Ekphrasis

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Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign.
PICTURE AND WORD,
SPACE AND TIME

The Exhilaration
—and Exasperation
—of *Ekphrasis*
as a Subject
The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;  
And as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name.

Theseus, in A Midsummer Night's Dream 5.1

Ever since it beckoned to me some two dozen years ago, I have found ekphrasis both a maddeningly elusive and an endlessly tempting subject. At that moment it led me, almost overnight, into the most easily written—and I think the most lyrical—critical essay I remember having written, but one whose very lyricism surrounded itself with a theoretical evasiveness that seemed to demand expansion into a book-length project—the most exciting I have ever seen on my horizon. That original essay, reprinted below as an appendix to this volume, bore the title "Ekphrasis and the Still Movement of Poetry; or Laokoön Revisited." From the moment of my finishing it in a frenzy, one night in 1966 only a night or two after I had begun it, I began to plan the book toward which that taunting subject drew me.

It was to be a book about the picture-making capacity of words in poems, except that from the first that capacity was to be challenged

1. See the Appendix. The essay was originally published in The Poet as Critic, ed. Frederick P. W. McDowell (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), pp. 3-26. When I reprinted it in my book The Play and Place of Criticism (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), in its title I substituted for "Ekphrasis" the phrase "The Ekphrastic Principle" in order to indicate the broader application I was seeking. I am still unsure about which of the two titles I prefer—just one more unresolved issue in my dealings with the subject, or rather in its dealings with me. For a perceptive study of that original essay and the extension of its themes in my later work see Gwen Raaberg, "Ekphrasis and the Temporal/Spatial Metaphor in Murray Krieger's Critical Theory," New Orleans Review 12 (1985): 34-43.

I am including my essay as an appendix to this volume not only to document the early version of my interest in the subject and to exhibit my own development in treating it but also to suggest some applications of the ekphrastic principle to what we used to call primary literary works. Finally, I should point out that because of an increasing number of discussions surrounding the word since my 1967 essay, ekphrasis has come into sufficiently common use to shed the italics that I gave it in that essay. So, from this point on, I will not italicize it in this volume.
by the obvious fact that words are many other things but are not—and happily are not—pictures and do not, even illusionarily, have “capacity.” How can words try to do the job of the “natural sign” (i.e., a sign that is to be taken as a visual substitute for its referent), when they are, obviously, only arbitrary—though conventionally arbitrary—signs? All the complexities of my subject, its unanswered questions, follow from the need to sustain the two opposed halves of this puzzle. What, in apparently pictorial poetry, do words, can words, represent? Conversely, how can words in a poem be picturable? Or do they somehow manage, instead, to represent the unrepresentable, or at least the “un-picturable”? I can put the issue another way by asking how we can reconcile the several blurred meanings attributed to that tricky word “image” as it recurs persistently throughout the history of criticism from Plato to Mazzoni to the moderns (Pound and the “imagists”). It is a term that, in its several simultaneous applications—ambiguously literal and metaphorical—to mental pictures and to words, both carries and hides the theoretical confusions it masks. Finally, because this is a study in criticism rather than in poetry itself, the most important question for me behind all these asks, how can the theorist—how have the theorists—made sense out of this set of paradoxes?

I could not then have imagined that the book deriving from an essay that seemed with such ease to write itself could be so difficult and resistant and prolonged an activity. For all these years I have felt ekphrasis drawing me, taunting me, putting me off—the one unyielding subject I have found among the books I have planned and written, both before and after my initial encounter with ekphrasis. Finally arrived at the moment that I have marked as a provisional end of my struggles with it (I will not speak of arriving at the light at the end of the tunnel, here where darkness empties into darkness), I think it would be useful to my reader as well as myself to provide a prospectus of what I have distilled into this troubled text: let it be at once summary and promissory note.

What follows, then, is a run-through of the problems with which I believe a systematic treatment of ekphrasis would have to deal, a rough synopsis of the story it would have to tell. In effect, it is the argument of my book. I acknowledge that I have now finished with these endless problems without solving them, that I have come to the end of my reach while leaving them still just beyond my grasp,

2. I borrow this term from Lessing (see Chapter 2, below).
though I am content with their ultimate elusiveness as a guarantee of the powers of literature to defy all attempts by the discursive categories of the critic to tame them.

Hard as it has been to satisfy the demands of the enquiry I undertook so long ago, I felt that I had to continue to struggle with ekphrasis and its network of complications because I was convinced that such an enquiry goes to the very heart of the language—which is to say, the habit of metaphor—that, throughout its history, has shaped and directed our literary criticism. We at once recognize the spatial origin of most of our terms of formal criticism, even in that very word “form”; but there is also an opposing tradition of criticism that fights against such spatial impositions on poetry as a temporal art. So we will find, in the history of our criticism, that there are those moments in which it is molded by the pictorial in language and those moments in which it is molded by the purely verbal as non-pictorial; moments in which it is dedicated to words as capturing a stillness and moments in which it is dedicated to words in movement; or even moments dedicated to the more difficult assignment of words as capturing a *still movement*. Thus I see my enquiry here as going to the heart of the varied practice of criticism itself.

A study that parades under the name ekphrasis can be many things. So perhaps at the start I should make clear what this study is not. Several likely subjects offer themselves, each of them satisfying interests that might seem consistent with ekphrasis and, consequently, with ideas traditionally associated with the phrase *ut pictura poesis*. For one, we could investigate literary paintings or pictorial poems—say, narrative pictures and detailed verbal descriptions—and conduct our study either historically or habitually, depending on the sort of conclusion we hoped to reach. A specialized version of this interest would have us compare pictures and related words as they come together in illustrated texts, whether in poems or in prose fiction. Or we could compare theories of painting with theories of the verbal arts, again either by relating them historically or by seeking to apply general aesthetic principles. As yet another alternative, we could relate the actual painting being produced in a given period with the poetry being written and trace the relationships, if any, between these products. As a slight variation of such a study, we could look at the attitudes of individual poets or schools of poets toward paintings or contemporary painters, or the reverse, the attitudes of painters toward poems or contemporary poets, tracing friendships and enmities, influences and aversions.
All of these are potentially exciting subjects; many important studies have explored them and others will explore them further. (In recent years I think especially of the remarkable work of W. J. T. Mitchell and Wendy Steiner.) But my own interests here carry me in a different direction, perhaps more general in some ways, though always, I hope, with a systematic focus that would reveal important consequences for the history of theory. I am primarily interested here in the notions put forth by literary theorists about the capacity of language to do the work of the visual sign: whether it can, whether it should. So, instead of these other subjects, what follows is intended as a study of the language of literary criticism and theory throughout its varied history in the West, but only as that language is shaped by its relation—positive or negative—to the injunction *ut pictura poesis*, broadly interpreted. I will be tracing the fortunes of the favored metaphors of critical and theoretical discourse about literature, metaphors shaped for many centuries mainly by a conception of the verbal arts that has them sharing characteristics of the plastic arts as arts of space and of visual appeal, but in the past two centuries more frequently shaped by a conception of the verbal arts that distinguishes them by their special relation to time and to the non-visual word.

