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REPRESENTATION
AS ILLUSION

Dramatic
Representation
and the
Natural-Sign Aesthetic
Suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature: for anything so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.

Hamlet to the players, 3.2

Our subject, as established in my introductory chapter, is the use of visual and spatial effects in the arts of the word, or rather the literary critic's attempt to observe such use. The borrowing by literary critics of descriptions of response conventionally assumed to be appropriate to the plastic arts is so common that we often fail to observe it and to be concerned about its inappropriateness. For such borrowing is a crossing over of the language appropriate to one art in order to characterize another to which it either is inapplicable or can be applied only figuratively.

It has long seemed inevitable for the language of literary criticism, despite the temporality of both the reading experience and the successiveness of the discourse, to suffer the intrusion of spatial metaphors. Even the critic who knows and cares nothing for the spatial and visual arts has, in the history of our criticism, usually been unable to avoid a language that would freeze the flow of the poem, almost as if it were a visual and spatial object. The flat-footed language of the critic reveals its helplessness in capturing the temporal dynamics of verbal play as it resorts to the metaphors of space that it imports to tame its object.

When this difficulty is rationalized into system by critics, it may well account for the widespread dependence upon formalism found in much of our criticism. Indeed, the very word "form," "shape," "pattern," and—perhaps most striking of these—"structure," reflects the metaphorical borrowing of terms that seem better suited to the spatial arts, to which we should expect to see them applied (although conventions of literary criticism have for some time inured us to their use here as well). The critics' habit of spatializing literary texts accounts also for the primacy often given the visual in their dealings with the effects of the verbal arts, however distant words would seem
to be from the literally pictorial. For example, how literally can we take the term "image" as applied to words, or, for that matter, the term "imitation" in relation to the things to which the words in the poem are to refer? Words as combinations of letters can hardly be images and cannot literally be said to imitate anything (except perhaps, as in drama, words being spoken by others). Of course, once we shift our attention from the outer to the inner world, to our minds and their free response to the verbal stimuli, we can make almost any pictorial metaphor for that operation vaguely relevant, although its theoretical power is pretty well depleted.

But as Henri Bergson instructed us, language generally, and not just the critics', is prone to indulge in the spatializing distortion of our temporal experience. As the philosopher who perhaps most strenuously revealed the deceptions and inadequacies of the spatializing habit of language generally, Bergson yet found a special role for poetry precisely in the way its language could be so manipulated as to permit it to break through that spatializing habit in order to reveal the temporal dynamics of our inner life. And from Russian Formalism through the New Criticism, modernist poetics may be viewed as a development of Bergson's claim, even though, ironically, many modernist theorists themselves lapsed into the spatializing habit as their language also failed to resist the temptations of "spatial form." (But this is a subject to be pursued in Chapter 7.)

This arresting of the potential plasticity of language is an inherited burden borne by the Western critical tradition since Plato. As we shall see, Plato absorbed literary issues into issues pertaining to the visual arts with an ease only increased by the special place he accorded to the sense of sight and the mental "images" of inner sense. (It is this limited perspective that very likely accounts for Plato's dwelling upon drama as the most blameworthy, because the most literally mimetic, of the verbal arts.) He tried to look past language as a manipulable poetic medium in order to treat it exclusively as an immediate, and an immediately transparent, container of its meaning. Because his metaphysic required a naive theory of representation that rested totally on the doctrine of literal imitation, he had to assume a one-to-one relation between an element in the art work and the object of its imitation in the real world. The word, then, is a belated equivalent for the image that stands for its object as its origin—as if all words were nouns. And the temporality, the coming after, that characterizes the relationship between the word and the object it would represent, like the more obvious temporal
relations between word and word in the sequence that constitutes a text, is overlooked, or at least elided, once it has been transformed into an analogue for the spatial.

In dealing with the problems surrounding the intrusion of the spatial upon literature's temporality, we also are confronted with the intrusion of the picture upon the word, despite what appears to be the vast semiotic distance between the ways in which the two function. This distance is as great as what used to be termed the difference between natural signs and arbitrary-conventional signs. However outmoded, this is a difference that will much concern me, since it led to the quest for an aesthetic that privileged the natural sign as its agent, even extending this quest to the poetic word. It is no wonder, in such a quest, that space invaded time and the pictorial invaded the verbal. And it is in Plato that this strange conversion of the literary into natural-sign transparency is first pressed, although—like many theorists after him—he has difficulty converting language to this use. Because of this difficulty, he frequently resorts to drama as his principal instrument for this conversion, because he recognizes in drama a form of verbal art that, as performance, has space for its apparently natural signs built into its very mode of representation.

Thus Plato, like many of those who followed his lead for well over a millennium in constituting the Western aesthetic, has two rather different ways of urging the effort of the verbal arts to move toward the natural sign in emulation of the visual arts. The more general way of emulating the natural-sign arts is to use words to paint a picture for the "eyes of the mind," thus seeking to force the medium of language—in spite of its "nature"—to do what comes naturally for those arts whose more immediate representations serve the body's eye. The second and more specific way of emulating the natural-sign arts, a way available only to drama as a performance art of the word, is to have its signs resemble its referents by standing in for them, the actors in a play like the pictured objects in a painting. In this second way the problem of the arbitrary sign is bypassed, since the use of words is secondary to the mode of representation itself. In the present chapter I pursue in detail the development of theory built around this second sort of emulation of the natural sign, the representation of pictures through live persons, and in Chapter 3 I pursue the first sort, the representation of pictures through words.

From the dawn of systematic thought about the arts in the West, illusion has been treated as the source of the appeal of the arts, even of the verbal arts, whether for good or ill. It was on the grounds of its
special illusionary power that, ever since Plato, drama was separated from the other literary genres as a special case that demanded its own theory. And that theory has been granted a history in some crucial ways distinct from the history of literary theory at large. At some moments in that history, where the theory of drama has overlapped the general theory of literature, drama was encouraged, as the model genre, to absorb the other genres within its own norms, to seek to turn literature itself into greater and lesser forms of dramatistics, with drama itself the ideal form to be aped by the others. At other moments drama has been forced, by self-exclusion, to go its own way, separate from—but more than equal to—its rivals, narrative and lyric, among the verbal arts. But always its peculiar character as a performance art—that is, as an immediately representational art—allowed it to be treated as different from the other verbal arts in that it was uniquely free from the limits that language placed on the representational powers of the others.

In brief, the apparent presence—the tangible presence—in drama of the objects of representation gave it an immediacy denied to words alone. No matter how forceful the conjuring power of verbal images, only drama could claim to produce a sensible illusion of reality. For words, strictly speaking, must always, at the source of our experiencing them, be intelligible only—transmitting their images and objects only through the mediation of mind—and not sensible, with their images and objects, as with pictures, grasped immediately as they are sensed. What is being appealed to in this oversimplified opposition between the sensible and the intelligible arts is the dubious distinction to which I earlier alluded, the distinction—as old as the philosophical study of language, or, more broadly, of all symbolic systems—between natural signs and signs that, though conventional, are arbitrary.

In book 3 of the Republic Socrates makes a sudden, unanticipated move whose repercussions literary theory may still be feeling. In book 2 he had prepared for the application of his general theory of imitation to the arts, including, of course, all the verbal arts, without regard to differences among the literary kinds: imitation is the same operation, "equally to be observed in every kind of verse, whether epic, lyric, or tragic." 1 Socrates is laying the ground here

1. All my quotations in this chapter are from The Dialogues of Plato, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 4 vols. (New York: Scribner’s, 1901), vol. 2 for the Republic and vol. 3 for the Sophist. This quotation is from 2:202.
for an attack upon all poetry as a mode of imitation in book 10: "I do not mind saying to you that all poetical imitations are a sort of outrage on the understanding of the hearers, and that the only cure of this is the knowledge of their true nature" (p. 425). He proceeds to the well-known epistemological-ontological arguments about the inability of "poetical imitations," without regard to differences in genre, to gain or transmit such "knowledge." Since Homer is his prime target, there can be little question that his target is far broader than dramatic tragedy. But despite the fact that his working definition of "imitation" allows it to characterize all the arts, including, of course, all the verbal arts, in book 3 he surprisingly restricts it to one verbal art, the dramatic, apparently exempting the lyric and many moments of narrative from the mimetic arts. A theory of poetic genres, distinguished by the manner (what we have come to call the "point of view") of representation, replaces a single universal characterization of the arts as mimetic. Without warning, Plato here is confining "imitation" to the dramatic (whether it occurs constantly in tragedy or occasionally in the epic), which is for him the one mode of representation that seeks to become a total illusion, and for this occasion stops using the term to define all the modes of representation.

