language and literature could be exposed. Gomringer was well aware that in looking for the basic materials of language and their structures – in order to create a verbal analogue of concrete painting – he could not limit himself to the visual (or aural) elements, since the basic units of language consist of both the material and the notional. Thus, a superficially non-visual, simple and linear constellation-poem was called by Gomringer the basic form, the "grundform" of concrete poetry (Gomringer 1997: 119-126).

A meta-linguistic investigation – or play – was itself an objective of the poem. With the use of friendly typography and simple means, such a reflection on language was intended to be available to the majority. Of course, a deeper linguistic awareness could later be used by some people to create more effective texts in everyday life. Indeed, Gomringer even encouraged such a course of events, and his belief in the Ulm-like, functional attitude to art can be exemplified by the fact that "the poem as a functional object" manifesto was included as the only theoretical text in *33 constellations* (1997: 64; 1960).

Gomringer presented his poetry as another useful object, an object consciously designed to look modern and be read quickly, aspects which were both specifically associated with the modern style of life. This gesture was not supposed to change the status of the elements of everyday life, and lipsticks or slogans did not become a part of Gomringer's art (as happened, for example, in pop-art). Instead, the status of poetry was modified – it was to be no better than any other type of text, but similarly functional. Its aims were, however, specifically defined: not to inform or advertise, but to allow reflection and play, and in consequence inspire more effective and aesthetic communication.

Although one may criticise the lack of direct social critique or the lack of distance towards the means of advertising, it seems that the aims of this poetry were more basic: an analysis of language encouraged by formal play and a presentation of language as a separate reality, not only as a medium of communication. If such an awareness could indeed be gained thanks to reading Gomringer's texts in Helvetica, the resistance to commercial texts in this font would also rise.

Another issue is the realisation and the results of the above goals. When one thinks once more about the appearance of *33 constellations*, the book seems to be consciously created as both "visible" and "invisible." The typography does not dominate the message, but is simple, modern and well-planned, in order to reflect the poems' construction. When one takes into consideration Gomringer's understanding of concrete poetry, it becomes clear why no further visual advancements were needed in this anti-mimetic poetry of printed words. Yet the unobtrusive, small size of the font may also be explained in the light of one of Gomringer's manifestos (1997: 58-59). Namely, this font size allows every poem to be fitted onto one page, whatever the length of the text. As a result, the book is an organic whole: its structural, inner divisions (the poems) are coherent with the external, material divisions (the pages).

Gomringer's poems, like Bill's drawings, are visually presented as an elegant, but modern "art for art" practice, devoted to its inner aims. Typography, discrete and unobtrusive, is conceived rather as a servant, and its function and shape depend on the texts. However, this is how Bill saw the role of all typography, whose limits and aims he was aware of and which he did not try to transgress (Bosshard 1999: 58, 92). Typography could not become a fully concrete art, according to Bill. Nevertheless, it remains equally true that Gomringer's concrete poetry depends on typography: on a suitable inscription that highlights the position of all the words, on their printed, mechanic, sans-serif look and their lower-case, non-punctuated notation.

Bill's mathematics

Even a quick glance at the book gives an overwhelming impression of minimalism: of reduction, clarity, order, and geometry. Gomringer's poems cover very little space. They seem somewhat dominated by the square-shaped whiteness of the pages that surround them. In most cases the texts look like typical twentieth-century poems: short, linear, black on white.

Apart from the black poems, six drawings by Bill are featured in the book, which are also called, as we know, "constellations." The drawings – thin red lines – always appear on the right-hand side of the book; one after every five poems, and one after every three leaves. Mathematics, as we can see, regulates not only the number of poems and the number of drawings (both being multiples of three), but also their order in the book. The idea of proportion is also the basis of the drawings themselves. Bill's concrete art, usually devoted to geometry, here utilises the shape of a circle. As Oliver Herwig has shown, each graphic consists of 1) a small circle, 2) a larger semi-circle (with a radius twice that of the first circle), 3) a quarter of the largest circle (with a radius four times that of the smallest circle) (Herwig 2001: 139). This means that the selection of the shapes is based on the proportions 1:2:4 (of the length of their radiuses), but at the same time on the number three (as three elements constitute each drawing). Moreover, geometry informs us that each curved line that can be seen in each graphic is of the same length – no matter if this is the whole of the small circle or a quarter of the largest.