Indeed, the matter may even be totally reversed, so that the other arts come to be spoken of in terms we normally would reserve for the verbal arts. In other words, instead of asking all the arts—even the verbal—to seek to become natural signs, we are told to move beyond the naïveté of such a semiotic, to accept the arbitrary and conventional character of all aesthetic signs—even the visual—and make the most of it, recognizing that pictures, no less than verbal structures, are human inventions and, as such, are products of an artificial making process. There thus would be no representational transparency, so that all the arts would come to be seen as emerging from a mediated activity.

I will be asking, then, about what others have termed the pictorialist or the anti-pictorialist character of critical and theoretical discourse, as well as about the attraction to that discourse of the language of space or the language of time, in the long history of crit-

icism in the arts, which has seen one or another art take the lead, at different moments, in creating a model language for the criticism of more arts than itself. One might even conduct a historical tour of our criticism by tracing—in the dominance now of the spatial and the visual, and now of the temporal and the verbal—the ascendancy and the fall of one art after another as the model art for its rivals to ape.

It should be conceded that these two oppositions, space versus time and picture versus word, do not necessarily collapse into a single theoretical issue, though they have many times been made to do so. As the history of criticism has treated them, the spatial and the pictorial are often, even usually, seen as coupled in opposition to the temporal and the verbal, but the two can be treated as distinct oppositions as well, with the debates about one pair not always involving the other. Indeed, they are not necessarily dependent on one another. For example, we shall see that Gotthold Ephraim Lessing concentrates exclusively upon the opposition between the spatial and the temporal, since his only concern with the word is with its capacity to yield moving rather than still pictures: he does not explore its peculiarly verbal—as non-pictorial—character. He concedes the opposition between natural and arbitrary signs only to dismiss its importance to his argument against a poetry of space and in favor of a poetry of time. On the other hand, at much the same time, Edmund Burke (as we shall see in Chapter 4) is far more concerned with the word's suggestive—because non-pictorial—powers and does not directly engage the issue of temporal versus spatial representation.4 (It may well be that within the dynamics of Burke's "sublime" there is a flight from stasis and thus the implication of a temporal—to the exclusion of a spatial—dimension, at least in the percipient's response. Still, his argument is explicitly addressed to one of the two debates without addressing the other.)

But to pursue such matters here is to leap far ahead of these introductory suggestions about what this study intends. In dealing with such niceties I meant primarily to make it clear at the outset that I will be concentrating on critical and theoretical discourse, as it reflects my special concern, rather than on the practice of the arts themselves, since, as I acknowledge from the first, the latter would lead me to tell quite a different story. Further, my treatment makes no pretense of being historically exhaustive; I will be selecting only

4. See Chapter 2 for the major discussion of Lessing and Chapter 4 for the major discussion of Burke.
a small number of representative landmark texts across the centuries, and returning to them again and again to search further within them and among them, as I create my own narrative to account for a series of striking developments in the language of theory and criticism. Whatever its shortcomings, I hope that this narrative, however partial and selective, will mark off the dimensions of the specific problems that define my subject and point the direction in which solutions to them might be found, or at least eliminate directions that are less likely to lead to solutions.

I enter upon this enquiry by way of ekphrasis because I see ekphrasis as the most extreme and telling instance of the visual and spatial potential of the literary medium. Let me at the outset define my sense of ekphrasis or rather, more broadly, set the limits on the ways I will suggest in which the term might be profitably used, although these limits will prove rather elastic since I intend to suggest an increasingly expansive reach for the verbal manifestations of the ekphrastic principle. I initiated this enquiry by accepting the narrow meaning given ekphrasis by Leo Spitzer (see the epigraph to my Foreword, above) as the name of a literary genre, or at least a *topos*, that attempts to imitate in words an object of the plastic arts. As the most commonly accepted use of the word, this remains the heart of the word's meaning for me. Ekphrasis, under this definition, clearly presupposes that one art, poetry, is defining its mission through its dependence on the mission of another art—painting, sculpture, or others. From the first, the study of ekphrasis, resting on that dependence, seemed to me the most extreme—and most useful—way to put into question the pictorial limits of the function of words in poetry.

5. Let me advise at the outset that I will use the phrase “the plastic arts” as aestheticians have traditionally used it: to refer to those arts in which the artist shapes or fashions or molds a material into a perceptible physical object, principally sculpture or painting. The more recent connotations associated with “plastic” in our culture, mainly derogatory, may well preclude the neutral designation “plastic arts” from continuing long in use, but its conventional generic use in aesthetics makes it a helpful shorthand that I am not quite ready to give up.

6. An even more restrictive meaning, one that I will not use, is given the term by Jean Hagstrum. In *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), Hagstrum reserves ekphrasis for only those poems in which the represented art object, like Keats's Grecian urn, “speaks out” to the reader. When objects are only described and have no verbal message, as in the case of Homer's shield of Achilles, Hagstrum calls the poem “iconic” as his more generic category. See *The Sister Arts*, pp. 18–29, esp. 18n.
However, I came to feel free to play with the expansiveness of the meaning and application of ekphrasis in view of a fuller history of the term’s usage. The early meaning given “ekphrasis” in Hellenistic rhetoric (mainly in the “second sophistic” of the third and fourth centuries A.D.) was totally unrestricted: it referred, most broadly, to a verbal description of something, almost anything, in life or art. Whatever the object it was to describe, and whether in rhetoric or poetry, it consistently carried with it the sense of a set verbal device that encouraged an extravagance in detail and vividness in representation, so that—as it was sometimes put—our ears could serve as our eyes since “[ekphrasis] must through hearing operate to bring about seeing.” More flagrantly than other rhetorical devices of the second sophistic, the ekphrasis, as an extended description, was called upon to intrude upon the flow of discourse and, for its duration, to suspend the argument of the rhetor or the action of the poet; to rivet our attention upon a visual object to be described, which it was to elaborate in rich and vivid detail. It was, then, a device intended to interrupt the temporality of discourse, to freeze it during its indulgence in spatial exploration.

Although works of the plastic arts—including illustrated cups and vases and urns and embroideries as well as paintings and sculptures or reliefs—were often cited among the many sorts of objects of ekphrastic description, there was no suggestion that ekphrasis was confined to them; indeed, they were not usually privileged among the unlimited sorts of objects on the visual horizon that were candidates for being converted into words. It is true that the Imagines of Philostratus the Elder in the third century was a series of descriptions of pictorial works of art and that, in his own derivative series of

7. I am grateful to Paul Davis both for helpful research into the classical sources of “ekphrasis” and for his useful conversation with me about them.

8. The quotation is from Hermogenes, “Ecphrasis,” The Elementary Exercises (Progymnasmata), in Charles S. Baldwin, Medieval Rhetoric and Poetic (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1959), pp. 35-36. In this broad assignment of its function, ekphrasis would seem to overlap, almost totally, the rhetorically encouraged virtue of enargeia, which is also defined as vivid description addressed to the inner eye. I introduce the notion of enargeia later in this chapter; and in Chapter 3, from its title on, I use enargeia as my starting point for tracing the critical tradition that defined itself by its encouragement of verbal painting (ut pictura poesis).