Socrates introduces this division within the verbal arts by stating a simple three-way choice for the poet: "All mythology and poetry is a narration of events, either past, present, or to come. . . . And narration may be either simple narration, or imitation, or a union of the two" (p. 215). In the first case

the poet is speaking in his own person; he never leads us to suppose that he is anyone else. But in what follows [in the opening lines of the Iliad] he takes the person of Chryses, and then he does all that he can to make us believe that the speaker is not Homer, but the aged priest himself. . . . But when the poet speaks in the person of another, may we not say that he assimilates his style to that of the person who . . . is going to speak? . . . And this assimilation of himself to another is the imitation, either by voice or gesture, of the person whose character he assumes? . . . Then in this case the narrative of the poet may be said to proceed by way of imitation. . . . Or, if the poet everywhere appears and never conceals himself, then again the imitation is dropped, and his poetry becomes simple narration. (P. 216)
All that follows in both the Iliad and the Odyssey, Plato concludes, is cast in this mixed form ("simple narration" when in Homer's voice and language, and imitation when in the voices and language of others). This mixed form mingle the two purer possibilities: the poet's simple narration (without any dialogue or even monologue in a character's voice) and "imitation," in which, as in dramatic tragedy or comedy, there is nothing but the speeches of characters, uninterrupted by a narrative voice.

In this diatribe against imitation as a falling away from the archetypical source of truth and virtue, Socrates must outlaw both the purely imitative art in this narrow sense (drama) and that which from time to time descends to imitate the imperfect characters (the mixed narrative). These three manners of writing, "the two styles, or the mixture of the two, comprehend all poetry and every form of expression in words" (p. 220). Throughout this discussion there seems to be no ambiguity about the definitions being given to "imitation" and pure "narration," which are mutually exclusive, though a writer like Homer mixes them and is condemned for mixing them. Of course, the unworthy attempts at illusion produced by the dramatic parts of the epic are exacerbated by the role of the rhapsode, who, in the oral performance of Homer, must mimic one character after another when he is not speaking in (i.e., imitating) the narrative voice of Homer.2

The sins that Homer commits in parts of his works, the tragic poets extend to all of theirs. Because of the shifting meaning of Plato's "imitation" (when we compare book 3 with book 10), it is difficult to be certain of the grounds on which Socrates links Homer to the tragic poets, although the role of "imitation," whichever meaning he ascribes to it, seems central to his condemnation. When Socrates refers in book 10—not without irony—to Homer as "the great captain and teacher of that noble tragic company" (or, elsewhere, to "tragedy and its leader, Homer") and several times lumps him with

2. Because the rhapsode serves not only as the imitator of Homer (in the purely narrative moment of the epic) but also as the imitator of the speaking characters (in the dramatic moments of the epic), Socrates is persuaded at moments to make Homer a member of the mimetic tribe of tragic poets, indeed their leader. At other moments (as in book 3) he clearly separates them when speaking of the narrative moments in Homer. Socrates appears to see the presentational device of the rhapsode as an elocutionary performance of Homer, a mimetic art that has much in common with the drama. Thus he is led to confuse his categories when he at times associates Homer with writers of tragedy and at times distinguishes him from them.
the "imitative tribe" of tragic poets, Plato may be revealing not so much his awareness that Homer has furnished the tragic poets with their master story as his concern—in accordance with his narrow definition of "imitation"—that Homer's free indulgence in those mimetic moments of quoted speech opened the way for the total indulgence in the dialogue form of tragedy. (It must also be conceded that there may be a perhaps more obvious reading: that rather than distinguishing one kind of verbal art, the dramatic, from the others and making Homer responsible for it, Socrates is simply returning to his broader definition of "imitation," which characterizes all the representational arts regardless of genre, so that he is doing no more than echoing his usual charge that Homer, as one of the tragic poets and chief among them, is representing imperfect and unworthy actions of gods and humans.)

These several interpretations can all be justified, although I emphasize the role of dramatic imitation as the controlling one in order to call attention to the special theoretical power of the distinctions made in book 3. In those passages Socrates unambiguously singles out the drama, or the dramatic moments that interrupt the narrative voice, as warranting the term "imitation," with all other forms of verbal artifice—mere words—apparently non-mimetic.3 This point is worth laboring because dramatic theory can be said to begin when, without warning, in book 3 "imitation" has been narrowed to the one sort of representation that seeks to become a total illusion, instead of being allowed to describe all the modes of verbal representation, including the more mediated forms, as is the case elsewhere when its use is dominated by metaphysical concerns.

But in book 3 poetry itself could be literally and even visually mimetic—as much involved with illusion as painting is—but only so long as that poetry was dramatic. As we will see in Chapter 3, below, Plato invokes painting as the model art only when dramatic poetry can no longer serve as model because the mimetic interest in poetry

3. It should be pointed out that Plato's attack on the mimetic art of dialogue—the employment of speaking characters whose voices are distinct from the author's—should not be taken as inconsistent with his own dialogistic practice, as is sometimes charged. We must remember that his own dialogues are not viewed by him as drama—whatever their apparent form on the page—simply because they are only to be read, and not performed. So dependent does Plato seem to be on the literal manner of representation that he can attack as mimetic a narrative poem elocuted by a rhapsode, while remaining oblivious to a piece of writing (his own) composed only of characters' speeches, so long as they are never to be actually delivered.
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wants to cover its non-dramatic forms as well. So the confusion about the relation between painting and poetry, as well as about the relation between the several poetic genres and imitation, reflects Plato’s primary confusion about which aspect of poetry he sees as responsible for its mimetic character: is it poetry’s capacity in all its forms to give us verbal equivalents of visual images, or is it its capacity, through speaking and acting characters in drama, to duplicate actual persons speaking and acting in the world of actual experience? Only one of these is literally imitative in the way that painting is; hence the narrowing to drama (or to the dramatic aspect of narrative, especially as, in the oral tradition, the narrative is represented in the mimicking elocution of the rhapsode).

The literally mimetic, then, which normally would seem to be the province of sculpture or painting, can also be made to include poetry, so long as we speak only of the dramatic mode of representation (in drama or epic) as circumscribed by the narrow meaning given to “imitation” in book 3. But of course the literally mimetic in art is being carefully delineated only in order to be condemned, condemned because it is false, in every way deceiving its audience. It is its dependence upon illusion that for Plato enables art to practice its deception, and it is only in drama that the verbal arts can find a wholly illusionary form, as illusionary as what we find in sculpture or painting: only in drama are we encouraged to see a representation as if we were witnessing real experience. Thus it is especially culpable among the verbal arts.

This separation of the dramatic from the rest of poetry while allying it to the visual arts—all in the subversive interest of illusion—is echoed in the Sophist, one of Plato’s late dialogues, which searches for the sophist and finds the poet, who constantly resorts to the deceptions of illusion, as one of the guises that the sophist assumes. After dealing negatively, early in the dialogue (pp. 470–71), with the visual artist as illusionist (to be discussed in Chapter 3, below), Plato’s Eleatic Stranger extends the falseness of aesthetic illusion to cover the poet as well. As he recapitulates his argument late in the dialogue (pp. 505–10), he presents a sequence of distinctions and choices that lead him to the poet as sophist: first the distinction between the productive and acquisitive arts, with the former chosen as appropriate for an art of imitation; then, within the productive, between those that are humanly produced and those of nature (divinely produced), again with the former chosen; then, within the humanly produced, between the production of real things and
the production of images (imitations) of things, with the choice between them permitting the Stranger to reach the subclass of image-making. Within the made images there is a further distinction between true ("icastic") and "phantastic" images, with the search for the sophist leading the Stranger to choose the "phantastic," producer of false and illusionary images.

Within the "phantastic" the Stranger presents a further subdistinction that will allow him to condemn the ventriloquist-poet or ventriloquist-rhapsode as sophist: a distinction between the "one kind of phantastic image which is produced by instruments and another in which the creator of the appari­tion is himself the instrument" (p. 508). This would seem to be the distinction between the plastic artist, who uses external materials and implements, and the impersonating actor of drama or the rhapsode of the dramatic portions of narrative (using his own person to play, one after the other, each of the several roles). As it did within the narrow focus of book 3 of the Republic, this act of impersonation becomes the sole criterion of literary "imitation" here: "When anyone makes himself appear like another in his figure or in his voice, imitation is the name for this part of the phantastic art. . . . Let this, then, be named the art of mimicry" (p. 508). Through the illusion produced by the act of impersonation, a language art seeks to turn itself into a natural sign, and into a mode of what Mazzoni was to term "sophistic," conceding that he was following Plato in doing so.

