

Fiammetta Campagnoli

A Pregnant Silence. Heuristics of the Word and Mediality According to Konrad Witz

*And what obscured in this fair volume lies
Find written in the margent of his eyes
This precious book of love, this unbound lover,
To beautify him, only lacks a cover. [...]
That book in many's eyes doth share the glory
That in gold clasps locks in the golden story¹*

Revealed by the prophets, transmitted by the Scriptures, and embodied in Christ himself, the divine Word *was* – and still is – conveyed by a communicative system as verbal as it is visual. To cope with the invisibility of God, verbose exegesis as well as loquacious imagery have followed. However, what happens when the word falls silent, and silence becomes eloquent? More importantly, how could such a dichotomy be addressed and, at the same time, emphasized in iconography?

To answer such questions, we will analyze a painting by Konrad Witz (Fig. 1), in which the viewer is stimulated by a dense interweaving of reticence and eloquence, suspensions and revelations, promises and reminiscences.

This study will focus primarily on a wing of the polyptych that Konrad Witz, assisted by the workshop, made between 1444 and 1447.² As usual for both the artist's biography and production, only a few documentary records remain for this specific work.³ It is presumably the left-wing of the so-called *Altar of the Intercession*. After this latter, the only surviving section of this altarpiece is the right-wing, now on display at the Kunstmuseum Basel.⁴ The central part is supposed to have consisted of a sculptural composition that has been lost.⁵ Commissioned by Dominican nuns for their convent,⁶ it is conceivable that the entire decorative ensemble presented an iconography in adherence to the mysticism of the order, whose mission is the preaching and the dissemination of the Scriptures. This aspect is particularly appreciable

¹ Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 1, Scene 3, 85–88 and 91–92.

² Concerning the workshop interventions, read Hartweg 2011, 181–187.

³ Brinkmann 2011, 10–22.

⁴ The wing shows a *Nativity* and, on the other side, a representation of *The Incredulity of St. Thomas* and *The Intercession of Christ and the Virgin*. On the reconstruction of the altar, Kemperdick 2011, 177–179 and Hartweg 2011.

⁵ Kemperdick 2011, 177, n. 6.

⁶ On the possible identification of the convent, Kemperdick 2011, 179–180.

I express my profound gratitude to Professor Philippe Morel, who accompanies me with generosity and patience in my doctoral research. I warmly thank Alessandra Gotuzzo for having proofread this text.



Fig. 1: Konrad Witz, *The Council of Redemption and Visitation*, 1444–1447, oil and tempera on wood, 135,5 × 164,5 cm, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin.

in the Gemäldegalerie panel, which involves a somewhat rare subject, namely the “Decree of Redemption” in German *Der Ratschluß der Erlösung*.⁷ Against a gilded and richly worked background, two figurative groups stand out. The first consists of a large throne, covered with a green and red cloth of honor, on which we see God the Father, Christ, and the lamb, surmounted by the dove of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, the second pole of the composition manifests itself under the more conventional features of a *Visitation*. However, a further singularity is to combine these two themes, inscribing them – though separate – within the same pictorial space.

Looking more closely at the Trinity, Konrad Witz endows it with two highly significant objects: a book and a key. In particular, the volume seems to represent the epicenter of the Trinitarian group. The Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, and the lamb all weave a direct relationship with this object. Christ’s praying hands overlap it, God’s

⁷ Hans Martin von Erffa has studied this iconographic theme, establishing parallels with the vision of Mechthild of Magdeburg (ca. 1207–1282). Mechthild von Magdeburg, *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit*, ed. by Neumann, 88–89 and Erffa 1989, 53–55.

grasp its pages, the dove's wings unfold above it, while the lamb meekly juxtaposes itself with it. Everything revolves around this book, despite its apparent muteness. No words find expression in it, and its sheets remain blank. Thus, the artist places a silent, empty and – only potentially – eloquent space at the center of the composition. How might such an iconographic device be interpreted? This fact will ground the roots for an analysis aiming to demonstrate how Konrad Witz made this textual gap an intellectually fertile absence.

1 “Take a large tablet and write on it in legible characters” (Is 8, 1)

Questioning the role exercised by the book, Michael Camille has argued that despite its inherently textual character, its representation can function as a sign that is not only semantically charged but also purely visual.⁸ Therefore, it seems necessary to ask how Konrad Witz used the iconicity of this silent book to nourish, on the one hand, his pictorial syntax and, on the other hand, to bring out in the viewer a heuristic propensity.