9. As we shall see in Chapter 5, this rhetorical tradition of the second sophistic contributes importantly to the extensive list of precedents that Jacopo Mazzoni cites to back up his own definition of poetry as an “image” or “idol,” the transformation of words into the spatial.
similar descriptions, also entitled *Imagines*, Philostratus the Younger refers to such description as ekphrasis. But the term is hardly being used as a technical reference to a genre, nor is there any attempt to argue more generally for such a restriction of objects. And when, during the same general period, Hermogenes, in the work already cited, lists examples of objects for ekphrasis, he does not talk separately about works of art at all.

Yet the narrowing of the objects of ekphrasis to works in the plastic arts does eventually occur, probably influenced by the fact that some of the most striking examples of ekphrasis were devoted to objects, real or imagined, from the plastic arts—perhaps beginning with Homer’s shield of Achilles, but also including many other frequently cited examples from Homer and succeeding classical poets and orators. The range of reference of the word “ekphrasis,” as it becomes a technical generic term, seems to become restricted in order to conform to those examples, those diverting descriptive interludes, that commentary habitually selected as the great ekphrases. And the connection of ekphrasis to works of pictorial art gradually becomes a firm one and continues into the modern era.

The advantages of having a work of art as an object of ekphrasis are, I think, obvious. If an author is seeking to suspend the discourse for an extended, visually appealing descriptive interlude, is he not better off—instead of describing the moving, changing, object in nature—to describe an object that has already interrupted the flow of existence with its spatial completeness, that has already been created as a fixed representation? Surely so: if he would impose a brief sense of *being*, borrowed from the plastic arts, in the midst of his shifting world of verbal *becoming*, the already frozen pictorial representation would seem to be a preferred object. His ekphrastic purpose would seem to be better served by its having as its object an artifact that itself not only is in keeping with, but is a direct reflection of, that purpose. Further, if one justification for the verbal description is to have it—for all the uncertainties of its words and our reading of them—compete with the visual object it would describe, the comparison would seem to be stabilized on one side by fixing that object so that, as an actual artifact, it can be appealed to as a constant, unlike our varying perceptual experiences of objects in the world.

10. See n. 8, above.

11. Since, by removing the italics, I have brought “ekphrasis” into the language, I will not use the original Greek plural form, *ekphraseis*. 
I have acknowledged the special theoretical value of using works of art as ekphrastic objects in order to examine, in its most extreme form, the capacity of words to transmit pictures. But the interest in the pictorial capacities of the verbal art would then once again open onto the broader consideration of ekphrasis as the sought-for equivalent in words of any visual image, in or out of art. Backed by historical precedent, then, I want also to summon this original, more universal sense of ekphrasis. Even while deferring to the special connection between ekphrasis and works in the plastic arts, I will broaden the range of possible ekphrastic objects by re-connecting ekphrasis to all "word-painting." I want to trace the ekphrastic as it is seen occurring all along the spectrum of spatial and visual emulation in words.

But I must also move even beyond such emulation—and beyond historical precedent—as I press all the dimensions I can find in ekphrasis. Because my interests lead me to extend the literal interest in ekphrasis to the widest possible probing of the ekphrastic principle, they lead me to search for a theory that would account for all the spatio-temporal possibilities within the poetic medium. Thus, even more than the verbal representation of the pictorial, I must include those other manifestations of the spatial impulse within poem-making that seek to fulfill the original ekphrastic impulse in the history of the verbal arts in the West, if the ekphrastic is to include every attempt, within an art of words, to work toward the illusion that it is performing a task we usually associate with an art of natural signs. At the far side of this extension of the ekphrastic principle, I see it at work also in the attempted construction of a literary work, whose words shape it into the verbal equivalent of an art object sensed in space. That is, the ekphrastic principle may operate not only on those occasions on which the verbal seeks in its own more limited way to represent the visual but also when the verbal object would emulate the spatial character of the painting or sculpture by trying to force its words, despite their normal way of functioning as empty signs, to take on a substantive configuration—in effect to become an emblem. What is at stake in all these diverse attempts at ekphrasis is the semiotic status of both space and the visual in the representational attempt by the verbal art—an ultimately vain attempt—to capture these within its temporal sequence, which would form itself into its own poetic object.

Ekphrastic ambition gives to the language art the extraordinary assignment of seeking to represent the literally unrepresentable. Yet
every tendency in the verbal sequence to freeze itself into a shape—or we can use "form" or "pattern" or some other metaphor borrowed from the spatial arts—is inevitably accompanied by a counter-tendency for that sequence to free itself from the limited enclosure of the frozen, sensible image into an unbounded temporal flow. Is it any wonder that I insist on words like "elusive" and "taunting" to characterize ekphrasis as a subject for theoretical placement? Whence this sense of inadequacy, of irresolution, of incompleteness, this challenge that seems to resist my attempts to find a critical language that can wrestle ekphrasis to the ground? I believe the difficulties arise out of the unresolvable tension, the mutual blockage, at the very base of the ekphrastic aspiration.

The ekphrastic aspiration in the poet and the reader must come to terms with two opposed impulses, two opposed feelings, about language: one is exhilarated by the notion of ekphrasis and one is exasperated by it. Ekphrasis arises out of the first, which craves the spatial fix, while the second yearns for the freedom of the temporal flow. The first asks for language—in spite of its arbitrary character and its temporality—to freeze itself into a spatial form. Yet it retains an awareness of the incapacity of words to come together at an instant (tout à coup), at a single stroke of sensuous immediacy, as if in an unmediated impact. Their incapacity is precisely what is to be emphasized: words cannot have capacity, cannot be capacious, because they have, literally, no space. The exhilaration, then, derives from the dream—and the pursuit—of a language that can, in spite of its limits, recover the immediacy of a sightless vision built into our habit of perceptual desire since Plato. It is the romantic quest to realize the nostalgic dream of an original, pre-fallen language of corporeal presence, though our only means to reach it is the fallen language around us. And it would be the function of the ekphrastic poet to work the magical transformation.

The second of these impulses, on the contrary, accepts a modest, unpretentious, demystified language that claims no magic, whose arbitrariness and temporal succession can escape the frozen momentary vision that, in seeking the momentous, would belie the fleetingness of the moment in an anti-pictorial blur. To this impulse the notion of ekphrasis, as a threat to language's temporal promise and the critic's conforming aspirations, can only be exasperating. In the conflict between these two impulses, between the attraction to ekphrasis and the aversion to it, what we are feeling is, on the one
side, what I call the semiotic desire for the natural sign and, on the other, the rejection of any such claim to the "natural," for fear of the deprivation it would impose on our freedom of internal movement, the freedom of our imagination and its flow in its arbitrary signs.

This is one doubleness in language as a medium of the verbal arts. And there is another: language in poems can be viewed as functioning transparently, sacrificing its own being for its referent; and it can be viewed as functioning sensuously, insisting upon its own irreducible there-ness. Yet I believe that as the Western imagination has seized upon and used the ekphrastic principle, it has sought—through the two-sidedness of language as a medium of the verbal arts—to comprehend the simultaneity, in the verbal figure, of fixity and flow, of an image at once grasped and yet slipping away through the crevices of language. This sense of simultaneity is sponsored by our capacity to respond to the verbal image as at once limitedly referential and mysteriously self-substantial. The aesthetic dream of our culture has long been of a miracle that permits these opposed impulses to come together in the paradoxical immediacy of ekphrasis, whether as a verbal replacement for a visual image or as its own verbal emblem that plays the role of a visual image while playing its own role. In either case, the dream of miracle remains even if its illusionary ground suggests it is no more than mirage. Perhaps this claim to miracle is only a way of specifying Coleridge’s claim that in poetry the imagination serves as the “balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities,” or Wolfgang Iser’s search in the aesthetic for “the simultaneity of the mutually exclusive,” not unlike Louis Marin’s or my own pursuit of the duplicity of what we both have termed the “metonymic metaphor.” Still, this specification by ekphrasis is important despite its inevitably paradoxical character: indeed, in the deference it pays to the anti-spatial impulse while holding out for the spatial object, it can help cover the break between what we call the modern and the postmodern.

