Ekphrasis

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REPRESENTATION

AS ENARGEIA I

Verbal
Representation
and the
Natural-Sign Aesthetic
To me be Nature's volume broad displayed;
And to peruse its all-instructing page,
Or, haply catching inspiration thence,
Some easy passage, raptured, to translate,
My sole delight. . .

James Thomson, "Summer," The Seasons

We saw in the preceding chapter that the need for Plato's metaphysic to deprecate all that contributed to the illusionary, as the deceptive, led him to condemn the arts insofar as they were mimetic, since he equated mimesis with illusion. In the Sophist he used the illusionistic tendencies of contemporary sculpture and painting to justify this judgment, since they permitted him to see all illusion as delusion and, consequently, to denounce the realm of appearance on metaphysical grounds. But his sense of the illusionary in poetry and hence his desire to outlaw poetry at large as an illusionary art were at some moments insecure enough to force him to reduce the object of his attack to the dramatic art of tragedy, which, despite its material base in words, could be treated as a natural sign by virtue of its mode of representation. Since the non-dramatic verbal arts, in this special sense non-mimetic, could not be so reduced, these moments in Plato's attack opened the way to a separation between the poetics of drama and the poetics of the less literally representational verbal arts, a separation that persisted throughout much of the history of literary criticism. And as we have seen, it helped to produce a poetics of drama heavily dependent on the myth of a natural-sign aesthetics, so that the place of drama in the literary hierarchy declined as the natural-sign aesthetic came to be abandoned.

But we saw in other places that Plato's attack on poetry as a mimetic art could also, despite the arbitrary character of words, spread out beyond dramatic representation to include the descriptive power of language to paint images for the mind, though not, of course, for the eyes. With this power poetry could seek to produce the effect of the natural sign even if—except in the drama—it could not quite be a natural sign. For the most part in Plato this picture-inducing power of words enables poetry at large—and not just drama—to be condemned as dangerously mimetic. In this chapter
I will pursue the development of this version of the theory of poetry as would-be natural sign.

The capacity of words to describe with a vividness that, in effect, reproduces an object before our very eyes (i.e., before the eyes of the mind) defines the rhetorical trope of *enargeia*; and once we assume, as Plato does, that the writer or speaker has this trope as his objective and at his best can manage to achieve it, the danger of the verbal art in wedding us to the world of appearances can approach that of the visual arts, despite the difference between words and pictures. In Chapter 1, I suggested that later classicism, looking for a device that would break into and halt the temporal flow of discourse by forcing us to pause over an extended verbal picture, develops the notion of *ekphrasis* (as an elaborate description of any visible entity) out of this earlier call for *enargeia*. It is to the later pictorialist tradition that emerges from *enargeia* that I will turn in this chapter, though only after once more dwelling on its sources in Plato.

Despite those lapses in which Plato narrows his attack on verbal imitation to dramatic poetry, we have several times noted that since he usually allows "imitation" to refer to all the modes of representation, it must usually refer to all the modes of verbal representation as well. And it is the broader definition of "imitation" toward which Plato consistently works in book 10 of the *Republic*, so that it is clear, as he moves back and forth between poetry and painting, that he means to overlook the generic distinctions within poetry that are so central to book 3, once he turns to examine the nature of artistic representation generally, finding all versions of that representation wanting, both cognitively and morally. By the time he has arrived at his definition in book 10, drama and narrative have come to be companion mimetic sinners confronted by the same charges, rather than opponents, one the many-voiced imitator and the other the unchanging, single-voiced teller. And similarly, poetry of whatever kind is a companion sinner with the visual mimetic arts.

It is significant that though book 10 begins by referring agreeably back to the damning judgment made against "the imitative kind of poetry" in book 3, it rapidly shifts to the world of things and the representation of them by the painter. What is also shifted is the grounds on which Socrates has declared himself to be hunting for "a general definition of imitation": "imitation" now is to rest, not on a natural-sign relation between an illusionary visual equivalent and its original, but on the one-to-one-ness of the referential relation between a thing and its representation. From the general idea to a
generic noun that "imitates" it, to a particular example of it in a thing, the passage that leads our mind from one to the other is a direct one.