Moreover, this hermetic volume must be related to the second object accompanying the Trinitarian group, namely the key, whose considerable dimensions suggest its semantic relevance. Furthermore, the key seems turned by the Holy Spirit, who is close to its handle. As for the rod and the map of the key itself, the painter directs them toward God's chest to evoke that the Father is opening and revealing himself in his various forms and persons. It is no coincidence that on the steps of the throne, in the parts not hidden by the drape, it is possible to read *tres sunt ... qui testio ... pater*, that is, a quotation from John's gospel (5,7), which says, “for three are they that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one”. In addition to this, the insertion of the lamb intensifies the epiphanic component of the whole: its representation alludes, in fact, to a further divine figure, revealed in its Eucharistic form.

Moving on these considerations, it is also appropriate to reconsider the book's opening in light of the gestures of the Father and the Son (Fig. 2). If God with his left hand still firmly holds one of the volume's pages, while with his right hand he blesses and points to Christ, Jesus seems to submit to his Father's will. God's will collides with the decreeing of human Redemption, uniquely possible through the sacrifice of the Incarnation. Moreover, the divine Word could gain visibility only since it was in Christ that the Word became flesh. In this regard, St. Bernard asserts that “the Book of Life is Jesus, open to all who are called. Blessed is he who comes to read this book which is Jesus”.⁹ The coincidence between the body of Christ and the Logos is undoubtedly

⁸ Camille 1989, 111.

⁹ Quoted in Rochais 1962, 117.



Fig. 2: Konrad Witz, *The Council of Redemption and Visitation* (detail), 1444–1447, oil and tempera on wood, 135,5 × 164,5cm, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin.

an immediate metaphor. However, why does Konrad Witz deprive this reflection on theophany medially of its textual expression, leaving blank pages before the viewer?

Having posited the fact that the Incarnation can be considered a medial and material conversion – capable of transforming the invisible into a visible and tangible essence – it is interesting to examine the artist's choice from the perspective of what Jeffrey Hamburger has called an “incarnational aesthetic”.¹⁰ In this regard, the strategic position of the lamb is in close contiguity with the book. Such proximity allows us to recall the corporeality of the sheets that make up the volume and their production technique. We know that parchments were made from the processing of animal skin

¹⁰ Hamburger 1998, 333.



Fig. 3: Virgin in Adoration of the Child, *Grandes Heures de Rohan*, MS lat. 9471, ca. 1416–1435, fol. 133', Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

and that, often, it was precisely that of lamb. There is, however, another detail that invites us to consider the materiality of these pages. The fingers of God, seem to convey some suggestions about the texture of the parchment.¹¹ Comparing the sheet held between God's fingers and the two pages that move – perhaps under the impulse of the Holy Spirit – we notice that the latter seem stiffer. The parchment supported by the Father presents a softer texture and, therefore, more like that of a cloth. In detail, we can detect a progression relative to the texture of these sheets. Those closest to God are characterized by a more softness, a peculiarity that can be appreciated especially following the observation of the two middle pages with their partially folded corners. The left sheet has slight undulations, clearly visible above the halo of the lamb. Although in a milder form, this peculiarity evokes the textural effect produced by the pressure exerted by God's fingers. This textile texture can be interpreted against the backdrop

¹¹ On this point, Plebani 2001, and in particular the chapter entitled “Corpi in lettura. Lettori e lettrici nella rappresentazione iconografica”, Plebani 2001, 57–163.

of an etymological excursus conducted from the word “text”, i. e., the very thing that Witz sheets are devoid of. In its original meaning, the Latin word *textus* referred to cloth, garments, and, more generally, any woven artifact. Thomas Lentes recalls a passage from *De Divinis Officiis*, in which Rupert of Deutz associates the books of the Holy Scriptures with the garments with which the divine Word is clothed.¹² Returning, then, to the different textures of the book’s pages, it could be interpreted that the Father’s gesture allows the scroll to be vivified so that it can receive and “clothe” the Word. Indeed, it is not accidental to find images in which the body of Christ is wrapped between the sheets of a codex. For example, the miniature of the *Grandes Heures de Rohan* (Fig. 3) shows the Child placed inside a voluminous codex, which serves as a cradle.¹³ For this type of illustration,¹⁴ there is a clear metatextual and metapictorial intention: since these are mainly images intended to adorn manuscripts, the relationship between the Incarnation of the Word and the physical volume – opened by the reader – acquires the traits of a limpid symbolic appeal. Additionally, the parchment, drawing its origin from a body, lends itself well to serve as a support for the incarnate Word. In choosing to leave these pages silent, Konrad Witz suggests a feeling of imminence and, at the same time, immanence: this codex awaits nothing more than an inscription whether sensory or cognitive, verbal or visual.