This abstract algorithm of sorts is confronted with the materiality of the book. It is no accident that the drawings were prepared by Bill specifically for this volume (as we learn from another paratext). Indeed, each drawing is perfectly positioned within the square format of the pages, which are 18 x 18 cm. In fact, the radius of the largest circle (of which we see only one quarter) is half the page's height. The location of all the lines on the page is also specific. The small circle is just below the middle of the page; the semi-circle joins the middle of the page with the mid-point of one of its sides and the last curve joins the middle of the square with one of its corners.

As one can easily deduce, the number of permutations that adhere to the above mentioned algorithm in locating the curves on the page is much greater than six. The selection of these particular six patterns of lines is a matter of subjective choice or play. This idea of art is in accordance with Max Bense's theory of aesthetics. Bense, a philosopher and concrete poet himself, was a lecturer in Ulm at the time when Bill and Gomringer worked there (Gomringer 1972: 19, 52). Bense believed that aesthetic states cannot be created in a deterministic way (Bense 1965: 117-119). They appear when material realisations transgress the systematic – as happens in Bill's drawings.

An overview of Bill's visual constellations, whose structural similarity to Gomringer's poems is suggested even by their name, may help us in further investigations of Gomringer's project. Firstly, one needs to note that such a conscious juxtaposition of drawings and poems highlights the fact that Gomringer's concrete poetry is a literary experiment. Though the book combines two arts in one volume, they remain autonomous (Herwig 2001: 216-218). Gomringer's poems, just like Bill's graphics, have no titles, no words to describe or name the visual, and neither are these purely optical works an illustration. Secondly, Bill's graphics highlight the difference between the visual and the verbal in such a way that these two arts utilise the tension between the systematic and the playful.

In the case of the drawings we need to analyse all of them in order to see their common algorithm and notice the playful selection of just a few of its possible realisations. As may already be suspected, such a strict mathematical rule cannot work for all 33 verbal constellations. Every one of them constitutes a play with its own individual system, every one departs from its mathematical pattern at some stage, and this departure is not only based on playfulness, but also on the inner rules of language: the rules of syntax and semantics. Gomringer's constellations are meta-poetic constructions, an attempt at translating concrete art into concrete literature.

Gomringer's mathematics

The selection of poems chosen by Gomringer for this volume encompasses not only German-language works, as the title of the book might suggest. A few texts in French, Spanish and English also appear. These are reminiscent of Gomringer's utopian wish to create universal, international literature. One of the poems, based on morphemes that appear in many European languages, does indeed seem international. Nevertheless, the slightly longer poems in French will remain unintelligible unless someone knows the language.

Most interesting, however, is the construction of the German constellations. In order to emphasise the role of space and the position of the words, inflection is avoided. Therefore, nouns appear in the nominative (though often in the plural) and verbs in the infinitive – or in the third person singular – yet they are devoid of the sentence subject, which is obligatory in German. The reduction of lexemes and contexts allows us to concentrate on a given word as a structural element of language, as a dictionary entry, rather than a reference to the outside world.

The first poem printed in *33 constellations* is a text whose opening statement subsequently became the title of another of Gomringer's books: *worte sind*

schatten (1969). It seems somewhat unlikely on reading "words are shadows," and all the following permutations in the text, including "shadows become words," and "are shadows words," that Gomringer's poetry would be associated with airport announcements and traffic signs, to which the poet himself compared his texts in the manifesto "the poem as a functional object." Yet, it seems that Gomringer's simile should be treated as a part of his manifesto rhetoric rather than a faithful description of his poetics. In fact, the opening poem in *33 constellations* resembles a handbook of how to neutralise the announcements that surround us, how to undermine all the slogans, how to reverse them and play with them, and how to treat them as separate linguistic objects.