Plato's argument is based, of course, on an unproblematic view of representation that Derridean theory has in recent years taught us to think of as "logocentric": a word, a generic noun, in effect contains the substantive idea within itself, as the idea contains all its particular representatives within itself. Hence Plato opens book 10 by accepting an assumption that, in our ontological insecurity, we would question rather than assume: "Whenever a number of individuals have a common name, we assume that there is one corresponding idea or form." From here he moves to his well-known metaphysical divisions among beds and tables: the universal "ideas or forms" of them, the particular examples of them made for use in our world, and the imitations of them by the painter.

We must note that the ground for establishing this sequence rests primarily on visual resemblances, what Socrates hastens to call "appearances." Indeed, he only half-seriously invokes the metaphor of the mirror to make his point. How may one be a universal maker, a maker of all things, even "the earth and heaven, and the things which are in heaven or under the earth . . . the gods also"? "There are many ways in which the feat might be accomplished, none quicker than that of turning a mirror round and round—you would soon enough make the sun and the heavens, and the earth and yourself, and other animals and plants, and all the other creations of art as well as nature, in the mirror." When it is objected that these so-called creations would only be "appearances," Socrates eagerly agrees, labeling the painter just such "a creator of appearances," appearances of particular beds, each of which is in its turn only an appearance, a "semblance" of "the idea which according to our view is the real object." In this semblance-making at a second remove, there must be as much distortion of the "true object" as there is in any of the tricks our eyes play upon us. He reminds us how we are fooled by the refraction of objects in water and suggests that similar effects are achieved in us by the painter's art of conjuring.


2. "And the same objects appear straight when looked at out of the water, and crooked when in the water; and the convex becomes concave, owing to the illusions about colors to which the sight is liable. There is no end to this sort of confusion in the
Given his objective of discovering the "general definition of imitation"—the realm of apparently hard things and their visible representations—we can understand why Plato has Socrates shift his primary target from the verbal to the visual arts, from poetry to painting. This general definition of "imitation" rests on art's capacity to mirror the thing we perceive (with its distortions) by making an illusionary substitute for it, so that the visual-spatial art is clearly a more appropriate model for his claims than is the verbal and temporal art. But when Socrates returns once more to include the poet as well, he still wants to retain the advantages of the definition that he derived from the painter even though within such a definition the poet could be included only as he is—if no more than metaphorically—a lesser painter.

Once again it is Homer he focuses upon, even though now what gives Homer his status is not his habit of speaking through the mouths of others but the fact that he is "an image-maker, that is, by our definition, an imitator."

The poet is like a painter who . . . will make a likeness of a cobbler though he understands nothing of cobbling; and his picture is good enough for those who know no more than he does, and judge only by colors and figures. In like manner the poet with his words and phrases may be said to lay on the colors of the several arts, himself understanding their nature only enough to imitate them; and other people, who are as ignorant as he is, and judge only from his words, imagine that if he speaks of cobbling, or of military tactics, or of anything else, in meter and harmony and rhythm, he speaks very well—such is the sweet influence which melody and rhythm by nature have. (P. 431)

There are few better examples of the position that later critics wrongly read into Horace's phrase *ut pictura poesis.* Yet here, clearly, the common ground between painter and poet depends not at all

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mind; and there is a similar deception about painting in light and shade, and juggling, and other ingenious devices, which have quite a magical power of imposing upon our weakness" (bk. 10, p. 433).

3. A bit later in book 10 Socrates himself questions his relying "on a probability derived from the analogy of painting," but after further argument concludes by affirming the justness of that analogy: "And now we may fairly take him [the poet] and set him up by the side of the painter, for he is like him in two ways: first, inasmuch as his creations have an inferior degree of truth—in this, I say, he is like him; and he is also like him in being concerned with an inferior part of the soul" (because
on the poet's attempt, through dramatic dialogue, to imitate the voices of his characters. Instead, it depends on the poet's capacity to create a "likeness," an image, though in his verbal—other than sensible—way, different as that way must be from the painter's. To the example of Homer Socrates now can even add Hesiod, whom he would have had to exclude so long as he relied only upon the poet's habit of speaking primarily through the voices of others.

So the definition of imitation is "general" and consequently is far removed from the limited definition of book 3. It would include all the varieties of poetry—dramatic, narrative, lyric—so long as they were characterized by the poet's misleading power as "image-maker." Still the poet's mission, however misguided, must require him to use his more indirect medium to follow as best he can (though with an inferior instrument) in the footsteps of painting, the model art that produces duplications directly, as visual substitutes for its objects.