2 The Incarnate Word and *Maria Illib(r)ata*

In addition to the bold reinterpretation of the *Throne of Grace*, one of the most remarkable inventions in the Berlin wing is, without a doubt, the combination of the iconographic motifs of the *Trinity* and the *Visitation*: a very atypical choice that deserves comment. In many late medieval Visitations, at the moment of the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth, both Jesus and St. John the Baptist are shown as two fully formed fetuses in their respective maternal wombs. Habitually, the former with arms folded, while the latter, having winced because he recognized the Messiah, kneels reverentially before him. As is noted by Anne-Marie Velu, although these are fetal representations *ex utero*, such images inescapably imply the emergence of a sense of interiority, as well as the evocation of a uterine space that is more symbolic than anatomical.¹⁵ The Marian womb is the place of the encounter *in posse* and *in esse* between the divine and the human: a place where essences, matters, and temporalities are intertwined. As Aileen Grace Andal reminds us, showing Christ’s existence before his fleshly birth

¹² Rupert of Deutz, *Liber de divinis officiis*, I, 23, ed. by Haacke, 198–200, commented in Lentes 2006, 148.

¹³ MS lat. 9471, fol. 133^v, *Grandes Heures de Rohan*, ca. 1416–1435, Paris, BnF.

¹⁴ Another example is the miniature of fol. 16^v of the *Bible moralisée* (cod. 2554), dated ca. 1225 and now at the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, where there are two medallions in which Jesus is materially wrapped between the pages of a book. On this image, Hamburger 2004.

¹⁵ Velu 2012, 121–132.

defies the usual temporal perception: through this depiction, the artist reveals how eternity is visually comprehensible to mortals. Considering these observations, it seems crucial to understand the role of Mary's body in the salvific project, decreed by the Trinity following the council of Redemption. To do so, the metaphorical substratum that makes the Virgin an incarnational support will be highlighted.

In the crucial expectation – suspended between imminence and immanence – that is skillfully expressed in the composition, Konrad Witz presents Mary as a hermeneutical model of conception, whether physical or spiritual. It seems appropriate to ask how and why the artist shows the Incarnation as a specifically textual moment during which the Virgin is exhibited as a “verbal mirror”. To understand this figurative choice, it is worth recalling that from the 12th century onwards, just as Gabriel arrives to announce the miracle of the future pregnancy, Mary is shown gathered in the reading.¹⁶ However, Witz seems to want to transcend the mere intertextual reference in the perspective of a deeper pictorial exegesis.

In a rich sequence of theological glosses, the Virgin is often compared to a book. In a study aimed at tracing the textual sources at the origin of this simile,¹⁷ Klaus Schreiner recalls that, as early as the 8th century, this metaphor – traditionally understood in a messianic key¹⁸ – was extended to Mary by Andrew of Crete. In his sermon on the Nativity of the Virgin,¹⁹ the hymnographer draws a long list of Marian appellations and, among them, the epithets of “book” (βιβλίον) and “tome” (τόμος) appear to signal in what way the Word had been inscribed on Mary. At this point, it seems legitimate to ask how this writing occurs in the Virgin. The answer to this question is provided by Pierre Bersuire's *Repertorium morale*, where he said:

The Son of God is like a book, dictated by the Father, *written by the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb on virgin parchment*, revealed to the world in the Nativity, corrected in the Passion, scraped in the scourging, pierced by wounds, placed on a lectern during the Crucifixion, illuminated with blood, bound in the Resurrection, and questioned at the time of the Ascension.²⁰

Bersuire dissects the metaphor, saying that the divine Word was written on a *pellis virginea*, *et in camera Virginis gloriosae*. Far from being anecdotal, this iterative formulation deserves further examination. Understanding the term *pellis* turns out to be

¹⁶ Saetveit Miles 2020 and Plebani 2018.

¹⁷ Schreiner 1970.