I can now suggest in a preliminary way the directions that following chapters will take and the shape they are intended to give my subject. In speaking of ekphrasis, or at least of the ekphrastic impulse, I have pointed to its source in the semiotic desire for the natural sign, the desire, that is, to have the world captured in the word, the word that belongs to it, or, better yet, the word to which it belongs. This desire to see the world in the word is what, after Derrida, we have come to term the logocentric desire. It is this naive de-
sire that leads us to prefer the immediacy of the picture to the medi-
ation of the code in our search for a tangible, "real" referent that
would render the sign transparent.12
Thus ekphrasis, as the ultimate translation of such a desire into
the language arts, rests, in its most obvious form, on a verbal pic-
torialism—the belief in the natural-sign basis for all the arts—and
was most attractive as a device when, in literary theory, pictorialism
was in flower. Yet it is not altogether resisted when anti-pictorialism
becomes dominant, although its character as ekphrasis is radically
modified and sophisticated. Throughout the history of the ekphras-
tic temptation, we sense the desire to overcome the disadvantage of
words and of the verbal art as mere arbitrary signs by forcing them
to ape the natural signs and the natural-sign art that they cannot
turn themselves into. As readers, we are to use the free play in our
minds of the words' intelligible character to allow us to indulge the
illusion that they create a sensible object, though an intelligibly—
and hence only figuratively—sensible object, of course.
Throughout its history, at the heart of a poetics of ekphrasis has
been the opposition between natural and arbitrary signs. (I will be
tracing the steps by which this opposition came to be perceived as
no longer tenable, a perception generally agreed upon for some
time.) For many centuries this opposition overlapped crucially the
related opposition derived from Plato between so-called sensible
and intelligible signs (and it is with this opposition that I begin in
Chapter 2). In the poetics of ekphrasis we find an ambivalence be-
tween, on the one hand, the defensive concession that language, as
arbitrary and with a sensuous lack, is a disadvantaged medium in
need of emulating the natural and sensible medium of the plastic
arts and, on the other hand, the prideful confidence in language as
a medium privileged by its very intelligibility, which opens the sens-
ible world to the free-ranging imagination without being bound by
the limitations of the sensible as revealed in the visual field. The
superior access of natural signs to the sensible world received by
our eyes can be countered by the superior access of language, com-

12. I should note parenthetically here that the conception of the picture as natural
sign rests on a naively "realistic" assumption of an unproblematic relation between
the painting and its object of imitation. Since this conception does not take into
account the making of the mimetic painting as a thing of pigment and canvas, it
bypasses the use of these materials to create the optical illusion of objects and per-
sons. The narrow, literal doctrine of ekphrasis would seem to require this primitive
notion of the pictorial as the naively representational.
posed of arbitrary signs, to the intelligible world received by our inner vision, conceived figuratively as "the eyes of the mind." Such is the cluster of oppositions, and the attempts by language to overrun them, that for me help define the domain of ekphrasis, or at least the ekphrastic, as it has functioned in the Western aesthetic since Plato.

Behind these matters lurks the central question, What theory of representation, what semiotic, is required in order to argue that imitation is the same operation in the visual and verbal arts? Ever since, in his Cratylus, Plato, however playfully, made what is in effect our first distinction between natural and arbitrary signs, but made it utterly within the precincts of an aesthetic—indeed, a metaphysic—that rested on a doctrine of mimesis, the language arts have had a lengthy struggle to free themselves, because of their visually disadvantaged medium, from the secondariness assigned to them in their non-naturalness of representation. I believe the history of this struggle, which culminated first in rescuing language from beneath the yoke of visual signs that it could try in vain to emulate, and then in privileging language as supreme among representational media, is important to our understanding of how the ekphrastic principle has functioned and can function in the Western poetic.

But before tracing that history, we have to comprehend the burden of the natural-sign aesthetic under which the language arts labored for so long. It is an aesthetic in which, within a commitment to a "visual epistemology," representation can be nothing other than literal imitation and thus poses no problems.\textsuperscript{13} Under the aegis of this aesthetic, and with the eye as the privileged sense (as it was for Plato), the model art is of course the pictorial art to which the verbal art is to adapt its program. And the poetics, accordingly, is built out of the spatial and visual language of the pictorial art, though, as applied to the verbal arts, that language can be no more than roughly and uncritically metaphorical in its attempt to force those verbal arts to take on alien (i.e., spatial and visual) characteristics, if only by analogy.

In spite of Plato's anti-aesthetic, puritanical intentions, his basic and unwavering notion of the unproblematically mimetic character

of signs bestowed a privilege on the natural-sign arts, as if they could represent their imitated objects (as objects of our limited perceptions) without disparities eventuating from the making process. Within such a theoretical setting, as Plato's followers were to make clear for centuries, words, on the other hand, could do their mimetic best, but they could not avoid their inferiority as an instrument of faithful representation. It is not surprising that this sort of semiotic produces the device termed enargeia as a major virtue for the language arts to attain. To create enargeia is to use words to yield so vivid a description that they—dare we say literally?—place the represented object before the reader's (hearer's) inner eye. This is as much as a verbal artist could hope for: almost as good as a picture, which in turn is almost as good as the thing itself. We can understand the original use of enargeia as a rhetorical device to enable an advocate to reproduce before his hearers in court the scene or incident he needs them to picture in order to persuade them to judge favorably. As my earlier historical examination indicated, enargeia develops into becoming one with the ekphrastic principle as poetry's principle. It is thoroughly in accord with the phrase originally attributed by Plutarch to Simonides that described poetry as a "speaking picture" or, much later, with the unfortunate, though generally accepted, misinterpretation of Horace's ut pictura poesis. Art in general is seen as a mnemonic device meant to reproduce an absent reality, and deprived of sensuousness, poetry is art at yet a further remove.

As I argue in detail in Chapter 2, where the drama is excepted from the sensory incapacities of language, it is only because dramatic representation, as the interaction of apparently real people, is itself a sort of natural sign in its illusionary immediacy. Lessing reminds us of drama's special role, a natural-sign role, as a visual art (a "moving picture") and, by implication, concedes the greater mimetic distance that occurs in non-dramatic poetry. For the dramatic mode of representation is not altogether dependent on the invisibilities of language, as the lyric and narrative modes are.