Since Socrates has invoked painting in order to emphasize the visual character of mimetic illusion, he can, for purposes of emulation, bring together the several varieties of the verbal arts that have in common the image-making power of their words: poetry thus creates mimetic images for the mind's eye as painting does for the body's eye, in accordance with a consistent theory of mental imagery. But he can use this theory only by borrowing a word like "image," which can be applied to the visual arts in its literal sense, and applying it to poetry as an unacknowledged metaphor or empty analogy, in order to elide the differences between the verbal and the visual. This metaphorical transfer from the visual to the verbal arts, together with the free use of the word "image" in poetic commentary, will be a common practice in the pictorialist aesthetic. That aesthetic, which is also dedicated to the primacy of the natural sign and of the visual arts that are that sign's literal embodiment, develops—though with welcome interruptions by dissenters—over the centuries right up to the eighteenth.

If, then, in book 3 dramatic impersonation was seen as the one literal way for poetry to produce imitations like those of the painter, Plato's general devotion to what has been called "visual epistemology" usually leads him to attribute image-making to less immediate
means. Nevertheless, since poetry at large, and especially the nondramatic genres, consists of conventional (though no more than arbitrary) signs, it can produce internal pictures only through our interpretation of the words, mediating signifiers that must be converted into meaning—and, presumably, into mental images—in accordance with a controlling code. With signs in the verbal arts there is no immediacy of movement from physical stimulus to mental image such as a natural-sign art like painting permits. I noted at length in Chapter 2 that in a definition of poetry-as-imitation contained within the domain of dramatic illusion (as in book 3 and as confirmed in the Sophist), poetry can be permitted to join with painting in the mimetic function of aesthetic signs as natural signs, even if only to be charged and exiled by the priggish moralist. The confusion that arises from these readings of Plato's "imitation" in books 3 and 10 leads me to concern myself further with the way (or ways) in which Plato would relate the verbal arts—and especially the non-dramatic verbal arts—to the arts of the natural sign.

It is important to note that Plato deals at length and painstakingly with the relation of language at large to natural signs in the Cratylus, that strange and ambiguous dialogue in which he tries in every way to avoid giving up the mimetic function of words. That dialogue, despite its confusing playfulness, still persistently urges the "natural" fitness of words to their meaning, their more than arbitrary, more than conventional character. At moments almost tempted to see them as approaching a natural-sign status just this side of onomatopoeia, Plato has Socrates draw back from the claim to natural signs as from the start he rejects any claim that signs are merely arbitrary signs. Plato rather leaves the claim for language as natural signs to be made by Cratylus—though as an absurdity to be rejected—and only fleetingly and wistfully by Socrates, who, when it counts, must deny that "a name is a vocal imitation of that which the vocal imitator names or imitates. . . . Because then we should be obliged to admit that the people who imitate sheep, or cocks, or other animals, name that which they imitate." Thus a name is "not a musical imitation," and "the art of naming" has nothing to do with "forms of imitation" like music and drawing.

Yet Socrates maintains to the end that "the name is an imitation

of the thing’": "the true name indicates the nature of the thing" (p. 667). Or even more strongly elsewhere: "Have we not several times acknowledged that names rightly given are the likenesses and images of the things which they name?" (p. 679). Although the name, then, has the obligation to represent accurately the nature of the thing—and, even more telling, should be a likeness and even an image of the thing—Socrates still concedes "that pictures are also imitations of things, but in another way" (p. 669, my italics). Now, "likenesses" and "images" are strong words for our primary philos­opher of mimesis to apply to "names"; and yet he must allow that he does not here mean them quite to be "pictures." This difference (between verbal likeness and visual pictures) is all-important to the conclusion of this baffling dialogue.

Socrates' developing argument makes clear his commitment to the distinction between sensible signs (as in pictures) and intelligible signs (as in words). And it is this distinction that underlies the further distinction made over the centuries between the natural sign and the arbitrary-conventional sign (arbitrary with respect to its object, though conventional, as a code, with respect to its community of users). This distinction, resting on the resemblance between signifier and signified in the natural sign and the lack of that sensory relation between them in the arbitrary-conventional sign, has assumed that the natural sign functions immediately, while the arbitrary-conventional sign requires a translating mediation in or­der to function. The distinction is retained, though Plato is clearly reluctant to abandon altogether some fit relationship between name and thing, even if the hope of a literal mimesis in words must be abandoned.