¹⁸ Schreiner 1970, 651: the author alludes, in this regard, to both Isaiah (29,11) and Revelation (5,1).

¹⁹ Andrew of Crete, *Homilia II in Nativitatem B. V. Mariae*, ed. by Migne, 692.

²⁰ Pierre Bersuire, *Repertorium morale*, II, 461C, s. v. *humanitate Christi*: *Christus enim est quidam liber scriptus in pelle virginea, et in camera Virginis gloriosae digitis Spiritus Sancti. Iste enim liber fuit dictatus in Patris dispositione, scriptus in matris conceptione, expositus in nativitatis manifestatione, correctus in passione, rasmus in flagellatione, punctatus in vulnerum infixione, super pulpito politus in crucifixione, illuminatus in s[a]nguine effusione, [et] illagatus in resurrectione, [et] disputatus in ascensione.*

essential: indeed, this word can be translated not only as “skin” but also as “parchment”. Against the previous disquisitions about the book’s materiality, it is interesting to note how, in this context, the two translations are reciprocal and complementary. Moreover, we can consider the obvious Marian allusion by an adjective (*virginea*) and a genitive (*Virginis*). Yet, to fully grasp the significance of the metaphor of the virginal scroll, it is necessary to examine its manufacturing processes. Once removed from the animal, the skin had to be roughened through immersion in chalk. Remnants of flesh and hair were then scraped off before a long drying process. The abrasion of the surface with a pumice stone was, finally, necessary for the skin to be smooth and receptive to writing. Well known to the exegetes, this purifying process inspired and nourished their writings even from a Mariological perspective. Indeed, in this regard, it is interesting to mention the contribution of the first archbishop of Prague, Ernest of Pardubice (1297–1364):

The Blessed Virgin is called the “Book of Life”, because she is the book who creates the generation of Jesus Christ, that is, the example of life for all those whom Christ has spiritually brought forth through the Word of Truth. [...] This book was an ox at its conception and its skin detached, purified by its sanctification, stretched by discipline, dried by abstinence, whitened by continence, shaved by poverty, smoothed by meekness, and thinned by humility. At the Annunciation, she was smoothed with a pumice stone, [...] so that the divine finger could write the Word announced to the whole world in Mary. [...] This book was admirably illuminated with red ink from Christ’s blood during the Passion and polished with the varied colors of His sorrows.²¹

In this passage, we find some interesting insights: beyond the already reported comparison between Mary and the book, Ernest of Pardubice lingers at length on the parchment preparation, suggesting a coincidence between the Virgin and this inscribed matter. Commenting on this passage, Klaus Schreiner²² highlights the separation of the skin from its body of origin. The author argues that the archbishop intended this physical dismemberment to signal a disjunction of Mary from sin and that, from her conception (*pellis separata a bove in sua conceptione*). This aspect introduces an allusion to the Immaculate Conception. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that even Pierre de Celles (ca. 1115–1183), a fervent Maculist, had referred to Mary through the analogy of the parchment, arguing that her purification from original sin took place only after birth. The Benedictine explains it in these terms:

²¹ Ernest of Pardubice, *Mariale*, c. 85: *Hoc modo dicitur beata Virgo Liber Vitae: ipsa enim est Liber generationis Jesu Christi, id est forma vitae omnibus, quos Christus spiritualiter genuit Verbo Veritatis. [Jacob. 1.] Iste liber fuit potius pellis separata a bove in sua conceptione, mundata sua sanctificatione, extenta per disciplinam, desiccata per abstinenciam, dealbata per continentiam, rasa per paupertatem, lenis per mansuetudinem, tenuis per humilitatem. In Salutatione Angelica pumicata, [et in instructione eiusdem regulata], et sic scriptum est in ea digito Dei Verbum illud abbreviatum, quod fecit Dominus super terram. [Isai. 9.] Liber iste miro modo fuit illuminatus minio sanguinis Christi in passione, et diversis coloribus, id est diversis doloribus consummatus.*

²² Schreiner 1970, 657.