In view of non-dramatic poetry's mimetic objective and the handicaps of its medium to attain it as directly as its more obviously mimetic rival arts, it is no wonder that, as a language art, poetry developed and pursued an ekphrastic ambition, seeking to emulate those arts whose naturalness makes them appear to be reality's surrogate. That ambition expresses itself, its commitment to enargeia, in a variety of ways as we follow it from ancient Greece through the
Renaissance. Let me follow that development as a narrative that moves from epigram to ekphrasis to emblem. It is in the latter, the emblem, that the ekphrastic principle, even more than in ekphrasis itself, fully realizes itself. In moving from epigram to ekphrasis to emblem, I do not mean to impose a chronological sequence so much as to suggest the alternative emphases that consistently reflect a complicated, if not confused, mixture of motives and epistemologies as the visual and the verbal interact in these strangely hybrid products.

In its early versions in Greece the epigram, in its primary use as a verbal inscription on sculpture or tombstone, implicitly acknowledged and set in place the subsidiary relation of its words to the work of plastic art that it accompanied (epigram), often as little more than a legend. But, sometimes restive in this subsidiary role, the epigram could use its words to challenge the primacy of the physical object it adorned. That is, not only could it try to function as a verbal representation—indeed as a verbal equivalent—of its spatial object, but it could also perform in several ways unavailable to its object: 

14 it could introduce an awareness of passing time—as only words can do—as a contradictory commentary upon the unmoving, unchangeable monument; it could speak for its object, giving it a voice, whether directly or enigmatically; it could point to the illusionary effects of artifice in the plastic construct; and it could, as an act of interpretation, allegorize the impact of the eternalizing shrine. In these ways the epigram could complicate the apparently unambiguous material representation that it was supposed only to complement; it could drive a wedge between the monument and its referent, thus undermining any pretense that the material object was a natural sign.

On the other side, the epigram was, perhaps more often—and more appropriately—confined to the self-effacing function of calling attention to the illusionary effectiveness of its plastic-art companion as a natural sign ("just like the live person"), thereby relegating itself to mere verbal explanation and emphasizing its own arbitrary-sign service as no more than a gloss on the tangible and successfully illusionary primary object. In this acknowledged secondary role, it reinforced the disadvantaged place for literature that we have seen to be dictated by mimetic theory.

14. No one dealing with my subject can fail to be in the debt of Jean Hagstrum's *The Sister Arts*. I again register my own indebtedness in the present discussion, though it will be reflected in many other places in this chapter and others.
Still, the impact of the epigram could go either way: especially in its funerary role it could also insist upon the deceptive consequences of the material object, immobile and unchanging, an illusion that, in its stasis and apparent permanence, belied the transience of human life—and death. That insistence suggests, paradoxically, the unreality of the very eternalizing monument and its now-dead referent that the epigram was to celebrate, thus suggesting also the fraudulence of the pretense of the would-be natural sign. Where the consciousness of time is admitted, there the complexities of the verbal universe also enter, undermining the immediate assurances otherwise given by the pretender natural sign. What has actually reentered the scene is the spirit of Plato that insists on turning the material world into the deceptive realm of appearance, leaving reality to the invisible ideas that transcend the senses. The epigram has turned into a metaphysical allegory on human vainglory. Once reality is freed from the sensible to soar into the realm of the intelligible, the would-be natural sign and its material object must lose all priority, and the possibility of representing the transcendentally "real" must be vested in the invented codes of language alone. The unchallenged belief in the authority of natural-sign representation will have to wait for the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the doctrine of imitation could rest securely in the spatial solidity of the material world that produced its firmly standing objects for imitation, unthreatened by any consciousness of the loosening flow of temporality.

Despite the complications into which the epigram could lead, in its early moment it was to function primarily as a pointer to the accompanying monument, for the most part accepting a second-place role for the arbitrary signs of language. (Of course, the epigram pursues its own more ambiguous role as it later emerges into its distinguished career as an independent work of verbal art.) When we move from epigram to ekphrasis and lose the presence of the companion object, we find language no longer yielding any primacy to its (apparently) visual object, but seeking an equivalence with it—and more. The ekphrasis is, in effect, an epigram without the accompanying object, indeed without any object except the one it would verbally create. The visual image that the ekphrasis seeks to translate into words is of course lost in the translation, as gradually the verbal representation, no longer leaning on another, extra-textual, tangible representation, takes on the power of a free-standing entity.
Frequently, as we find in obvious examples of ekphrasis such as the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad* (bk. 18) or—to invoke the most familiar, even if belated, example—Keats's Grecian urn, the object of the ekphrasis does not exist except as it is invented in its verbal description, subject to the special character that only its verbal form can exploit.\(^{15}\) I suggest that in such cases the poet prefers the object to be fictive so that his ostensible verbal description can make free with it. Indeed, in the verbal representations of both the shield and the urn, the ekphrases take their special meaning by exceeding their fictive spatial objects in a number of ways.

The most obvious way in which each verbal description overruns its object is in the opening it provides, within what is presumably a spatial construct, for movement into the realm of human time. There is this difference between Homer's shield and Keats's urn as objects for the poet exercising the magic of his craft: the first is a fictional "impossible" object that only a poet could transcribe,\(^{16}\) while the second is a fictional *possible* object that the poet, and only a poet, can move beyond. That is, the invented shield supposedly represents temporal sequences that could not appear on it (hence its miraculous making, which could be performed only by a divine maker), so that only an ostensibly mimetic verbal narrative can convey them to *us*; by contrast, the invented urn accepts the spatially frozen limits of its represented scenes (representative also of metaphysical, or at least aesthetic, stasis), so that it is up to the poet, whose language is in tune with the wretchedness of the human temporality ("all breathing human passion") that we all share, to break through and move beyond into the unfolding incompleteness of mortal time. The two ekphrases thus speak differently in their effort to represent what the fictive art object could not, but the effect is

\(^{15}\) I would argue that even if we found an urn that seemed to be the one that is the ostensible occasion for Keats's poem, it would seem, for all its beauty, a poor thing so long as we expected it to account for all that the poem makes us aware of with respect to the urn. The ability of Keats's language to exploit the paradox of the urn's multidimensional "still"-ness at once leads us beyond the circular enclosure of the urn itself.

\(^{16}\) I borrow (and distort) the word "impossible" as it has been applied to M. C. Escher's misleading architectural pictures, which force us into two simultaneous and contradictory ways of perceiving spatial relationships. I have found E. H. Gombrich's discussion of Escher's "visual paradoxes" especially valuable (see "Illusion and Visual Deadlock," in his *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art* [London: Phaidon Press, 1965], pp. 154-56). See Chapter 7, below, for an extension of this concept to the verbal arts.
similar: as the hundreds of lines in Homer permit us to take in the extended accumulation of anthropological and narrative detail that could not coexist on a single shield, so Keats's poem gives voice to all that the urn cannot say. Using its speech to break through the "stillness" of the urn's circularity, it points us to what must transpire beyond the seized moments represented on its fictive object, the moments that the urn and the poem (like the urn) would contain, but that the poem also (unlike the urn) must dissolve.