When viewed within this mimetic perspective, the drama, together with the dramatic elements in narrative, stands alone among the verbal arts (though together with the visual arts) as would-be natural-sign arts, apparently leaving the other verbal arts outside the definition of imitation and thus exempt from being condemned as mimetic. Nevertheless, I do not mean to ignore the full reading of the Sophist that argues for two different ways in which artists may be condemned as mimetic, one less applicable to poets than the other; but neither is directed against non-dramatic poetry, poetry that does not indulge in impersonation. In the several parts of the dialogue there are two grounds for reducing artists into sophists: visual artists because they produce distorted images of reality (their works in effect falsely impersonating reality), and poets of several voices because they indulge in actual impersonation. In its pursuit of the sophist, the dialogue progresses from the first to the second of these, from those whose work tries to delude us into believing that the appearance they present is the reality (that which is not, is)
to those ("dissemblers") who use themselves to make us believe that others are speaking and acting. This is the Stranger's last in this series of distinctions: between those who have knowledge of what they imitate, however deceiving that imitation may be, and those who know nothing of what they are imitating (impersonating), who know nothing except the art of impersonation itself. And it is in this latter, in the "ironical imitator" rather than the "simple imitator," that "the true and very sophist" is found (p. 510).

But the second of these two ways of relating art to mimesis, which seems applicable exclusively to the dramatic mode of representation, has a crucial consequence for the history of literary theory, particularly for the place of drama in the history of that theory. Despite the utterly negative cast of Plato's discussions of mimesis and the specially mimetic character of drama, more positive theorists pursued the theoretical attractiveness of the semiotic analogy between dramatic poetry and the visual arts, which has its source in book 3 of the Republic, and so gave drama its own theoretical history apart from the history of literary theory at large. Through the centuries they also felt the illusionary force of the drama as an immediate visual presence, while reserving for another class of considerations those problems deriving from poetry (primarily non-dramatic) as a temporal art. Once thus cut off by Plato, drama continued its lone, privileged path as a special (and spatial) mode of representation, one requiring its own poetic, to be distinguished from the poetic for the other kinds of verbal art. I repeat that this difference between the developing poetic of the drama and the poetic of the other literary genres reflects the differing demands of the natural-sign arts and the arbitrary-conventional-sign arts; and this familial separation within literature echoes the more general separation between the plastic arts and literature as a family. Thus Plato should help remind us, in our observations of later theorists, that for many centuries the distinction between the sensible and the intelligible is what the distinction between natural and arbitrary-conventional signs was all about.

We may after all understand Plato's singling out of drama, the special vituperation that he reserves for the "mimetic tribe" (the writers of dramatic tragedy), once we recognize that his antipathy to "imitation" is metaphysically and thus morally rooted in his concern about the sensuous (usually for him the visual) consequences of the world of appearance. Hence his desire to expel it as a threat to the Republic's health. But it is surprising—and instructive—to find that
even Aristotle, who responds to Plato with a profound defense of literary imitation, in an unguarded moment borrows from Plato, his precursor-antagonist, the narrow definition of "imitation" that isolated drama from its sister verbal arts.

It is the more surprising, in view of the care with which Aristotle, from the start of the Poetics, defines "imitation" as his central term and concept, giving it a broadly inclusive coverage. It explicitly includes all the "various kinds" of poetry, however they may differ from one another in the "medium" of imitation, the "objects" of imitation, or the "manner of mode" of imitation. In chapter 3 Aristotle clearly distinguishes drama from the other kinds by virtue of the difference in its "manner," even if the "medium" and the "objects" are the same. Drama, as that kind which, whatever its "medium" and "objects," presents all the "characters as living and moving before us," is distinguished from "narration," which is of two types, depending on whether the poet decides to "take another personality as Homer does, or [to] speak in his own person, unchanged." Obviously, these distinctions in Aristotle's third chapter repeat Plato's in his third book; but unlike Plato, Aristotle insists that the poet does "imitate by narration" as much as he does by representing the action in drama. These are equally modes of imitation, since the "objects" of their imitation are "men in action," and narrative as well as drama imitates men in action, though in its own "manner." Imitation, then, does not have the restriction to one mode of direct representation that it has for the Plato of book 3 and, I would add, of the Sophist. (I have acknowledged that Plato's own definition is similarly broadened elsewhere, but in the place where he makes the distinctions among literary kinds that Aristotle clearly takes up, he restricts "imitation" to dramatic impersonation. Hence Aristotle's departure is significant.)

But after clearly using "imitation" throughout the Poetics in a way that includes all the "various kinds" of poetry, in chapter 24 Aristotle suddenly reverts to Plato's narrower meaning, that which would restrict imitation to dramatic representation, whether in plays or in the dialogue portion of narratives. Speaking approvingly of Homer for staying out of the action as much as he does, Aristotle asserts, "The poet should speak as little as possible in his own person, for it is not this that makes him an imitator. Other poets [unlike Homer]

4. I am using the S. H. Butcher translation of Aristotle. Since the chapters of the Poetics are so brief, citations that refer only to chapter numbers should suffice.
appear themselves upon the scene throughout, and imitate but lit­
tle and rarely.” The dramatist, needless to say, does nothing but imi­
tate. In this passage all the parts of the poem delivered in the voice
of the poet, rather than in the voices of the characters, are not imi­
tations. For it is the poet’s speaking in the persons of others “that
makes him an imitator.”

This passage occurs in the midst of Aristotle’s discussion of epic,
begun in chapter 23, and his attempt to judge it as a rival to tragedy.5
Aristotle wants to counter Plato’s condemnation of drama by argu­
ing for a preference of the dramatic “manner” over the narrative
“manner,” so that it should not be surprising that he allows “imita­
tion” to be reduced to its purest form in drama, with tragedy becom­
ing a synecdoche for general poetic mimesis, as his scientific analy­
sis gives way to the privileges of hierarchy. With the unmediated
representation of tragedy as the model, that variety of epic which
most closely approaches it—in spite of the lingering handicaps of its
own “manner”—is best. Since for Plato imitation was bad and
drama was the most extreme version of imitation, he charged Homer
with speaking too little in his own voice and too much in the voices
of his characters; since for Aristotle imitation is salutary and drama
is the most extreme version of imitation, he praises Homer for hid­
ing himself behind his characters as much as he does. Both see
Homer’s narrative moving toward drama; Plato deprecates it, while
Aristotle applauds. Both are conceding to drama, at least momentar­
ily, an unmediated representation that seems to make only it deserv­
ing of having the word “imitation” applied to it, converting it into
the one literary kind that can overcome the handicap of language as
an arbitrary-conventional medium and can truly, “naturally,” imi­
tate, even as the plastic arts do.

What makes this momentary lapse in Aristotle’s use of “imita­
tion” significant (aside from its indication of the hold Plato has
upon him even in his dissent) is the fact that it runs counter to a
main objective of the Poetics—Aristotle’s formalist desire to tran­
scend Plato’s limited concern for the separate, imitated objects by
concentrating upon the poem itself as one integral, formed object.
For Aristotle “imitation” refers to the created structure that over­

5. I must in fairness add that by the start of chapter 25, Aristotle again speaks of the
poet as “an imitator” in the broad sense that characterizes all forms of poetry, just as
it characterizes art produced by “any other artist.” The Plato-like aberration caused
by the comparison of tragic to epic “manner” is behind him and out of sight.
rides the individual elements in it (hence his preference for the probable impossibility over the possible improbability). So "imitation" for Aristotle derives from the "formal cause."

But the Platonic restriction of imitation to impersonation, borrowed by Aristotle in his chapter 24, limits the power of imitation to taking advantage of the peculiar capacities of the dramatic "manner"—even in epic!—at the cost of the larger, formal notion of imitation as poetic structure. The dependence on characters visibly in action means that Aristotle, at least in this context, is limiting "imitation" to his "efficient cause" so that it may be applicable to drama only, that is, to the one natural-sign manifestation in poetry. It is this Platonic hangover, given Aristotelian sanction, that—we shall see—will be carried over to the "verisimilitude" version of "imitation" that characterizes French dramatic criticism in the seventeenth century, in which the natural-sign character of drama is carried to its farthest consequence.6

Except for Aristotle's formalist diversion, what we are confronting—at moments in Aristotle and through most of Plato—is an aesthetic directed toward an ideal of pure natural-sign representation. Its basis in imitation theory led to its assigning aesthetic value to the extent that the imitation approximated its object of imitation. I put it this way despite the fact that Plato, as moralist, rather insisted that the greater the aesthetic value—that is, the more mimetic, the more illusory and deceptive the representation—the more it was to be condemned on both moral and metaphysical grounds. But once—after Plato, but hardly in accord with him—a higher worth was put on our phenomenal experiences, a more positive view of aesthetic value, and of mimetic fidelity, took over our judgments of all the arts, with drama leading the way.