So Plato can claim a natural and imitative fitness between picture and thing, as he makes this claim in the realm of the sensible when speaking of pictures, though—if only by analogy—he wants not al­together to give up the claim to an analogous fitness in the realm of the intelligible when speaking of words. It is in either case a "visual epistemology" yielding internal pictures, though this mental imag­ery must occur through very different processes in the two cases. He does not permit this distinction to prevent him from speaking of poetry as mimetic in the broad sense of verbal representation in book 10 of the Republic. Nevertheless, when, in book 3 or in the Sophist, Plato equates "imitation" with literal impersonation, he yields to the temptation that he often feels in dealing with the fallen world of art—the temptation that worries about sensible appear-
ances—as he tries to bring poetry into the sensible world of natural-sign immediacy that characterizes the visual arts.

Where Plato discusses the artist in the earlier portion of the *Sophist*, he emphasizes the deceptive character of those visual distortions, those misrepresentations related to perspective, which cater to our interest in appearances, to our absorption by *apparent* accuracy. In Chapter 2 I pointed out that his transference, later in that dialogue, of these illusionary sins to the poet-as-sophist leads him to impersonation as the illusionary verbal art. But once we have watched Plato broaden the visual (by analogy to the intelligible) realm to include verbal images, the *Sophist*’s attack on aesthetic deception can be applied to all poetry as versions of those misleading disciplines that Mazzoni will term "sophistics."

I have before noted the extent to which Plato’s entire conception of natural-sign imitation rests upon an unproblematic notion of how pictures represent and how the viewer reacts to the representation: from thing to picture of the thing to our internal image of the picture as if it were the thing. In moving to the intelligible mental imagery produced by words as pictorial translations, the semiotic rests upon an equally simple view of transparency, only slightly less immediate. The process must merely tolerate a middle (mediating) but still untransforming element to intrude itself: from thing to its equivalent word to its idea to our internal image of our pictured idea as if it were the thing. So whichever way one conceives poetry as mimetic—as an intelligible surrogate for the sensible or as itself a sensible impersonation—the one-to-one simplism remains as the basis for the conception.

As a consequence, the mimetic object would yield to a similarly simplistic analysis. It would be treated not as an object but rather as a collection of separately imitated objects, with the emphasis falling not on their collectivity but on the accuracy of the individual imitations. Clearly, the semiotic basis of such an aesthetic assumes the unproblematic character of individual representations, so that there seems to be no need to ask how these are to be made. The making of a representational object intended to match its existential archetype presents no problem, since we are assuming an unerringly representational visual art that intends to be nothing else and encounters no difficulty in realizing that intention. In other words, we need worry about no medium’s interfering with the making process and thereby clouding the transparency of the reproduction. As an analogy to this process in the verbal arts, the uninhibited representation
of an object in words—as the ultimate triumph of *enargeia*—is to proceed without being inhibited by the resistance of the verbal medium. What is being ignored is the very plasticity of the plastic arts, or—in the verbal arts—the intransigence of words, in our consideration of the artist’s or the poet’s labors to bend the materials at hand to a prior intention.

Plato’s broad view of literary imitation seemed enough to allow him to condemn poetry merely because, as an intelligibly based art, it creates mental images through its verbal representation. So we may wonder why, as if not content with this broad attack that he can make despite his acknowledgment that poetry cannot be a natural-sign art, Plato should feel the need for those moments when he collapses poetry’s mimetic guilt into the dramatic, using drama’s peculiar representational character as an impersonator of reality to open it to his attack upon it as if it were a natural-sign art indeed. During such moments the drama, or even the dramatic elements in narrative, may seem separated from the other verbal arts—though allied with the visual arts—as all these leave the other verbal arts outside the definition of imitation and thus exempt from condemnation as mimetic. But the non-dramatic verbal arts can be condemned in other places and for other reasons, reasons that recognize that though they are intelligible rather than sensible, they can be condemned nonetheless. The dramatic art may be most like a visual art because it too would create a sensible illusion; but though the non-dramatic verbal arts, with their arbitrary signs, are semiotically unlike a visual art, they seek to emulate that art in the way they would function, thereby using the visual arts as their model in their attempt, despite their disadvantaged (because invisible) medium of words, to create pictures in their readers’ minds. Their objective is to be like the sensible arts, to emulate their effects, even if they are only intelligible. Here, then, in their emulation of natural-sign arts, are the grounds on which poetry, as non-dramatic, can be condemned by Plato even when in its mode of representation it accepts its status as an art of arbitrary signs. When poetry, as dramatic, mimes or impersonates, then its imitative intention is patently objectionable, but the anti-aesthetic moralist can change definitions to allow for objections even to image-making poems of a single voice.