The text in German runs as follows:[1]

worte sind schatten
schatten werden worte

worte sind spiele
spiele werden worte

sind schatten worte
werden worte spiele

sind spiele worte
werden worte schatten

sind worte schatten
werden spiele worte

sind worte spiele
werden schatten worte

The most popular English translation of the poem, by Jerome Rothenberg, reflects the meanings of the original text, but it modifies its construction, since in English one cannot use inversion to construct a question with the word "werden", "become", as in the German constellation.[2] An auxiliary verb "do" is needed in some English verses, while in German the whole text is based on the same set of words. Three nouns and two verbs are repeated in the same grammatical forms, yet in different places in a given verse. All the nouns appear in the

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[1] I rewrite the poem in Arial typeface, which is frequently used instead of Helvetica in computer-based texts.

[2] words are shadows / shadows become words // words are games / games become words // are shadows words / do words become shadows // are games words / do words become shadows // are words shadows / do games become words // are words games / do shadows become words (Gomringer 1968: n. pag.).

nominative, in the plural (these are "worte" – "words", "schatten" – "shadows", "spiele" – "games"), all the verbs are used in the third person plural, in the present simple tense (these are: "sind" – "are" and "werden" – "become"). Every verse of the poem is a combination of three words: two different nouns and one verb.

Within one line constructed of three words (one of which is always "worte") three permutations can be observed: $noun_1$ + verb + $noun_2$, or: verb + $noun_2$ + $noun_1$, or verb + $noun_1$ + $noun_2$. This selection of three permutations (instead of six), limits the possibilities of mathematics and results from the German syntax. No verb can be located in the final position of a sentence in German – and none is in this poem. All the nouns can appear in the nominative, all the questions are constructed by inversion. A simple modification of the order of the words in a given verse allows for the creation of various sentences. It is not conjugation and declension, but simply the location of the words that decides the meaning. In accordance with Gomringer's manifestos, the poem depends on a spatial structure.

Yet the construction of the text is not only regulated by the combinatorics and the German syntax. In order to fully examine the structure of the poem I will ascribe the numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4 to the four combinations of the words that appear in following lines of the text (each combination can then be diversely arranged, and result in various permutations). The letters a, b, c, x, y will stand for the words of the poem: a – words, b – shadows, c – games, x – are, y – become.

1 worte sind schatten	1	a x b
2 schatten werden worte	2	b y a
3 worte sind spiele	3	a x c
4 spiele werden worte	4	c y a
1 sind schatten worte	1	x b a
4 werden worte spiele	4	y a c
3 sind spiele worte	3	x c a
2 werden worte schatten	2	y a b
1 sind worte schatten	1	x a b
4 werden spiele worte	4	y c a
3 sind worte spiele	3	x a c
2 werden schatten worte	2	y b a

In the schema above one can see that each combination of three words appears three times. An arrangement "a x b" from the first line is repeated as "x b a" in the fifth line, and in the form of "x a b" in the ninth line. The first,

strong statement that "words are shadows" is reversed in the second iteration, when it is changed into a question as to whether shadows are words, that is, if the reverse statement could also be true. Then, in the third appearance the initial statement is questioned. "Are shadows words?"

In this way each set of words is repeated. The statements from the first four lines of the poem are later reversed and finally questioned. The twelve lines of Gomringer's constellation constitute three parts, each with a similar formal construction and word arrangement, which results in the similar syntactical functions of stating and questioning.

As one can see, Gomringer avoids one more possible verse construction, allowed both by the combinatorics and the syntax. The statements from the first four lines never change into a reverse claim. "Words are shadows" never becomes "shadows are words". This restriction results in a construction based on the number three rather than four, with every combination appearing three times (just as in every line there are three words and in the poem there are three nouns). Some affinities with Bill's project can thus be observed, since the painter also based his construction on three shapes. The title of the book reminds us too that mathematics joins the concepts behind the verses, the drawings and the book.