This book [the Virgin], made from the skins of the first man [...], is like the skin of a dead animal, shaggy to the touch from having contracted original sin. Under the direction of an invisible copyist, the Holy Spirit, the four cardinal virtues, Prudence, Justice, Strength, and Temperance, prepared it: shaving, smoothing, adjusting, and writing it.²³

In addition to evoking the dense metaphorical substrate as well as dogmatic references, this textual selection is characterized by the numerous echoes concerning the materiality of the medium, all aimed at signaling its purity. At this point, it seems necessary to recall Pierre Bersuire's text to appreciate its poignancy. The French humanist had mentioned a *pellis virginea*, a designation that is by no means trivial. The designation usually given to that type of extremely thin, smooth, and soft parchment is precisely "virginal parchment". This degree of fineness was considered possible because it was obtained from stillborn calves or lambs or their fetuses. For these reasons, too, it is called "uterine parchment".²⁴ It can be grasped how Mary was understood as undeniably physical support, but one of exceptional purity apt to guarantee God's reception in the concretization of the salvific project.

It is now possible to ask not only how Konrad Witz "incorporates" such exegetical reflections within his composition but also – and more importantly – which rhetorical tool he relies on to demonstrate Marian mediality.

In his *Visitation*, the artist sticks to the Nordic iconographic tradition of displaying the fetuses of Jesus and John the Baptist within their respective maternal wombs. However, unlike Elizabeth, temporalities, subjects, and languages meet and merge in the virginal womb. In this way, the eternal becomes mortal, the divine human, the invisible visible, and the Word image. Thus, Mary is shown as the mediatrix between heaven and earth and, at the same time, as the support and matrix.²⁵

Through its association with the Council of Redemption, Konrad Witz makes this *Visitation* a prefiguration of Mary's "material" contribution to the salvation of humanity. Thus, the painter presents the Virgin as the one who, by becoming a mother, allows to complete the empty pages turned by God. Aligned with this interpretive orientation is the Visitation that decorates folio 41^r of manuscript MS W. 288, displayed at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore (Fig. 4). Datable between 1425 and 1430,²⁶ this book of hours no longer shows the two mothers-to-be with their unborn children but endows Mary with a volume. Firmly held in the Virgin's hands, this codex is closed because its contents have not yet been born. At this point, it is fair to ask why in the Berlin wing, the book is open. Some answers to this question can be found, taking into account the

²³ Pierre de Celles, *Sermo XXVI*, ed. by Migne, 718a–b: *Hunc librum, de membranulis primi hominis originali propagatione extractum, tamquam pellem mortui animalis contactu et contractu originariae culpae hispidam, quattuor illae cardinales virtutes, id est Prudentia, Iustitia, Fortitudo et Temperantia, invisibili scriptori scilicet Spiritui Sancto praeeparaverunt, radendo, leniendo, regulando et scribendo.*

²⁴ Ruggiero 2005, 252; Avrin 2010, 213; Reed 2010, 76–77.

²⁵ Rimmele 2010, 126–140.

²⁶ For further information about this manuscript, Randall 1992, 444–448.



Fig. 4: Visitation, MS W. 288, ca. 1425–1430, fol. 41^r, Baltimore, Walters Art Museum.

setting of the two images. For if in the Baltimore miniature, the Visitation takes place in earthly space and time, in Witz's composition, Mary and Elizabeth are beyond any physical determination, for they are shown still within the mind of God. Consequently, Witz's book is open in that the painter shows the decision of Redemption and the foreshadowing of its accomplishment. In contrast, the miniature's volume is closed, because the divine project is still awaiting its achievement with the birth and, above all, with the sacrifice of Christ.

Therefore, it now seems necessary to study the dynamics of this dialectic, strained not only between closure and opening but also between intelligibility and legibility.

3 The Margin Notes, the Blank Pages ... and Their Future Authors

Mary gives body to the divine image and Word just as the miniature gives them a symbolic body. As Holger Kuhn points out, “Christ is carried *in* and *on* Mary’s, just as the miniature is carried in the body of the book”.²⁷ Moreover, in Witz’s composition, the Virgin is shown not only as “illibrate”, as the purest receptacle of the divine ink, but also as the author of what might be interpreted as margin notes.

Looking in detail at Mary’s clothing (Fig. 5), one notices that her mantle has ornate borders. However, a discerning eye will recognize that these are not simply golden ornaments but rather inscriptions that run along the entire length of the outer hems. As for those insides, on the other hand, the edges feature a lozenge pattern reminiscent of those which adorns Elizabeth’s dress. Konrad Witz chose to make this “text in the margin” decipherable: between the lines of these embroideries, the viewer can read the incipit of the Magnificat. According to Luke’s gospel,²⁸ John the Baptist’s recognition of the Messiah induces Elizabeth to greet her cousin as the one who is blessed



Fig. 5: Konrad Witz, *The Council of Redemption and Visitation* (detail), 1444–1447, oil and tempera on wood, 135,5 × 164,5 cm, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin.