As we shall see in Chapter 3, below, from late classicism through much of the eighteenth century the pictorialist view of non-dramatic

6. As I argue in greater detail in Chapter 5, Aristotle here is giving the epic—because it is not limited to what is representable on the stage—the freedom to introduce the element of "wonder." Yet this difference is not intended to raise the epic above the drama. Indeed Aristotle is here comparing the two genres to demonstrate the superiority of the drama—on the grounds of its compactness, its capacity to accomplish its end more efficiently, within a smaller, more contained compass. So the freedom from representational restriction, the freedom to wander into the wonderful, is, within these Aristotelian criteria, no virtue. What is not representable within the constraints of stage "imitation" is a threat to the formalist strictures of the Aristotelian system.
poetry, of poetry as vivid description—as verbal painting—commanded a wide following as its way of arguing for poetry's attempt to function as if it were a natural sign. Of course, the "as if" acknowledges the metaphorical character of this attempt: it must be conceded that for non-dramatic poetry to function this way would be for it to emulate the natural-sign function of painting with the handicap of not being able literally to claim a "natural" status for its signs. We have seen that this view could also claim support from Plato, although not from the special and limited concept of imitation as dramatic illusion that we find in book 3 of the Republic. Clearly, any claim to the natural sign for non-dramatic poetry seems weak next to the natural-sign claim for a separate notion of dramatic representation, for which Plato—and Aristotle after him—furnished so forceful a precedent.

Of course, it is only by implication that I have been attributing the phrase "natural sign" to Plato's semiotic, since while he clearly sets forth the concept, he does not use these words. But when, in the later eighteenth century, Lessing extends this semiotic—though he would incorporate some Aristotelian modifications—he uses the phrase "natural sign," and its distinction from "arbitrary sign," to help create an ultimate justification of drama. That is, he attempts to convert poetry into an unqualifiedly natural-sign art and can do so only because he is a protagonist for the drama. Strangely, because his argument seems aimed against the notion of pictorial poems, it appears—but only appears—to undermine the application of the natural-sign aesthetic to poetry, at least so long as what is at issue is poetry in its other than dramatic forms—the use of words for poetic description. Indeed, in his Laokoön (1766) he is expressly committed to oppose the use of poetry to make verbal pictures. In spite of this commitment, however, we will find him to champion that very aesthetic in its application to poetry.

The opening lines of the Preface to the Laokoön repeat in explicit terms the usual first principle of the mimetic, illusionary objective of painting and poetry: "Both represent what is absent as if it were present, and appearance as if it were reality; both deceive and the deception of both is pleasing." Here again is the appeal to art's mnemonic character; here again what Plato found vicious in the imita-

7. My quotations are taken from the translation of Laokoön by E. C. Beasley and Helen Zimmern (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1900).
tive arts has been converted into their virtue, thanks to an aesthetic validated by an empiricist psychology that accepts appearance, for all its deceptiveness, as reality enough. But Lessing goes on to establish a mimetic function for poetry that differs from that of painting as the temporality of verbal sequence differs from the spatiality of the pictorial instant. And he enjoins poetry to shun any attempt at static description, the proper business of painting, in order to indulge the kind of consecutive images appropriate to poetry as a temporal art. Consequently, he has been credited with helping to undermine the neoclassical injunction _ut pictura poesis_, though in doing so he by no means releases poetry from its literally mimetic obligation, no less obligatory than painting’s.

Poetry is indeed freed from the obligation to provide “descriptions” (in Addison’s sense of the word) that yield pictures for the painter, but it yields its own sort of pictures nonetheless—in effect moving pictures. This critical attitude would support the proscenium-arch theater, in which the action is framed in a way that makes it the moving analogue to the framed painting as a “still life.” Drawing a distinction between the “picturesque” (malerisch) and the “picturable” (malbar), Lessing argues that poetry can be the former, though without being the latter, since it is full of time. And he proceeds to distinguish between those pictures that emphasize the movement among objects and those that dwell upon statically disposed objects themselves, the first properly the poet’s and the second properly the painter’s. Each may impose upon the other’s proper realm to its own detriment, but the _Laokoön_ is dedicated to setting the matter straight. Indeed, it is Lessing’s consequent emphasis on action as poetry’s realm that makes him a faithful Aristotelian in spite of his lingering pictorialism: “Although both objects, as visible, are alike capable of being subjects of painting in its strict sense; still, there is this essential difference between them, that the action of one [poetry] is visible and progressive, its different parts happening one after another in sequence of time; while on the other

8. _Laokoön_, chap. 16. Lessing uses the inevitable example, Homer’s description of the shield of Achilles (_Iliad_, bk. 18), to demonstrate his defense of literary images as images of objects that are in motion and hence are “picturesque” rather than at rest and hence “picturable” (“Where Homer paints, the artist finds least to employ his pencil”). See my related discussion of Homer’s treatment of the shield, as well as of Virgil’s similar treatment of the shield of Aeneas as time-ridden, in the Foreword and Chapter 1, above.
hand, the action of the other [painting] is visible and stationary, its
different parts developing themselves in juxtaposition in space.”

However forcefully Lessing may argue for the distinction between
time arts and space arts and thus the need to keep separate their
mimetic functions, he insists (in chapter 14) that the poet, with his
“power of setting forth picturesquely the most unpicturable,”
should still produce that which inspires the reader to mental repro-
duction of the visible world. At the same time, we must remember,
“a poetical picture is not necessarily convertible into a material pic-
ture.” It turns out, then, that for Lessing also, the mimetic function
of poetry leads us to reduce the role of the verbal medium to self-
effacing transparency: “The poet makes his object so palpable to us,
that we become more conscious of this object than of his words.”
Even though this picturesque object is in motion, “it brings us
nearer to that degree of illusion of which the material picture is espe-
cially capable, and which is most quickly and easily called forth by
the contemplation of the material picture.” Still, the poet creates his
own illusionary object in his own slightly less effective way to the
extent that we “become more conscious of this object than of his
words.” So it is a verbal illusion that allows our mind the pictorial
conversion, however different the kind of picture: how far has the-
ory progressed from Addison’s more conventional passages after all?

At the start of chapter 17 Lessing freely grants that words are arbi-
trary signs only, so that they differ from painterly images in two
ways: first, words are progressive, and second, they are arbitrary in-
stead of being static and natural as visual images are. As verbal se-
quences rather than still pictures, poems can be treated as moving
pictures only by a sort of metaphor that characterizes the way in
which the reader’s receptivity acts upon them.

The poet does not merely wish to be clear; the prose writer is contented
with simply rendering his descriptions lucid and distinct, but not the
poet. He must awaken in us conceptions so lively, that, from the rapidity
with which they arise, the same impression should be made upon our
senses which the sight of the material objects that these conceptions rep-
resent would produce. In this moment of illusion we should cease to be
conscious of the instruments—his words—by which this effect is obtained.

9. Chap. 15. It is because Lessing is defending an Aristotelian commitment to a pro-
gressive sequence of action that he writes the Laokoon in order to do battle with the
static universality of Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s Platonism.
This was the source of the explanation of poetic painting which we have given. But a poet should always produce a picture.

In this key passage of a document presumably dedicated to undermining the *ut pictura poesis* tradition, we find echoes of the age-old pictorial injunctions controlled by the rhetorical device of *enargeia*, which in the Renaissance culminated in the presentational aesthetic of Jacopo Mazzoni: here too the poet, unlike the orator (Lessing's "prose writer"), is required to figure forth "images" or "idols" instead of engaging in discursive description. These may all be seen as extensions of Aristotle's (or even Plato's) separation of those kinds (or portions) of literary works in which words are forced into functioning as something like natural signs.

If the poet leads us to "cease to be conscious of the instruments—his words," then, under the spell of the illusion, we seem to substitute the object itself for its representation, so that the medium itself disappears into its transparency. This suppression of the medium, and with it all consciousness of the artistic process, seeks to turn arbitrary signs—despite themselves—into the illusions of natural signs. It may seem odd that despite Lessing's concern to keep the medium out of it, it is for him the medium of the particular art that, because of its intrinsic limitations, defines what the art can or cannot do. The temporal character of words and the spatial character of pictures determine what kind of object each art is capable of imitating:

I reason thus: if it is true that painting and poetry in their imitations make use of entirely different means or symbols—the first, namely, of form and color in space, the second of articulated sounds in time—if these symbols indisputably require a suitable relation to the thing symbolized, then it is clear that symbols arranged in juxtaposition can only express subjects of which the wholes or parts exist in juxtaposition; while consecutive symbols can only express subjects of which the wholes or parts are themselves consecutive. (Chap. 16)