Nevertheless the question remains as to why Gomringer avoids reversing the first statements. What would be the function of such a construction? An answer can be given when one considers another aspect of the constellation: its couplets. Each couplet divides the use of two verbs. In the first line of a couplet there is always "are," in the second – "become." Moreover, in the two couplets with positive statements one can see a kind of inversion between the two lines. The phrase "words are shadows" turns into "shadows become words," and similarly "words are games" turns into "games become words." A statement about something accomplished, stable, permanent is changed into a vision of something just happening, into a dynamic process of alteration.

Such is the construction of the first two couplets. After an exchange of "a is b" with "b becomes a," the rest of the poem leaves us only with questions, whether "b is (has already become) a," and whether "a becomes b" (if it is just a fixed state, or if it is constantly becoming b). And then doubts appear, if really "a is b" and "b becomes a," as the poem claimed in the beginning.

Being is presented as a constant process of becoming, in which simple declarations can be easily undermined. But also at the level of language the allegedly similar statements are tested and juxtaposed. With such a model of doubting and questioning many messages that surround us in everyday life can be easily deconstructed. Such testing cannot be classified as a transfer of commercial slogans into the structure of the poem. Instead it seems to be a convenient examination of the durability of many messages.

The mathematical construction (and at the same time the grammatical construction) is strictly functional. The limits resulting from the German syntax, from the semantic opposition of "be" and "become," from the number three and from the logical construction of the following questions, are a territory of the poem. Yet in this net of restrictions one can find a certain freedom, a place for a play, namely the alteration of the arrangement of verses built of a given combination of words. This modification makes it harder to discover the structure of the poem. The order of the combinations that form the first lines, 1-2-3-4 (according to my notation), is changed later into: 1-4-3-2 and 1-4-3-2.

The semantics of the nouns chosen is also important. The constellation is based on the statements on words and on the extent to which they become shadows and games. All plural German nouns have two syllables (similarly to "werden" and differently from "sind"). The poem is characterised not only by the visual rhythm of the three words in each line, but also by a regular sound structure, based on an exchange of verses 5 and 6 syllables long and on the consequent repetition of the three stresses in a line. But a phonetic version of the poem would not suffice. The poem must be read a few times if one wants to discover its underlying pattern, to enter the game offered by the text. It could even be said that one needs to rewrite the constellation in a new notation, making it even more visual, in order to see its construction.

Are words only shadows? The addition of the word "only" lets us see the dramatic nature of the questions asked in the poem, questions oscillating between a vision of the poem as a weak reflection of material objects and an even weaker reflection of real ideas, and a concept of the poem as a game and free play. The shadows of the poetry remind us of Plato's theory of art as mimesis (Herwig 2001: 31), a concept that seems so far from Gomringer's programme of autonomous concrete poetry. If words are just shadows, it means that they not only depend on the extra-linguistic reality, but that they also deform it, being ephemeral and changeable.

Yet in the second verse we can read that the shadows themselves become words. Since we write about them, here, in this constellation, there are no longer any shadows, but just words and linguistic notions. In the following lines doubt appears, do shadows indeed become a part of the language and are words just a shadow of the world. The poem gives us no direct answer, it is suspended in-between a referential and an auto-referential use of the words "shadows," between "shadows" as an element of verse, a linguistic item, and the real shadows that could be presented in the text.

The poem, beginning with a reminiscence of Plato, written in lower case and Helvetica, constructed of short statements, is not a serious discussion with the philosophy of literature. In his first manifesto Gomringer claimed that the word is "neither good nor bad, neither true, nor false" (1997: 16).

These reflections are purposefully juxtaposed with another vision of the poem, in which words are presented as games. In a game a separate, temporary reality is always constituted, with its own rules. It is not subordinated to the laws of the world, it is a pleasure in itself (Huizinga 1967). Such a concept of a poem as a game seems to be confirmed by Gomringer's statement that a constellation enables play. Therefore: words are games.