²⁷ Kuhn 2015, 168.

²⁸ Luke 1,41–55.



Fig. 6: Nuremberg Master, *The Virgin on the Distaff*, ca. 1410, oil and tempera on wood, 27,1 × 19,3 cm, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin.

among all women. The Marian response ensues through a prayer of glorification with Christological and eschatological scope, better known as the Canticum of Mary or the Magnificat, with which the Virgin celebrates her privilege of giving birth to the son of God. Why did the painter decide to incorporate this quotation into the finishing touches of the Marian garment? As is well known, hems serve as much a practical function as an ornamental one: they prevent the cloth from fraying, as well as embellish it, giving it a finished appearance. For Konrad Witz, the Virgin's words resonate, therefore, as the completion of the Marian *fiat* and allude, at the same time, to a principle of authorship. It is possible to find a further meaning related to the placement of these words on a cloth. Weaving and spinning were activities widely associated with the female sphere, and gestation was precisely equated with the "spinning" of the child in being. Not surprisingly, Rupert of Deutz had spoken of an *evangelicae textrix doctrinae*, i. e., a weaver of the doctrine of the holy gospel.²⁹ The oil on panel painting by the Nuremberg Master (Fig. 6)³⁰ exhibits Mary working a thread. This latter transits through her womb, already pregnant, and passes plastically *into* Jesus' body. Notably, in addition to this symbolic crossing, this thread touches the Child's right hand, which would seem to sketch a sign of blessing.

²⁹ Lentjes 2006, 148.

³⁰ Kemperdick 2010, 158–161.



Fig. 7: Mathieu le Vasseuseur, Adoration of the Crucified Christ, NAF 4338, 1325–1350, fol. 141^v, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Moreover, in Witz's image, the Virgin's mantle emphasizes the unveiling of the divine Word and, therefore, the opening of that mystical volume where Redemption is being inscribed. Then, considering the tension between opening and closing, it is worth mentioning the seal that, according to the Revelation,³¹ only the lamb could have opened. Here, it is added a new meaning to the presence of the key and the proximity between the volume and the sacrificial animal. In this regard, it is interesting to recall that, in mystical literature, it is common to find a comparison between the opening of a manuscript and the display of the body of Christ on the cross.³²

Moreover, in his study dedicated to Beato Angelico, Cyril Gerbron explains that the writing is assimilated to that of wounding, given that writing is an engraving on a thick and living material, such as skin.³³ In addition to this, commenting on the Circumcision scene in the Armadio degli Argenti, Gerbron showed how the artist empha-

³¹ In Rev 5,9, we read that the lamb was called to take the book and open its seals.

³² This analogy is proven through images, such as Mathieu le Vasseuseur's miniature of fol. 141^v (Fig. 7) within the codex NAF 4338, preserved at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and dated between 1325 and 1350). In addition, one may recall some epistolary passages that Jordan of Saxony wrote to Diana of Andaló, reported in Smalley 1952, 283, as well as an excerpt from letter 309 of St. Catherine of Siena, in which it is stated: "*Acci dato el libro scritto, cioè el Verbo dolce del Figliuol di Dio, il quale fu scritto in sul legno della croce, non con inostro, ma con sangue, co' capoversi delle dolcissime e sacratissime piaghe di Cristo. E quale sarà quello idiota grosso, e di sì basso intendimento che non le sapi lègiare?*". This passage is quoted in Tylus 2009, 254–259 and in Gerbron 2012, 54.

³³ Gerbron 2012, 51–62.

sized the scriptural component of the Incarnation: the Dominican painter added discreet touches of blue color on the blades employed by the priest to circumcise the infant. Through such a figurative device, Beato Angelico transformed blood into ink and, at the same time, gives to his depiction an exegetical depth, capable of highlighting the “Christ-page”.³⁴ This fascinating comment prompts us to interrogate the materiality of the pages of Witz’s book. On closer inspection, the right-hand page (Fig. 8), the one at the intersection of Christ’s sleeve and the lamb’s halo, shows the shadow of the previous sheet and patches of red color.