10. Chapter 3, below, is devoted to the development of static pictorialism out of the notion of *enargeia*. The relation of this development to the different version of it in Mazzoni is pursued in Chapter 5. We will see an earlier version of Lessing's distinction between "prose" writing and poetry, between mere clarity and a special intensity, in Mazzoni's distinction between "rhetoric" and "poetry." The roots of this distinction can be found in Longinus (see Chapter 4), and this privileging of poetry above rhetoric can be traced forward to Russian Formalism in our own century.
Lessing terms the first of these objects of imitation "'bodies'" and the second "'actions.'" Consequently, just as the medium of painting requires that it avoid the telling of stories that are appropriate to the verbal arts, the medium of poetry requires that it avoid the description of objects that are appropriate to the visual arts. Otherwise "'the coexistence of the body comes into collision with the consecutiveness of language,'" so that the illusion, which depends on this one-to-one relationship between medium and object of imitation, must fail. So, in poetry as in painting, the medium is the determining factor of the art after all, though only because it functions in accord with an objective so purely mimetic (time for time, space for space) that it determines also that any awareness of itself be eliminated.\footnote{11}

It is clear that for Lessing art's mimetic purpose requires that all the arts (though in different ways) seek a natural-sign status so complete that—as if the medium were not there—they may become illusionary substitutes for the objects of imitation. In his letter to Friedrich Nicolai of May 26, 1769, Lessing pursues the distinction between natural and arbitrary signs, basing it on the argument developed in the \textit{Laokoon}: "'The more painting gets away from natural signs, or mixes natural signs with arbitrary signs, the more it gets away from its highest point of perfection; while poetry approaches perfection the more nearly, the more its arbitrary signs approximate natural signs. Thus the higher painting is that which uses only natural signs in space and the higher poetry that which uses only natural signs in time.'"\footnote{12} When we remember that the \textit{Laokoon}, as we can see from the subject announced in its title, is mainly concerned with the epic (Virgil's and, of course, as the inevitable master, Homer's) as its literary example, we better understand why, in his letter shortly afterwards, Lessing will bring in the drama to

\footnote{11. As I point out in Chapter 7, Diderot, Herder, and many modernists reject Lessing's claim that poetry, because its medium is sequential, is bound exclusively to the temporal. They argue, rather, for an instantaneity of effect that creates a spatial dimension for the poem.}

\footnote{12. It was René Wellek, in his \textit{A History of Modern Criticism: 1750–1950}, vol. 1, \textit{The Later Eighteenth Century} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), pp. 164–65, who most shrewdly excised this passage and those that follow from the May 26, 1769, letter to Nicolai and called attention to their crucial significance. At several points over the next paragraphs I have altered his translations where a more literal rendering suited my purpose. The letter can be found in Lessing's \textit{Sämtliche Schriften}, ed. K. Lachmann and F. Muncker, 23 vols. (Leipzig: G. J. Göschen'sche Verlagshandlung, 1886–1924), 17:280–92.}
complete the move of the verbal arts toward the natural sign.

I originally introduced Lessing by promising that he would extend and complete the framework of the natural-sign aesthetic by using drama to convert poetry into a natural-sign art. Until now we have seen him urge this conversion while being unable to make good on it. Nor can he until he moves beyond the relation of words to picture-making, and thus beyond narrative poetry. Let me recapitulate. In narrative, we have seen, poetry must deal with the visible without describing it in a way that creates possible subjects for the painter or for our inner eye as mental painter. It must yield pictures—moving pictures—though these are not to be confused with what we normally take to be pictures as spatially bound entities, symbols in juxtaposition. Finally, it consists of arbitrary signs and not—like paintings—of natural signs, and yet it must be capable of creating a sensible illusion not unlike that created by natural signs. Though a narration that must avoid static description, it yet creates an illusionary presence for its described action, even if that illusionary presence, however “picturesque” it may be, is not “picturable.” The attempt by the language arts to describe a static picture leads only to the work of the prose writer rather than the poet: it is a use of arbitrary signs that does not permit them to rise beyond themselves. How, then, in poetry, can arbitrary signs do more? How can they yield an illusion of moving life comparable to what a painting does for a static object? Enter the drama.

In his letter to Nicolai, Lessing proposes various poetic devices that move toward naturalizing the arbitrary signs: “Poetry must try to raise its arbitrary signs to natural signs: only that way does it differentiate itself from prose and become poetry. The means by which this is accomplished are the tone, the words, the position of words, the measure, figures and tropes, similes, etc. All these bring

13. I must concede that there are many places in Lessing’s dramatic criticism (his Hamburgische Dramaturgie) and in his debates with his fellow critics, where—in contrast to the naive commitment to the natural sign that I am stressing—Lessing indicates his awareness of the need for the drama to be self-conscious about the illusionary character of its medium. But Lessing’s place in my historical narrative leads me to dwell upon his firmly stated claims for drama as the ultimate—and the only—natural-sign verbal art and to make that aspect of his theory the ultimate statement of the natural-sign aesthetic, even if he does display significant qualifications elsewhere.

14. I should note again that the tradition I trace in Chapter 3 does focus on the picture-making power of words, the very power that Lessing, coming at the end of that tradition, reinforces while working to reject it.
arbitrary signs closer to natural signs, but they don't actually make them into natural signs." Lessing here is anticipating the efforts of recent critics—Sigurd Burckhardt comes most immediately to mind, though there are many others, several Russian Formalists among them—who seek to account for ways in which poems become poems by forcing their words to create a presence within themselves, in effect to corporealize themselves. These are strange demands to be made of the medium by a critic like Lessing, who asks the poetic medium to be self-effacingly transparent. Even so, these devices are not in the end sufficient to make the transformation he seeks, since as he acknowledges, the arbitrary signs do not quite change into natural signs—not this way. The quest for a fully mimetic poetry in the _Laokoön_, then, must be incomplete: narrative poetry cannot transcend its arbitrary means totally, nor can the completeness of illusion be attained, however high the hopes Lessing reveals in that treatise.

Having exhausted the naturalizing possibilities of narrated poems, Lessing must, if he is to culminate his quest for poetry as a natural-sign art, abandon our epic masterpieces and follow the lead of Plato and Aristotle in his discovery of the special semiotic role of drama. By now the history of criticism has enabled him to use the terms "natural sign" and "arbitrary sign," toward which Plato and Aristotle, in dealing with drama and narrative, were groping (although, I repeat, I have freely imposed these terms in my treatment of their arguments); and it is their specially narrowed notion of imitation, as applicable only to dramatic representation, that is borrowed by Lessing now to make his own special case for poetry as a natural-sign art.

After speaking, in his letter to Nicolai, of those poetic devices (verbal and figural manipulations) that "bring arbitrary signs closer to natural signs, but . . . don't actually make them into natural signs," Lessing continues: "Consequently all genres that use only these means must be looked upon as lower genres of poetry; and the highest genre of poetry will be that which transforms the arbitrary signs completely into natural signs. That is dramatic poetry; for in it words cease to be arbitrary signs, and become natural signs of arbitrary objects." Because of its peculiar mode of representation—flesh-and-blood creatures (actors) impersonating made-up poetic creatures (characters) who represent real people (objects of imita-

15. See my extended treatment of Burckhardt in Chapter 6.
representation) — drama converts literature’s words into the moving pictures of a visual art. The words of a play, though arbitrary, like all words, are an imitation of an actual speech act: the words of a dramatic speech constitute a natural representation — in the mouth of a natural-sign speaker who speaks like his or her real counterpart — of our use of words as arbitrary signs. Thus the arbitrary signs of language, like the arbitrarily named fictional creatures who speak them, function within a mimetic operation in which actions and speeches are viewed by us as natural signs. In this way “words . . . become natural signs of arbitrary objects [Dinge].”

Drama has thus defied and triumphed over literature’s inherent disadvantage as an arbitrary-sign art; but it also demonstrates its superiority to the spatial visual arts because only it can marry the natural sign to temporality, thereby imitating the sequence of lived moments. In this ultimate extension of the natural-sign aesthetic to literature, dramatic poetry alone becomes the most perfectly realized representation of the consecutiveness of human experience: because the fact that it is only a representation is most completely hidden, the illusion is most effective. In view of the real gesturing bodies on the stage, occupying three-dimensional space and moving in time as experience moves, there would appear to be no medium at all required to make the illusion do its work upon us. In non-dramatic poetry, the poet’s attempt to produce something like (but not quite) natural-sign illusion requires a struggle to make words produce extraordinary effects; in drama the poet can relax in the assurance that the very mode of representation carries the illusionary effect within itself. It is as if the ancient verbal attempt to produce ekphrases as gestures to the superiority of the natural sign has been realizing itself all along in drama: in it without verbal effort we come upon the uncomplicated production of walking ekphrases, those living, moving, flesh-and-blood sculptures (pace Addison) who strut before us in their own space, so reminiscent of our own. After all, an art of moving life must be more satisfactorily mimetic of our actual temporal experience of living than an art of still life.