Both the verbally pictured urn and shield, then, by superimposing our awareness of the accidents of human time upon the fixed completeness of formal stasis, demonstrate the inevitable mixing—through the indulgence in paradox—of the existential in the aesthetic. Keats constantly reminds us of the unhappy befores and afters that cannot appear in the frozen pictures on the urn he is presumably describing: the unpictured moments beyond the wooing and, just beyond the frame of the second scene, both the unpictured past—the absent and abandoned town—and the unpictured future, the sacrificial "green altar" to which the heifer is being led. Linear history and circular art can both be sustained in the poem as they cannot be on the urn. Similarly, in describing what appears on the shield, Homer seeks to give us at once both the elaborately ornamented metal artifact and the routine material life of ancient Greece (together with its mythological divine overseers) that he both represents and misrepresents: "The earth darkened behind them and looked like earth that has been ploughed / though it was gold. Such was the wonder of the shield's forging" (Lattimore). Black earth in gold, and both at once: it is, rather, the alchemical wonder of the words' forging, which in this ekphrasis collapses time and space, earthly life as lived and its divine transmutation into a golden art. In these two ekphrases, then, we are given, not a visual image of a golden shield or an urn, but a verbal shield or a verbal urn and the textual intimations of an existence beyond: what only words can give us by revealing the two at once. It is an aesthetic alchemy revived for our time in the golden bird of Yeats's Byzantium.

So the claim of naive imitation no longer applies, not even in a genre like ekphrasis, which seems to have been created expressly for mimetic purposes. The genre is thus used to allow the fiction of an ekphrasis, a make-believe imitation of what does not exist outside the poem's verbal creation of it. Literal ekphrasis has moved, via the power of words, to an illusion of ekphrasis. The ekphrastic principle has learned to do without the simple ekphrasis in order to
explore more freely the illusionary powers of language.

By the time we arrive at the emblem poetry of the Renaissance, we find that the relationship between visual image and word, which was both established and undermined in the epigram, has completed its reversal. As visual companion to the poem, the emblem, which is no longer anything like a mimetic representation, seems cryptic and in need of explication, so that it leans upon a text whose verbal completeness now permits it to claim primacy. Though visual, the emblem has taken on a mysterious complexity that makes it function less as an imitation than as itself a text in need of interpretation, so that we welcome and depend upon the words as the literal code, spelling out as its own what is only hinted at in the opaque pictorial signs of another, figured code.

As I hope to show in Chapter 5, the pressures of Renaissance Neo-Platonism made it increasingly objectionable for the artist to indulge the sensible world or imitations of it. Instead, esoteric symbols were to be taken as an allegorical code to allow us access to a reality that was only intelligible, accessible to the mind alone. According to the mystifications summoned by Marsilio Ficino, for example, we need the symbolic immediacy of things, and the representation of things, rather than the mediation of empty words; but those representations—thanks to an ontological hermeneutic that allows us to interpret them as essential symbols—serve as our threshold to an intelligible reality. So it is a picture, but it is also a language rather than a natural-sign representation. Yet, as language, it is not arbitrary since the signs are firmly tied to their referents through the unalterable allegorical system rooted in that ontological hermeneutic.

In this way, according to Ficino, the hieroglyphs of the Egyptians, though a language of pictures, are an emblematic code rather than a direct imitation of objects presumably being represented. So, on one side, pictures as natural signs are rejected as imitations of the lowly sensible, and on the other, language—words, though seeking the intelligible, is rejected as symbolically empty. Between them are pictures-as-language—a sacred language of presence—which, essentially locked into the ontological hermeneutic, indirectly reveal

intelligible reality to us by speaking the unmediated language of God as the only possible sensible representation of Platonic ideas. Within this perspective, the dependence on words is part of the curse on us as fallen creatures, who have access only to signs that are arbitrary and conventional ("multiple and shifting," Ficino would say), since we are denied the power to speak the immediate language of God.

When the Egyptian priests wished to signify divine mysteries, they did not use the small characters of script, but the whole images of plants, trees or animals; for God has knowledge of things not by way of multiple thought but like the pure and firm shape of the thing itself.

Your thoughts about time are multiple and shifting, when you say that time is swift or that, by a kind of turning movement, it links the beginning again to the end, that it teaches prudence and that it brings things and carries them away again. But the Egyptian can comprehend the whole of this discourse in one firm image when he paints a winged serpent with its tail in its mouth, and so with the other images which Horus described.

The visual emblem, then, is devised, as "one firm image," to transmit an all-at-once, enclosed meaning—as enclosed as the image of the "winged serpent with its tail in its mouth," a conventional figure of closure, though for the Egyptian (according to Ficino) it is temporality itself, in its winged form that would escape closure, which is in this emblem being figured, however paradoxically, as the ultimate closure. Here, in the magical *ouroboros* (or "tail-eater") the image, functioning here as an emblem, as a code, must be treated as a language to be interpreted rather than as a natural-sign imitation to be seen through to its object. This is so even if the code is ren-

18. I have anticipated this sustaining of the paradoxical coexistence of the wings of linear time and its circular enclosure in what I have said earlier in this chapter about the shield of Achilles and Keats's urn. The conflict between linear and circular concepts of time is a major issue in Chapter 7. There I take up the need in the ekphrastic tradition to hold onto the circular and yet to break through it to the linear. It is one advance I have tried to make on what I now see as the overemphasis on circular security in my earlier essay (in the Appendix) and in the source of that essay, the Spitzer review article that provides my epigraph as well as the grounds for the discussion that closes Chapter 7.

19. There is a different, even more cosmic significance assigned to the tail-eater by Horapollo (referred to by Ficino as "Horus" in the above quotation), who is the presumed (but questionable) author of the *Hieroglyphica*, the most influential list of em-
pered hermeneutically (as well as hermetically) inevitable rather than arbitrary by virtue of its being ontologically secured, thanks to a metaphysical equation.

The desire to shift art's responsibility from objects to be re-presented to a code to be interpreted helps turn all art into interpretable texts, even if—for a world confident of its metaphysical grounding—the interpretation was pre-scribed. This desire is related to the Puritan war on idolatry, which results in a rejection of the deceptive seductions of the worldly—and hence of visual representation as transparent idols of art. Once, like the Neo-Platonists, one pursues Plato's quest for ontological objects seen by the mind's eye rather than phenomenal objects seen by the body's eye, then the superiority of interpretable—and hence intelligible—symbols, visual or verbal, over the immediately representational arts, is assured. Instead of being limited to the sensed world about us, as a visual and natural sign through which that world's objects are to be perceived, the arbitrary, though conventional, signs of a visual or verbal language can give us the insensible illusion of an existing object while actually moving freely to the intelligible realm beyond the senses.

Ficino himself, we saw, distrusted the symbolic powers of signs as arbitrary as words and thus called instead for a language of visual symbols. Despite Ficino's doubts, however, his support of an interpretive system of symbols—though symbols mysteriously multiple in their intelligible meanings—helped clear the ground for claims of the superiority of the verbal arts to emerge. The Neo-Platonic argument led to a view of the verbal arts as the purest version of symbolic structure—the freest from any dependence on sense—so that they could claim all the advantages of the visual arts while enjoying

 Problematic identifications used in the Renaissance. He uses it to symbolize the universe itself, the heavens, the four elements, and human life in the circularity of youth and age, generation and diminution (see The Hieroglyphics of Horapollo, trans. George Boas [New York: Pantheon, 1950], pp. 57-58). As it is sometimes used in medieval and Renaissance alchemical literature dominated by Christian Neo-Platonism, the tail-eating serpent has yet another, more moralistic kind of allegorical significance. It is still a paradoxical image expressing the mutually exclusive, but it now encloses the simultaneity of good and evil, of poison and cure, thanks to the magical transmuting properties of mercury (related, of course, to Hermes and, beyond, to the divine master, Hermes Trismegistus). A redemptive metamorphosis of the serpent of Eden, the ouroboros is seen in the hermetic reading as consuming his own venom and converting it into a miraculously virtuous balm (see Kurt Seligmann, The History of Magic [New York: Pantheon, 1948], pp. 134-35).
a freedom from their limitations: they function, in effect, as a higher but unworldly analogue of the concomted arts of the natural sign. Yet it is the dream of a return to the idyll of the natural sign, the lingering semiotic desire for the natural sign, that presses the poet to resort to the verbal analogy to it in the realm of the intelligible by struggling to create an emblem out of words.