But the next variants of the phrase follow the path sketched above: the game itself may become an empty word. In new iterations the poem asks if the words of the text do indeed become a game for us, if the enumeration of the permutations do indeed force us to play. The readers-players have to be included in such a vision of the game, which cannot be thus limited to language and words. If the constellation is working, if it opens up a space for play, and we are indeed engaged, then the reverse statement is not true. The fact that words are games does not determine the fact that a game is limited to words, that, for instance, laughter is of a verbal nature.

Such meta-literary play seems to ridicule the serious warning from the beginning of the poem (that words are shadows). The way in which the warning is questioned suggests that the poem is not a deformed image of the world but the game itself. At the same time real play with words is enabled. A theatre of shadows turns into a set of pawns in a game. In this way the poem becomes a discourse on literature, and a commentary on practical texts. It is hard to compare this text to an airport sign or an advertising slogan. Every sentence is simple and clear, but among other similar phrases, each word radiates with various senses. It is the diversity of meanings that finally decides about the poem's intransparency and its "concreteness," which avoids illusory images, imaginations and objects.

Perspectives

The book *33 constellations* is a consistent exemplification of modernist thinking on all three planes: visual, linguistic and typographical. Just as the meta-linguistic reflection and the construction of the poems were supposed by Gomringer to be the most basic, universal, and structural, so too is the typography: it is geometric, non-decorative and sans-serif. Of course, when observing from a distance, both of these ideals prove to be historical: their attempted ideal invisibility can now be noticed and deliberated upon. Bill's design bears the traces of functionalism, and Gomringer's poems remind us of the structural and semiotic approaches to language, usually devoid of pragmatic context and interested in the systematic.

Seen in this light, Gomringer's poetic programme appears to be coherent. Certain supposed contradictions (such as functionality versus self-reference) simply result from assumptions rooted in the Bauhaus tradition. This applies also to the typography: the fact that it was planned to be nearly transparent, mechanical and universal does not contradict the fact that it was deliberately designed in this way. Finally, the verse construction of Gomringer's poems appears to be both simple yet complicated, hidden yet explicit. A simple sentence that is altered and reversed in accordance with a mathematical rule in Gomringer's "worte sind schatten" results in a clear presentation of the poem's structure rather than a transparent view of the extra-textual world.

Acknowledgements

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Cultural Sources of Verse: A Poem by Eugen Gomringer
Keywords: concrete poetry, concrete painting, Gomringer, Bill, constellation

S u m m a r y

Eugen Gomringer's poetry of the 1950s and '60s was strongly rooted in such elements of contemporaneous culture as Swiss concrete painting, the Swiss style of typography, the functional design of the Bauhaus tradition, and the Stuttgart-based modern theories of aesthetics. Some of these practices were the basis on which Gomringer constructed his own poetic means, while others were directly implemented in the layout or cover designs of Gomringer's poetic books. In this paper the sources of Gomringer's verse are examined with special reference to the book *33 konstellationen* and the mathematical verse construction of one poem, "worte sind schatten," whose structure proves to be paradoxical, simultaneously complicated yet simple.

Kulturowe korzenie poezji. O jednym wierszu Eugena Gomringera
Słowa kluczowe: poezja konkretna, malarstwo konkretne, Gomringer, Bill, konstelacja

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Poezja Eugena Gomringera z lat pięćdziesiątych i sześćdziesiątych wyrastała z takich elementów współczesnej kultury, jak szwajcarskie malarstwo konkretne, szwajcarski styl w typografii, funkcjonalne projektowanie graficzne w duchu Bauhausu i nowoczesne stuttgarckie teorie estetyki. Niektóre z tych praktyk stanowiły podstawę, na której Gomringer wypracowywał własne środki poetyckie, niektóre z nich były jednak wprost aplikowane w układzie typograficznym czy projekcie okładek Gomringerowskich tomów. W artykule omówione zostają źródła Gomringerowskiej poezji, odnoszone zwłaszcza do książki *33 konstellationen* oraz do matematycznej konstrukcji jednego wiersza, *worte sind schatten*, którego struktura okazuje się, paradoksalnie, jednocześnie prosta i skomplikowana.