This argument for drama as the hybrid art that has overcome the inherent disadvantages of the verbal arts was anticipated in the previous century in the aggressive theoretical defenses of the most extreme practices of the neoclassical French theater, although it took Lessing to create a systematic rationalization for them. While most French dramatists and even their apologists may have been less rigid
than their mythical, totally restrictive counterparts created for polemical purposes by a Dryden or a Johnson, the most consistent version of French neoclassical theatrical theory, as it affects the history of criticism, has certain logical consequences for which Lessing’s natural-sign commitments are a systematic justification.

I do not at all mean to suggest that Lessing intended such support, since in his criticism he strongly objected to this French theater and the theory that sought to justify it. It is true that the restrictions of French neoclassicism are usually looked upon—and were surely looked upon by Lessing—as arising out of a narrow and legalistic formalism rather than out of a natural-sign interest in the drama. They were sometimes—though not by that faithful Aristotelian, Lessing—taken to be an inheritance from, and an extreme extension of, Aristotle’s formal analysis converted into prescriptive rules. It must be conceded that Aristotle’s preference of tragedy to epic, toward the end (chap. 26) of the extant version of the Poetics, rests upon the greater compression permitted by the dramatic form: “The art attains its end within narrower limits; for the concentrated effect is more pleasurable than one which is spread over a long time and so diluted. . . . It plainly follows that tragedy is the higher art, as attaining its end more perfectly.” Lessing alludes to these grounds for Aristotle’s preference in his letter to Nicolai: “Aristotle said that dramatic poetry is the highest, even the only, poetry, and he assigns second place to the epic only insofar as it is for the most part dramatic or can be dramatic.” In Aristotle this compactness is a virtue drama can display only by sacrificing the freedom of the epic—because the epic does not actually show us what it narrates—to treat the marvelous, even the monstrous, to tell grandiose lies with impunity.16 Reversing Plato’s hierarchy, Aristotle approves the restrictions of the drama that inhibit the more reckless elements of the poet’s imagination. This recklessness, with its consequent freedom, leads the epic into a formal diffuseness and looseness that, for Aristotle, make it inferior to tragedy.

But Aristotle sees the compact system of internal relations in tragedy, bound by the laws of probability, as an intrinsic characteristic of the poem, not as an attempt by the play to imitate the time-space

16. “The irrational, on which the wonderful depends for its chief effects, has wider scope in epic poetry, because there the person acting is not seen. . . . It is Homer who has chiefly taught other poets the art of telling lies skillfully” (Poetics, chap. 24).
conditions of the members of the audience in order to trick them into viewing it as a real part of their world. A strange transformation of Aristotle's "probability," which the Renaissance had already turned into "credibility," allowed it to slip further into "verisimilitude." Hence the narrowly conceived unities of time and place, instrumental in producing "verisimilitude" for the French neoclassicists, should not be traced back to Aristotle as coordinates of his highly prized unity of action. Aristotle's central concern for the "formal cause" as the primary stimulus of the tragic effect is shifted by the French to an expanded notion of the "efficient cause," "the manner of imitation," which is a less important factor for Aristotle. Indeed, French neoclassicism has the efficient cause take over the role of the formal as it, in effect, creates a semiotics of drama that changes what is being represented: since the stage is taken to be the real world itself, the words in the text can be taken to refer to the limited stage space and stage time (within a picture-frame stage), instead of, as in Aristotle, referring to the world of people, their acts in their time and their space, even if they must be contracted by form for their effective representation before us.

The extreme tightness of French dramatic prescriptions may be traced to an almost perverse naturalism of semiotic desire. (I repeat that I am referring here to the extreme version of French seventeenth-century dramatic theory rather than to the actual productions of a more interestingly varied dramatic practice.) The restrictive enforcement of the doctrine of "verisimilitude" could be and was interpreted as treating drama, from the viewer's perspective, as the ultimate natural sign; treating it, in other words, as a mimesis that literalized the viewer's imagination by reducing the play to the audience's reality as bodies in the theater. The doctrine could be made to rest on the insistence that the play should approach a one-to-one relationship between stage time and space and audience time and space, between, that is, the passage of time represented onstage and the amount of elapsed time in the theater, as well as between the one place to be represented onstage and the singleness of the framed stage itself. Otherwise, the argument runs, the presen-

17. In dealing with such extremes of natural-sign theory, we should remain aware of the countertendencies in the arts of the seventeenth century and beyond. The extravagance of the baroque, for example, helped create opera as a rich and utterly artificial mélange of the arts. In opera, with its mix of song and speech, and the occasional intrusion of masque and orchestral music and dance, we find little attempted illusion of reality in dialogue or action.
vation would not be "verisimilar" and would not be credited by an audience who knew how little their time had advanced and that their space had not changed at all.

The absurdity that this theory cultivated rested on the supposed desire to remove from the drama any obstacle of convention that would prevent us from mistaking the play for the real thing: this mistaking is what Lessing thought of as "illusion," though Johnson would call it "delusion," saving "illusion" for a more self-consciously aesthetic activity.\(^{18}\) The deliberate confusion that required the time and space of the represented fiction to be one with the "real" time and space in the theater can be seen as arising from a desire to rid the play of all intrusions by a medium that, in calling attention to artifice, threatened the play's credibility: would keep members of the audience from believing it to be a real-life happening they had come upon. Such a suppression of the medium for the immediacy of illusion (in the sense attributed to "illusion" by Lessing and the French, though not by Johnson) is precisely in accord with Lessing's objective in moving poetry toward becoming a natural-sign art.

The paradox is that French neoclassical drama accomplished the very opposite of this intent, since, as Dryden and others—including Corneille himself—freely point out, it is just where such rules of verisimilitude are closely followed that the plays seem reduced to an extreme of unlifelike artifice. That which is intended to make them "natural" has turned them "conventional" as well as "arbitrary," beyond all chance of being "credited." And, ironically, these plays had no critic more disparaging of them on this score than Lessing himself. For how can one hope to produce his desired illusion of reality when the rules imposed by the French version of verisimilitude maximize the artificial and minimize the "natural," instead of the other way around?

For example, the liaison des scènes—which dictates that the stage not be left vacant, since a character is to remain onstage to link one scene to the next—is a device intended to prevent any gap in the represented time sequence, so that members of the audience would feel that their own temporal continuity, where they sit, is not being violated onstage. Thus, it could be argued, the natural signs they ob-

\(^{18}\) My use of Johnson's views here and later rests primarily on his introduction of the theater of illusion, as contrasted to delusion, in his defense of Shakespeare's violation of the French unities in the "Preface" to his *Shakespeare*. A more extended discussion of Johnson appears later in this chapter.
serve have their naturalness reinforced, as no intervening dramatic conventions are needed to account for the leap forward from one time period to another or from one place to another. Yet obviously the play that restrains its represented actions in order to observe the liaison des scènes must resort to considerable artifice, and—alas—very evident artifice, to do so; what is represented onstage is sometimes so awkwardly restricted that the unnaturalness of the compression of what we are permitted to see demonstrates the strain it imposes on the representation, thereby revealing all too clearly that it is only a conventional representation and not life at all. The paradox, then, is found in the obvious artificiality that accompanies devices intended to produce the illusion of reality, thereby emphasizing the strange failings of the distorted and even impossible search after "nature," or rather the search after the apparently "natural" in order to command our belief that the signs we see do not merely represent nature, but are "nature."

I have been observing from Plato onward the conflicting discussion of the two modes of representation, the dramatic and the narrative, and I have observed the tendency to ally one (the dramatic) with the visual arts as potential natural signs and to resign the other (the narrative) to the realm of the verbal arts that cannot rise beyond being arbitrary and conventional signs. Now, we have seen in Lessing the privileging of drama (in the Aristotelian tradition that sought to reverse, though on familiar grounds, Plato's special condemnation of drama) as the way to convert arbitrary signs to natural signs. Consequently, Lessing must want to expand that portion of the drama that shows the audience and hence functions as natural signs and must want to reduce that portion that tells the audience, since this portion is only narrative in disguise, no more than arbitrary signs after all. Indeed the best play, as a perfect structure of natural signs, would only show and never tell.

These observations lead to another and more striking paradox, linked to the first, that lurks within this restrictive dramatic practice. As witnesses to an illusion of "natural" action, we should see it all as if it were a "real" action happening before us; consequently everything should be directly represented. But the dramatist, despite the desire to delude us into this belief that what we are witnessing is "real," is forced severely to restrict the stage space and time if all gaps are to be avoided: consequently he is forced to limit what may be directly represented. He thus must exclude much in the ac-
tion that we ought to see happening before us and, as a consequence, must yield to the temptation of having the characters tell one another (and us) about what has happened or is happening elsewhere; for he must let us in on the action one way or another. As the extreme version of French neoclassical theater demonstrates, the more the collapsing of stage time and stage space reduces what may be shown, the more it expands what must be reported by one character or another for the audience's benefit. The more exclusive the quest for natural signs, the greater the need to resort to arbitrary signs as supplements. The desperate struggle to compress the stage action, so that its verisimilitude may deceive the audience into seeing it as real, leads instead to a severity that necessitates the increased employment of reported offstage action. This narrative intrusion on the dramatic, the theatrical, makes the members of the audience more and more aware of themselves as listeners, auditory recipients of a story being told, engaging in verbal activities that preserve their function within the conventions of a mediated aesthetic transaction; they cease being fully engaged onlookers (even voyeurs) of a real happening they have come upon.