Fig. 8: Konrad Witz, *The Council of Redemption and Visitation* (detail), 1444–1447, oil and tempera on wood, 135,5 × 164,5 cm, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin.

Again, such a detail cannot be accidental, especially considering that the artist seems to draw the viewer’s attention to this portion of the wing, precisely where the pages are in motion. These stains evidently recall the blood of Christ that will be shed in the future: Witz inscribes them precisely in conjunction with that *umbra futurorum* of which St. Paul mentions.³⁵ On this sheet, the bodily traces of the newly decreed sacrifice materialize. The medial metaphor is intensified when considering the Aristotelian theory of conception: indeed, the Greek philosopher argued that the woman

³⁴ Gerbron 2012, 55.

³⁵ In his letter to the Colossians (Col. 2, 14), St. Paul explains that Jewish rites are nothing but a shadow of things, while Christ is a concrete reality.

provided the material, while the man formed it. This analogy is also reflected in the act of writing, with the female parchment accommodating the male ink.³⁶ On this subject, it seems appropriate to recall the analogy offered by St. Ambrose, for whom Christ is to be considered as the *calamus* and the *stylus*, while the Holy Spirit as the scribe. What is more, according to the bishop of Milan, they enable us to imprint the will of the Father in our hearts.³⁷ In this way, there is a further metaphorical shift from the sheet of Mary's purest flesh – which has become the crucified body of Christ – to considering the hearts of the faithful as veritable receptacles of the divine Word.

In this succession of media supports, it seems appropriate to deepen and extend the question regarding authorial identities. Indeed, these blank pages, so emphasized by Konrad Witz, present themselves as a place to be filled as a result of a hermeneutic process undertaken by each viewer. Concerning the absence of the Word in its textual form, it triggers a heuristic operation not only aimed at stimulating the viewer but also at conferring pseudo-authorial prerogatives. As Elina Gertsman reminds us, when exposed, exhibited, or revealed, empty spaces function both as signs and as theoretical objects, as they act to subvert expectation and draw attention to themselves.³⁸ Although shown as silent, Witz's book is thus anything but inexpressive and inert. Involving the transcendent,³⁹ it symbolizes a contract entered by God with Humanity. Also cloaked in a textile that – by its color – evokes the incarnate and thus the Incarnation, the Father grasps the page of the book to imprint his mark not only on the parchment but also on the Marian body.

As could be appreciated, the textual absence and the interchangeability of allegorical references determine a semantic suspension, capable of fostering hermeneutic impetus, as well as the transition, to put it in Augustinian terms, from corporal to spiritual vision. Moreover, this pictorial apparatus allows the viewer to perceive the *tempus plenitudinis*, theorized by Albertus Magnus, in which “*conceptio est propter nativitatem, nativitas propter passionem, passio propter redemptionem*”.⁴⁰ However, if Redemption embraces the whole of Humanity, where could individual salvation be placed?

³⁶ Kuhn 2015, 167–168, n. 396; Jager 1996, 13; Bynum 1996, 79.

³⁷ Ambrose, *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam*, 105, ed. by Migne, *PL*, 15, col. 1164–1165. On this analogy, Jager 1996. The premises of St. Ambrose's contribution can already be found in St. Paul and in Petrus Comestor. In his second letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul states that believers are a letter from Christ, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but tablets of flesh, that is, our hearts (2 Cor 3,3). Regarding Petrus Comestor's exegesis, he is particularly clear, when he argues that “*huius libri pergamenum erit cor uestrum*”. Petrus Comestor, *Sermo VI, In Nativitate Domini*, ed. by Migne, col. 815.

³⁸ Gertsman 2018, 827 and Gertsman 2021.

³⁹ Frese 2014, 12.

⁴⁰ Albertus Magnus, *Mariale*, q. 150, B. 37, 217b.

4 Salvation in Filigree: From Council to Council

Through this witty semantic suspension, Konrad Witz has been able to stimulate the viewer's imagination, but at the same time, he has instilled doubt about the beholder's actual chances of salvation. A suspicion that can be dispelled only during the Last Judgment, precisely when God's book opens again. According to Revelation, the dead will be judged according to what has been inscribed on their books, namely those inexorable witnesses to their earthly actions.⁴¹ Moreover, it is good to recall the mediating role of Mary, considered by Honorius III, as the book whose letters cannot be erased and in which all holy souls are inscribed, to receive the fruit of eternal life.⁴² It is not fortuitous to find the echo of this privilege in the verses of the Magnificat, which the painter wanted to "embroider" on the edges of the virginal mantle. Thanks to Mary's example, the believer must not only make his heart a purest parchment but must also know how to praise and exalt Christ's sacrifice.