The verbal artist, then, is authorized to have it both ways, dealing with the words of the world and taking advantage of their intelligibility to claim a realm beyond. Some of those who earlier maintained the primacy of the natural sign nostalgically saw an Edenic origin in it, so that our need for the mediation of words was a result of the Fall; but those we have now turned to would privilege the intelligible reach of language over natural-sign images, condemning the latter on the grounds of idolatry and their confinement to the sensible world. The final trick is for language to complete its bid for supremacy by taking on the here-ness of the plastic arts, turning itself into a form that creates the illusion of becoming its own emblem, an internal ekphrasis, *almost* sensuous after all, though without touching the earth. But of course it is the *almost* that stimulates its complex, paradoxical attractiveness.

Once the shift from natural-sign picture to picture-as-code has occurred, it is a short step to a configuration of words that would turn themselves into a form that is the self-enclosed equivalent of an emblem, in effect a verbal emblem. The visual emblem and the verbal emblem are complementary languages for seeking the representation of the unrepresentable. Ekphrasis is the poet's marriage of the two within the verbal art. As we shall see, in the more complex manifestations of the ekphrastic impulse, we find the paradoxical search for a language that can force itself into satisfying a demand for "spatial form." Following the lead of a sacred iconographic tradition, with its dependence on a belief in word magic, the poem appears to convert its language—despite the evanescent way in which words normally seek to function—into an emblematic enclosure. It seeks to defy the mediating properties and the temporality of language by finding in language a plasticity that, as in the plastic arts, turns its medium into the unmediated thing itself, as if it were the word (Word?) of God. The poem as emblem, in effect supplanting its visual accompaniment, becomes the ultimate projection of the ekphrastic principle by representing a fixed object which is itself. The extreme example of George Herbert's poems-as-figures is only a baroque exaggeration of this tendency.
The movement from epigram (with the word as subsidiary to the object it accompanies) to the minimal notion of ekphrasis (with the word attempting an equivalence to a described object) achieves its ultimate claim in the poem-as-emblem (with the word as itself the primary object). It is in the latter that the ekphrastic principle would most fully realize itself. Thus I see the ekphrastic principle, which I have traced here from the "visual epistemology" of Plato and the consequent call for enargeia, as completing itself in the verbal emblem of the Renaissance. This development from Plato's enargeia to the Renaissance emblem is for me the first major extended moment—and the most complex—in the history of my subject.

As I suggested earlier, by the late seventeenth century and through the first half of the eighteenth, the well-ordered semiotics of the untransforming mirror, differently sponsored by rationalism and by empiricism, restores the dominance of the doctrine of a literalistic imitation and with it, thanks to the continued appeal to "visual epistemology," the authority of the ut pictura poesis. This second moment in the history of my subject, a more uncomplicated moment that treats poetry as verbal painting, is taken up in detail in Chapter 3. The medium of the verbal arts is to be thinned to utter transparency in their effort, as a disadvantaged relation, to emulate the natural-sign arts, now restored to primacy as the model for all the arts.

When, for example, Joseph Addison, as a faithful follower of John Locke, projects a spectrum—or, should I rather say, a hierarchy?—of the arts, he moves from sculpture, as "the most natural" art in that it is "likest the object that is represented," to painting, with its illusionary use of the two-dimensional picture plane, and only then to verbal "description," with "letters and syllables" that, unlike a picture, bear no "real resemblance to its original." He is on his way to music as the extreme version of the non-natural sign, furthest from any obvious sort of mimetic representation. By contrast, in the literary there is still some chance for the emulation of visual meanings through the attempt to make verbal pictures, especially since Addison restricts the role of the literary to "description" in the attempt to realize the visual task even with its handicapped arbitrary signs.

It is no wonder that having given the verbal arts the impossible task of painting pictures with their non-pictorial signs, Addison must insist that those signs seek transparency, turning aside from

20. Spectator 416 (1712). I quote this passage in full and discuss it at much greater length in Chapter 3.
any play with letters or words that permits them to call attention to themselves as letters or words, instead of pointing self-effacingly, without interference, to their meanings. The word, then, should behave as a medium that, in its vain search for a natural-sign transpar-

ency, seeks to obliterate our awareness of its being there by suppress-
ing all of its mediating properties.\footnote{See \textit{Spectator} 62 (1711) for the conclusion of Addison’s extended definitions of, and comparisons among, “true wit,” “false wit,” and “mixed wit,” based mainly on the degree of activity or passivity in the role of the verbal medium and, consequently, our awareness of its visibility. This issue is pursued in Chapter 6.} Under such stringencies, any ekphrasis would have to be slavishly other-regarding with respect to the natural-sign object it is imitating (via description): it is not only to imitate the natural sign as its object but also to imitate (i.e., to emulate) the semiotic intention of that object as well.

But this neoclassical moment, which celebrates the “sister arts” while designating literature as the deprived sister, can also sponsor a second—and opposed—tendency (treated in Chapter 4) that acknowledges and even encourages the thickening of the verbal medium and appreciates its opacity. It celebrates the incapacity of words to yield natural signs and, instead, relates poetry to the temporal condition of our inner life. We find this tendency even in the same \textit{Spectator} paper of Addison’s when, having established the hierarchy of the art objects based on naturalness or resemblance to their referents, he moves on to speak, even if contradictorily, on the other side: of those occasions on which language, as if discovering and exploiting its other-than-natural-sign function, permits the poet not only to gain effects beyond the reach of the painter but even to “get the better of nature.”

Edmund Burke, we will see, extends this tendency to invert the hierarchy of the arts in order to privilege the literary. He argues that natural-sign representation is the handicapped one because it is limited by the physical confines of its object of imitation, while language, in the vagueness, the unpredictability—but also the suggestiveness—that emanates from its arbitrary signs, can have a virtually unlimited emotional appeal precisely because language can paint no pictures. In valorizing the “sublime” at the expense of the “beautiful,” Burke would have us break through the finite dimensions of the merely pictorial to the limitless potentialities of unpicturable emotions. If I may anticipate the language of a more influential, later thinker who in this distinction was indebted to Burke, the
"Apollonian" should be supplanted by the " Dionysian." This shift from the externally directed natural sign to internal human expression creates a third moment for my narrative, one that springs from an anti-formal impulse.