The restrictions that were to have produced an unalloyed structure of natural signs end by producing more and more supplementation by arbitrary signs to the point that drama becomes converted into mixed media, a mélange of the shown and the reported, the would-be natural and the arbitrary-conventional. Such a dramatist employs supplementary narrative, just as, on the other side of the generic boundary, a narrative poet like Homer—as we have been reminded since Plato—produced supplementary dramatic (that is, quoted) episodes. But both have both, both mixed—neither “natural.” The search for the dramatic purity of the natural sign inadvertently turns drama into a hybrid that betrays its unnaturalness.

Of course, all drama—even the least restrictive, the most wandering—inevitably displays some mixing of genres in its need, from time to time, to resort to narration; but the stringencies of seventeenth-century French dramatic theory, however contrary to their intention, are forced to exaggerate the need for narrative intrusion until it sometimes appears to play the primary role in getting the plot represented, though it must do so verbally rather than dramatically. The very act of pressing the dramatic into its narrowest enclosure leads to breaking it open in an extreme fashion that demonstrates the mixed character of all drama in its dependence, at whatever cost to its illusionary objective, on the narrative supplement. As a consequence of
such revelations about the quest for the natural sign in the French dramatic model of the seventeenth century, the way was opened for the questioning of that quest in less severe examples of drama.¹⁹

We can well understand Lessing’s attacks on the French theater of the preceding century, since—whatever its mission was or could be interpreted as being—he had to see it as artificial, obviously so, and hence unlikely to produce in its audience the natural-sign illusion he sought as the objective of all drama. Yet we have seen how the arguments made in defense of the French theater were aimed, however self-deludedly, at that very objective. Perhaps what Lessing saw as the failure of that theater should have persuaded him of the futility of pursuing the myth of art—even drama—as a natural sign. This pursuit is self-defeating because in the very making of art (even if as a would-be natural sign) the employment of various illusionary devices, and hence of artifice, must intrude, and with effects that should be seen as part of a transaction with the viewer-hearer from which the aesthetic (as non-real, as fictional) cannot be excluded. We have seen that this turns out to be the case even if the work of art is a would-be natural sign; indeed, my examination of French neoclassicism suggests that it is all the more the case as the work seeks to be a natural sign. If by saying this I am consigning the natural-sign aesthetic to the realm of self-deluding myth, I am only anticipating what subsequent thinking about art has done—and shrewdly and effectively done—in our own century.

Johnson’s well-known response to the seventeenth-century French version of the unities dwells precisely on the extent to which the doctrine of verisimilitude can be exposed as a most naïve version of what I have called the myth of the natural sign. In returning us to the drama as a created fiction, Johnson is also, in effect, answering Lessing a year in advance of Lessing’s major statement. (Johnson’s “Preface” to his Shakespeare appears in 1765, a year earlier than Laiokoon.) Johnson frees dramatic representation from a mimetic subservience to our empirical reality, since such a subservience would deny the representation its own constructive power: “‘It is false that any representation is mistaken for reality; that any dramatic fable in its materiality was ever credible, or, for a single moment, was ever credited.’ The key phrase, it is clear, is the qualification “in its mate-

¹⁹. In Chapter 7 we will see modernist critics argue for self-referential features that display themselves even in ostensibly “realistic” works of art, whether in painting or drama, to disrupt any natural-sign appeal.
rality’’: echoing Aristotle’s material cause, it points to the difference between the stuff of the world and the make-believe of stage illusion. It is not that the credibility of the drama as dramatic representation is being denied; what is being denied is our literal belief in the stage happening in its materiality as a real happening. We believe in it not as reality but as if it were reality. I quote again the often quoted lines:

The truth is that the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players. . . . It will be asked how the drama moves, if it is not credited. It is credited with all the credit due to a drama . . . representing to the auditor what he would himself feel if he were to do or suffer what is there feigned to be suffered or to be done. . . . The delight of tragedy proceeds from our consciousness of fiction; if we thought murders and treasons real, they would please no more.

Here, in the tradition of Aristotle, the arbitrary inventions of the playwright, subjected to the conventions of the generic literary occasion, presumably are made to achieve a propriety of their own that allows the auditor to receive the experience they impose as an acceptable substitute for nature, though hardly as the thing itself. It is in accordance with this view that Johnson acknowledges the purely nominal and conventional—in contrast to the ontological and ‘‘natural’’—status of dramatic genres:

Out of this chaos of mingled purposes and casualties [the mixed nature of human experience that he refers to as ‘‘the real state of sublunary nature’’] the ancient poets, according to the laws which custom had prescribed, selected some the crimes of men, and some their absurdities; some the momentous vicissitudes of life, and some the lighter occurrences; some the terrors of distress, and some the gaieties of prosperity.

20. This quotation and those in the rest of the paragraph appear in the ‘‘Preface’’ to The Plays of William Shakespeare, in Samuel Johnson, ed. Donald Greene (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 430–32. It must be conceded that this extended argument in Johnson is not altogether consistent with Johnson’s writings elsewhere. Even in the ‘‘Preface’’ I find three Johnsons: a realistic and particularizing Johnson, who can confound drama with the world of immediate experience; a moralistic and universalizing Johnson, who would have drama improve upon the way things go in the world; and the Johnson I am describing here, who celebrates our consciousness of the artifice of art as fiction. See my ‘‘Fiction, Nature, and Literary Kinds in Johnson’s Criticism of Shakespeare,’’ Poetic Presence and Illusion (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), pp. 55–69.
Thus rose the two modes of imitation, known by the names of *tragedy* and *comedy* (my italics).21

Unlike these ancients who accepted such customary distinctions, "Shakespeare has united the powers of exciting laughter and sorrow not only in one mind, but in one composition." Thus, Johnson's justification of Shakespeare maintains, though contrary to the rules, this procedure is *not* contrary to nature. Indeed there is always an appeal open "from criticism to nature," though obviously this is a more complex nature than that which gives rise to natural signs.

Johnson's poet is giving us, though in another form, that "other" or second nature that Renaissance critics like Sir Philip Sidney recommended ("Only the poet . . . lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow in effect into another nature, in making things either better than Nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in Nature").22 As a precursor to Johnson, Sidney in his *Apology for Poetry* also finds in drama an exemplary genre as he seeks to distance all poetry, and especially the epic, from the truth of a *literal* mimesis in order to support his concept of poetry as a feigned fiction, a concept springing from the distinction between poetry and history that he borrows from Aristotle:23

The historian, affirming many things, can, in the cloudy knowledge of mankind, hardly escape from many lies. But the poet . . . nothing affirmeth. The poet never maketh any circles about your imagination, to conjure you to believe for true what he writes. He citeth not authorities of other histories, but even for his entry, calleth the sweet Muses to inspire into him a good invention. (P. 124)

Consequently, since

the poet's persons and doings are but pictures what should be, and not stories what have been, they [readers or auditors] will never give the lie

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21. "Preface" to *Shakespeare*, p. 423. This passage appears in Johnson's defense of Shakespeare's violation of the neoclassical doctrine that calls for the purity of genres.


23. I do not at all deny that Sidney's major attachment is to Plato rather than Aristotle, but as is often the case with sixteenth-century critics, his Platonism did not prevent him from borrowing enough from Aristotle to free poetry from historical reality, even if largely on metaphysical, and thus Platonic, rather than formalistic grounds.
to things not affirmatively but allegorically and figuratively written. And therefore, as in History looking for truth, they go away full fraught with falsehood, so in Poesy looking but for fiction, they shall use the narration but as an imaginative ground-plot of a profitable invention. (P. 124)

As Aristotle demonstrated long before, one cannot press the history-poetry distinction without freeing poetry from nature and from the succession of actual events, and subjecting it to the rules of its own operations. Indeed, the power and influence of the Poetics over the centuries have been due in large part to its shrewd instructions about how to impose humanly formed fables upon the casual sequences of history and to do so with forms that will move audiences despite their factual untruth. Clearly, the several sequential parts of such dramatic forms are governed by principles of internal relations that are anything but naturally derived.

