

The poetic/artistic practice of Ian Hamilton Finlay is deeply concerned with a topic that dominates contemporary discussions of the so called Anthropocene: human relations to what we call nature. If one considers language to be the medium helping us to produce the concepts with which we try to define the determining conditions of our living existence (which is my understanding of the term nature) the need for poetic and/or artistic investigations is obvious. Appropriately dubbed „the avant-gardener“ by the Guardian, Finlay’s work revolves around the inscription of language into all sorts of natural surfaces and culminates in the project „Little Sparta“: a whole garden filled with texts etched in stone and arranged between weeds and trees.

A small work by Finlay, called *wave/rock* may be read as an examination of the relations between our modes of representing nature and the (material) role that language plays in that process. *wave/rock* consists of the two words that its title entails. The words are arranged in such a way as to create a picture: a visual abstraction of a wave breaking on rocks. It exists in different forms, printed on a page as well as printed on a glass plate. On the left side of the visual poem, symbolizing the water, the letters are the ones belonging to the word „wave“. On the other side, where the rock is being symbolized, the letters r, o, c, k are dominant. Both sides merge in the middle of the work, with all letters overlapping in a region resembling a cliff. Insofar as the whole work is a picture *and* a poem at once, the visual form of the letters used by Finlay are highly important for its functioning. The letters v and w resemble the form of waves and, like foam, they are splashing into the air above the water. Like v and w on the watery side of the picturepoem, c and k serve a similar purpose within the „rock“, where they form its back-side as sharp edges marking its outline.

If one wants to read *wave/rock* as a work about the way language is related to nature — as I claim one can — the employment of the letters in the poem seem to serve a double purpose. On the one hand it relates to the old dream of poets and philosophers of language, that there might be a substantial connection between the form of linguistic signifiers and the things they signify (this would not only be true on the visual level but also on the auditory level, since the sounds that v and w signify in english are often used as onomatopoeic references to aquatic processes). And even if one subscribes to the contemporary standard view in linguistics that such a tie doesn’t exist between linguistic references and the natural world but that the connection is rather arbitrary, Finlay’s use of the letters as graphic material might still work as a reminder that with all our words we aim to speak *about* the world and that all our visual and auditory symbols are material products of the physical, biochemical and physiological processes that nature consists of. On the other hand however, with the anti-naturalistic, abstract use of letters as the components of a *picture*, Finlay seems to remind us of the fallible construction that every description of natural processes in symbolic form necessarily is. This effect (the relativization of the Kratylian dream) seems to be doubled formally in the materialization of the work, where the picturepoem is printed on a small glass pane. In this form viewers can move *wave/rock* around, making it symbolize the most heterogenous entities in the world which might remind them of the constitutive slipperiness of language.