Once Burke has shifted our interest from the reproductive picture to the affective sequence of words, we are ready for the general shift of literary theory into the realm of temporality at the expense of visual form. Hence, as Burke himself suggests, the model art toward which the hybrid art of literature is now to move is no longer painting or sculpture, but music. The spectrum we saw introduced by Addison from sculpture through painting to literature and finally to music is reversed as the realm of sound enters the debate, and the total dependence of poetry on a visual epistemology comes to an end. At an end too is the indulgence in that sort of ekphrasis which has a visually mimetic basis. If we see poetry as a two-sided art positioned between the representational visual arts on the one side and music on the other, having referential meaning like the former and temporal sonority like the latter, we would recognize the partial and mutually exclusive character of the aesthetics based on metaphors borrowed from only one (either one) of these two model arts. And the two would have opposite attitudes toward the ekphrastic principle. The analogy to the visual arts would encourage ekphrasis as a simple mimetic procedure, totally ignoring the problematic character of verbal representation, while the analogy to music would appear to preclude ekphrasis altogether as an effective instrument of representation.

But I have already observed another aesthetic that would collapse this opposition and enrich the possibilities for ekphrasis beyond its function within a natural-sign aesthetic. The Renaissance, I suggested, provided such a subtler possibility that could comprehend the ambiguities of poetic language and the emblematic ambitions of some poems. And this is a version that, thanks to the shift away from the natural-sign aesthetic in the later eighteenth century, begins to reappear in a more sophisticated, less ontologically dependent form. I seek to trace its development in Chapters 6 and 7 as my fourth moment, which returns to form on a new basis—on a different notion of what it is to emulate nature, now taken to be one with the natural process.

Some romantic theories, in the wake of Burke, pursue into the twentieth century the quest for an anti-formalistic literary sublimity, indulging language in its anti-pictorial—and anti-spacial—char-
acter, which tends toward music. Further, the shift in the nineteenth century from spatial to temporal models, from metaphors of orderly world machines to metaphors of evolution, tends to give the arts of temporality free movement, as if there were no formal inhibitions to be imposed upon the dispersive tendencies of our responses to language. There are moments in Burke that suggest as much. But almost at once, modifications come to be introduced that shape the major formalist tradition from Herder to Coleridge to the New Critics. What emerges seeks to harness the unleashing of the dynamics of language to create a new emblematics. So hardly has the literary art been freed, in the direction of the temporal, from neoclassical spatiality, before these critics begin, on literature's behalf, to work their way back to space, though only on new and shifting grounds that never quite come to rest.

The emphasis on the sound of language, especially as reflected in the major verse traditions, helps such critics argue that the literary medium, long conceded to be intelligible, can, after all, be made sensible too, like the media of the other arts. Here is yet another way to take up the older argument that language can have it both ways: it can claim the advantages of the sensible arts, and yet in its intelligibility it need not suffer the limitations imposed by the phenomenal world. If words in poems can use their aural dimension to give shape to the sequence they form, then through the mutual influence of their sounds they can deepen or even transform the meanings they bring to the text. Through such manipulation in the poem, the sensible—because it is aural rather than visual and thus leaves the mind free to range—is able to serve and enrich the intelligible instead of displacing it.

Through such enhancement the language arts could hope to represent what from the merely sensible or natural-sign perspective would appear to be unrepresentable. So here again the two-sidedness of poetry, using a medium that is conceived as at once meaning and sound, was to confer a privilege that would make it the model art. As we approach our own time, not only is primacy bestowed upon the arts of the word and of time (instead of upon the arts of the picture and of space) but the spreading semiotic interest in texts absorbs all the arts, subjects them all to temporality and makes them all ripe for reading. This is the ultimate imperialistic move by literature and literary criticism to subject to its terms all the arts and all the arts of discourse alike.

The efforts of formalist criticism to create a dynamic unity in texts
that could reconcile the temporal and the arbitrary into the created inevitabilities of spatial form are reflected in the movement that leads to high modernism in literature and ultimate organicism in high New Criticism. Under the aegis of this movement the paradox of an internal ekphrasis can flourish anew as the mark of a spatial form that can coexist with the flowing character of words as an aesthetic medium. Whatever phonemes, syllables, words, passages, tropes, characters, actions, or even themes may be seen as serial repetitions are to be treated by the formalist as if they were spatial juxtapositions, except that their sequential character allows them to be both the one and the other. The poem as emblem, under the ekphrastic principle, seeks to create itself as its own object.

And yet no object: for all of its intelligible richness, there is, in this set of arbitrary signs, nothing there. Here is an invulnerable duplicity that can claim so much only because, in the end, it claims so little. In examples of it, such as the urn of Keats or the Tennessee jar of Stevens, the verbal representations are described as containing formally what is at the same time seen as dribbling away. Like Stevens's jar, they must give the lie to the very claim to spatial enclosure that their being (i.e., their verbal representation) would for the formalist enact. In this they are another version of the winged serpent with its tail in its mouth, each a verbal emblem that has become its own ekphrasis—and its own undoing.

In my final chapter I look at our current moment, which is my fifth and last: the negative postmodern skepticism that is its reaction to such ambitious claims for poetry. The various—and they are varied—literary movements that we think of as postmodern, some of them seeing themselves as theoretical successors to the still maligned New Criticism, have, in their anxiety to press their own anti-formalism, clearly declared such claims to be deceptive self-mystifications resulting from the sacralizing or fetishizing impulse of a long reactionary moment. No one more forcefully than Paul de Man argued for a rhetoric of temporality that would dissolve the would-be emblem—that ekphrastic gesture—and let the string of allegories, like life's unrepeatable moments, keep running, at least until they have an arbitrary stop. But he is only one of many. They have

22. The explicit extension of the principles of main-line New Criticism to the doctrine of spatial form is the contribution of Joseph Frank's original series of essays, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" (1945), reprinted in The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963). I discuss at length these essays and the issues they raise in Chapter 7.
preferred to ignore the complex possibilities opened by their pre­
cursor-antagonists: that is, they have preferred to ignore the slip­
pery version of the ekphrastic poetic which presses for a verbal play
that acknowledges the incompatibility of time and space, while col­
lapsing them into the illusion of an object marked by its own sen­
sible absence.

Hence these last decades have seen the increasing dominance of
a number of diverse and often embattled interpretive emphases,
each shaped by different metaphorical borrowings that project their
own anti-aesthetic hierarchies. But in common they suggest a differ­
ent constellation of the arts, having used a semiotic model to reduce
them all to a textuality under the dominion of time. Further, a dis­
dain for what is falsely referred to as the "natural" in sign or ideol­
ogy—together with an insistence on seeing the "natural" as a decep­
tive projection of the conventions dictated by sociopolitical power—
has consigned all verbal attempts to capture space to a suspect rhet­
oric sponsored by bad faith.

Such an impatience with the spatial is hardly conducive to a po­
etics of ekphrasis. Thus an exasperation with the ekphrastic has
replaced the exhilaration of those earlier critics of mid-century who
were stimulated by formal closure and its illusion of at once repre­
senting an object and being an object. Even in the face of this
recently flourishing antagonism, however, I wonder whether the
semiotic desire for the natural sign can, despite the archaism of that
notion and the violently deconstructive character of our time, be
quite overcome, though it may be only the unrepresentable itself—
an abyss, or an abyss beyond an abyss—that the ekphrastic impulse
can now address. An abyss, or an abyss beyond an abyss: since
those early self-denying attempts by the verbal art to make its se­
quence stop long enough to manage to represent—and to fail to
represent—has it, like that Egyptian serpent, ever had any other
object?