In the midst of the discussion I have quoted, Sidney explicitly introduces drama as his example to prove poetry's freedom from literal truth. And he does it by summoning stage illusion as his prima facie argument: "What child is there that, coming to a play, and seeing Thebes written in great letters upon an old door, doth believe that it is Thebes?" (Apology, p. 124). This passage surely anticipates Johnson's similar defense (in the midst of the passage I have referred to) of the auditor's power to entertain dramatic illusion, though without delusion. The enemy for Johnson is the French insistence that the stage cannot successively represent different places because the spectator "knows with certainty that he has not changed his place, and he knows that place cannot change itself; that what was a house cannot become a plain; that what was Thebes can never be Persepolis" ("Preface," p. 430).

Johnson answers with his enthroning of our imaginative power to entertain dramatic illusion and, consequently, to resist being deluded about what is art and what is reality. The crucial sentence is the one I have quoted before: "It is false that any representation is mistaken for reality; that any dramatic fable in its materiality was ever credible, or, for a single moment, was ever credited" (pp. 430-31). Certainly one should be able to entertain the change on the stage from one place to another, once having granted the initial make-believe time and place of the first scene. (As Sidney said, no child believes he is in Thebes—in time and place—when he sees the name written as the denomination of what the stage represents.)
After all, the leaps licensed by the imagination, if we are to grant the play its initial premises of time and place, make subsequent demands for shifts in time and place seem slight indeed. Or, in Johnson's powerful simplicity, "Surely he that imagines this may imagine more. . . . Delusion, if delusion be admitted, has no certain limitation" (p. 431). For we know we are actually in none of those places but only in "a modern theatre," watching "players" pretending to be characters who are themselves artful creations and not real people. In opposition to narrowly restrictive neoclassicism, Johnson justifies the great variety that can be admitted onstage to be represented because place and, even more, time are utterly "obequious to the imagination." How far, with this splendid phrase, we have come from the literal, surrogate function of the natural sign. In an argument that has been echoed many times, even in recent years, Johnson—after Sidney and with much more detailed argument—speaks for dramatic illusion rather than dramatic delusion. In what sense "illusion" and in what sense "delusion"? He sees illusion as a wilful version of delusion, a deception that is aware of itself even as it indulges itself. The spectator sees the duplicity in the play but is complicitous in allowing it to function both ways. The sign in drama is no longer viewed as natural, but it does not totally lose its relation to the natural-sign myth. The make-believe in the play requires that we respond to the sense in which it apparently claims to be a natural sign even while it ministers to our common-sense knowledge of it as anything but natural—as an artifact constructed out of arbitrary and conventional materials. In effect, the stage illusion is a fake imitation of the natural sign it pretends to represent, and as audience we share both in its pretension and in the acknowledged deception behind that pretension.

The common-sense liberation from the artificial strictures of neoclassical theory, most brilliantly formulated by Johnson, spread beyond England. Indeed, as if to qualify the excesses of his predecessors, it was a Frenchman, Denis Diderot, who soon after Johnson's "Preface" echoed the rejection of any association of the stage with empirical reality. Diderot (at least the later Diderot of the Paradox

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24. Diderot, Paradoxe sur le comédien (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1967), pp. 123-91. This witty extended dialogue was probably written—or at least started—in 1769, though it was only published posthumously in 1830. Its authorship, at one time challenged, is no longer in question. The translations of the quoted phrases are my own. Strangely enough, the position that Diderot persists in taking throughout the dia-
of the Actor) is, in effect, rejecting the French neoclassical idea of a century before, although he is doing it primarily from the standpoint of the actor rather than from that of the audience. Indeed, he finds his argument particularly applicable to the French theater—to the very plays that were presumably sponsored by earlier doctrine but often succeeded in spite of it. Diderot argues that the actor is to be always aware of the difference between the stage situation and the real one: he is not to surrender to the "real" feelings of the character being portrayed, as if the situation were an actual one, but, instead, is at all times to be conscious of his own extra-theatrical person and circumstances, as well as of the conventional demands of the theater and the art of acting. The "paradox of the actor" is precisely that he does not seek to become the person he imitates, but, as a self-conscious and hence conventional performer, remains himself, though only himself as an imitator. In a curious way Diderot's "paradox" serves as a forerunner to Bertolt Brecht's notion of the "alienation effect," discussed in Chapter 8, below.

Diderot approaches Johnson even more closely as he suggests that the audience responds accordingly: the fictional scene of domestic pathos will move us more than a real scene it may be said to imitate, because, he argues, neither the actor nor we have "perfectly forgotten ourselves" (pp. 180-81). The actor, then, should not actually be moved to tears, "because one does not come [to the theater] to see tears, but to hear discourse that draws forth tears, because this truth of nature does not accord with the truth of convention" (p. 187). With no intention to delude, the play is to remain a play: "The actors impress the audience, not when they are furious, but when they play fury well" (p. 190).

From this perspective—Johnson's and, after him, Diderot's (and later Brecht's)—the myth of the natural sign is a temptation that must be exposed as a theoretical deception. In the arts it perhaps tempts us most in the deliberate falseness of the stage illusion, which from the standpoint of a natural sign betrayed can be read as
dramatic delusion: here stand apparently real people apparently interrelating as in life, except that their actions and speeches are directed by structural and theatrical requirements both arbitrary and conventional, playing within the realm of appearance, with the representations as in life always belied by the representations as if in life. From Plato through Lessing, the theorist who professes the natural-sign aesthetic seems to have been taken in by what the drama pretends to, and would even try to extend that deception to all the verbal arts; but theorists in the Johnson mold know better on both counts.

So unless we take the Johnsonian path, the semiotic on which we ground our aesthetics will fool us as seventeenth-century French theory—and even, in his own way, Lessing—wanted the drama to fool us.25 The myth of the natural sign, prompted by the example of drama, may have deceived the innocent mimetic theorist about the semiotic of the literary work of art, while in Johnson’s view of drama, which converts both audience response and the semiotic itself, viewers, in complicity with the ambiguous aesthetic occasion, help to deceive themselves, to welcome the illusion in its duplicity, so that their response is anything but innocent. The drama, given its peculiar character and the peculiar history of its theorists, may be viewed as the example par excellence of how the natural-sign aesthetic turned its deceived worshipers into willing victims of the temptation to convert aesthetic illusions into their delusions. And it is Johnson’s corrective view, as developed through the nineteenth century and into our own time, that permits us to see that naive conversion and to resist it. It is an unfortunate consequence—but should not be a surprising one—that once the natural-sign aesthetic is displaced, the drama appears to suffer its own decline among competing literary genres as a newer theory authorizes a semiotic that privileges more unbounded kinds of verbal representation, mainly the novel and the lyric.

25. Again I remind the reader that the early Diderot (see n. 24, above) seemed to defend just such a natural-sign doctrine. Thus, from Les bijoux indiscrets (1748), “I know still that the perfection of a spectacle consists in so exact an imitation of an action that the spectator, deluded without interruption, imagines that he is observing the action itself.” His later position in the Paradox thus represents a most significant correction. I have translated this passage from Oeuvres complètes de Diderot, ed. J. Assézat, vol. 4 (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1875), pp. 284–85.
Well beyond the central city, occupying a large estate on one of the many islands that make up greater Stockholm, is the palace of Drottningholm, home of the Swedish royal family. A neighboring structure on the compound is the wonderfully preserved eighteenth-century court theater and its companion building, the theater museum. One large room in the museum is devoted mainly to pictures of old stage sets, theatrical representations of both interior and exterior “realities,” some of which are urban scenes, filled with houses, streets, people. But the one side of the room that backs against the windows provides a significant contrast to the others: mounted against the windows are several old prints, nineteenth-century drawings of actual European urban scenes, even identified by the names of the cities being represented. Of course, since all the drawings around the room are also aesthetic representations, these pictures of actual cities also appear to us, in effect, as a series of sets, not very unlike the invented theater sets pictured on the other walls of the room: all of them are, similarly, artful reductions of “reality.”

But there is a strangely paradoxical effect in the scenes of the ostensibly “real” cities (in contrast to the stage cities) being represented. In each of them we seem to be seeing a night scene, though the drawings are not darkened and it is still daylight in the room. Indeed, we seem to be seeing a night scene only because it is daylight. In the city scenes all the windows of the pictured houses are cutouts covered by a transparent film, so that the daylight pours through the film to create the illusion of interior nighttime illumination. In this way nature’s own daylight, entering through the windows, is transformed into—or at least is made to appear as—artificial night lights, the many bright dots of lighted windows shining into what now appears to be a night scene.

Here is a strange conjunction indeed, one that turns nature’s day into art’s night, forcing nature to change its “nature” in order to serve its artful opposite. Observing this paradoxical conjunction, I suddenly saw figured in it all the collisions and interchanges that occur between our attraction and our resistance to the illusion of the natural sign: an allegory of what I am struggling to describe and account for in this chapter—and in this entire study.