As could be inferred, Konrad Witz was able to juggle transcendence and immanence, but he equally provided a relevant historical anchor. Among the few biographical elements in our possession, we know that the artist settled in Basel precisely at the time of the council, which began in 1431 and lasted in the city until 1437.⁴³ This complex conciliar assembly continued first in Ferrara, then in Florence, and finally in Rome, where it ended in 1445, i. e., approximately the same years of the altarpiece's creation. Reading the *Laetentur Caeli* bull of 1439, it is possible to find conciliar stipulations that the artist readily incorporated into his composition. There is a reaffirmation of the coeternity of Christ⁴⁴ and, this aspect would explain the inscription that the painter places on the steps of the throne. In the decree, the itinerary of souls according to their earthly works is also reiterated. Later, in 1441, the Immaculate Conception is confirmed,⁴⁵ and the feast of the Visitation is extended to all of Christendom.⁴⁶ About

⁴¹ Revelation 20,11–12.

⁴² Honorius III, *First sermon for the Annunciation*, quoted in Gambero 1996, 122–123.

⁴³ Lehmann 2011, 23–31.

⁴⁴ Conc. Florentino, *Bulla Laetentur Caeli Unionis Graecorum*, sessio VI, 6 iulii 1439, ed. by Denzinger/Schönmetzer, 1300–1308: *Quod Spiritus sanctus ex Patre et Filio eternaliter est, et essentiam suam suumque esse subsistens habet ex Patre simul et Filio, et ex utroque eternaliter tanquam ab uno principio et unica spiratione procedit, declarantes quod id, quod sancti doctores et patres dicunt, ex Patre per Filium procedere Spiritum sanctum, ad hanc intelligentiam tendit, ut per hoc significetur Filium quoque esse, secundum Grecos quidem causam, secundum Latinos vero principium subsistentie Spiritus sancti, sicut et Patrem. Et quoniam omnia, que Patris sunt, Pater ipse unigenito Filio suo gignendo dedit, praeter esse Patrem; hoc ipsum, quod Spiritus sanctus procedit ex Filio, ipse Filius a Patre eternaliter habet, a quo etiam eternaliter genitus est. Definimus insuper explicationem verborum illorum Filioque, veritatis declarande gratia et imminente tunc necessitate, licite ac rationabiliter symbolo fuisse appositam.*

⁴⁵ For the reception of the Immaculate Conception in this historical period, Schmitt 1952 and more recently Izbicki 2005.

⁴⁶ *Monumenta conciliorum generalium, Seculi decimi quinti. Conciliorum Basileense scriptorum*, ed. by Birk/Palacky, XVIII, III, 959–961.

the first, the exegetical tradition – aimed at making the Virgin an unstained scroll – has been recalled, and it has, likely, inspired the artist in his medial interpretation of Mary. As for the second, this aspect explains why Konrad Witz juxtaposes the Trinitarian group with the encounter between the two future mothers. Moreover, from this ecumenical event, it is possible to understand the importance attached to the book as a vehicle of unquestioned and unquestionable authority. In this context, it is noteworthy to recall that during the councils, the evangeliary was placed on a throne, to preside over the assembly, and was thus interpreted as a representative of Christ.⁴⁷

The emphasis on the book and its materiality reveals the effectiveness of a skillfully modulated iconicity. In this way, from the blank page to the texture of parchment, Witz embraces a broad semiotic spectrum, through which he enriches his pictorial syntax to signify the sacrificial and sacramental presence of the Word.

Between textual fragments and empty spaces, between ink and flesh, between intercession and redemption, it has been shown that the compositional strategies in Konrad Witz's work can amplify, sometimes unexpectedly, allusions not only to the Incarnation but also to its recognition through the enigmatic insertion of the divine Word. It becomes the creator of eloquent virtuality, as well as the initiator of hermeneutic and heuristic processes. Through these figurative devices, Konrad Witz not only invites viewers to complete the pages of this book for themselves, writing an entirely personal exegesis of their salvation but also demonstrates that, often, the image is more loquacious than the word.

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