The reason behind the lapses in Plato’s doctrine of mimesis, I suggest, is that they represent his attempt to find a place for poetry within the spatial and visual categories of art generally, because of his special concern for the sense of sight—external and internal—
and thus his desire to include poetry among the arts to be condemned for their exclusive traffic with the realm of appearance, and hence of illusion. Why not, then, seize upon that mode of poetry, the dramatic, which seems calculated to deceive our senses? And so he does. But he clearly leaves the way open, though only within another argumentative context, to charge non-dramatic poetry as well with catering to the realm of appearance by its concentration upon its representational powers, its powers to produce enargeia. If, as we saw in Chapter 2, the dramatic, in its illusionary intention, seems to be the only analogue among the verbal arts to the natural-sign status of the visual arts, Plato’s introduction of his additional analogy between the eyes and the eyes of the mind allows him to include the narrative and lyric also among the objectionable arts, so long as their appeal to the eyes of the mind has an objective as mimetic as the appeal to the eyes themselves made by the visual arts. With this analogy he has opened the way for the pictorialist tradition that uses the visual arts as the model for the functioning of the poem.

We have already seen, in Chapter 2, the extent to which Aristotle seemed burdened with the spatial and pictorialist consequences of Plato’s “imitation” even as he tried to free poetry (or at least tragedy) from the obligations to enargeia that the static representations of Platonic theory imposed. It is clear that Aristotle’s metaphysical commitment to teleological process led him to see the dramatic poem as a single organic object whose unfolding form was to transcend and redispense every element (each of Plato’s imitated “objects”) within it. Aristotle counteracts the visual and spatial implications of enargeia with his own temporal interest in the very different term energeia, which characterizes the force that drives the developing plot, whose system of probabilities strives for the realization of all that is potential within it.

Now, it must be conceded that Aristotle’s formalistic concern with sequence yielded only an apparent temporality, since that sequence, as fixed within its form, had its own sort of stasis: the phrase “temporal structure,” which one might apply to the Aristotelian plot, proves to be no more than a deceptive oxymoron. For Aristotle the poem, for all its consecutiveness, was, in effect, replaced by the architectural framework that served as its spatial icon. This was projected onto the dramatic action that, with its dialogue, could only fill that framework. That action was an unwinding, but one always trapped in advance by its closed form. Despite
this deceptive commitment to spatiality, there was in Aristotle’s po­
etic a crucial advance over the restrictive Platonic concern with indi­
vidually imitated objects. The sense in which the Aristotelian action
still represented human action—still could claim to be an "imita­
tion"—was much less literal-minded, much more subtle and com­
plex, and it led to quite another sort of theoretical tradition.

Yet here and there the deadening hand of Plato’s analogy to the
spatial and the visual intrudes to flatten Aristotle’s supple defini­
tions of a unique art form and return poetry to being a poor relation
of the visual arts, struggling to mimic them by analogy. For example,
in arguing for the primacy of plot over character in chapter 6 (11-15),
Aristotle more than once uses the analogy to painting to make his
point: "it is the same in painting," or "a similar fact is seen in paint­
ing." The point being argued is that the diction and thought through
which a character is expressed in the drama have no more primacy
than do the colors used in a painting to fill in the "outline" of the
portrait, on which its quality principally depends. The relation of
the outline to the total picture is analogous to the relation of the
sequence of incidents—the plot—to the total play: each is the pri­
mary feature on which all else depends, to which all else is subor­
dinated. We should note here, if only parenthetically, the naive
theory of drawing-as-imitation that is being assumed as the aes­
thetic example for the drama to follow: "The most beautiful colors,
laid on confusedly, will not give as much pleasure as the chalk out­
line of a portrait."

The notion of a portrait as the filling in of an outline, with the out­
line as the essence of the work and the fill as secondary, will often
be borrowed by those who will treat character or figures or diction
as external garments, pleasing decorations, for what comes first—
the plot—as the "soul" of the literary work. Thanks to the analogy
to painting, and perhaps to its source in the Platonic doctrine of
"imitation," we have here a far more primitive—and static—theory
of the making process or of the finished work than the more dy­
amic Aristotelian notion of organic development should encour­
gage. His use of this analogy only reinforces my claim that beneath
his call to action-as-sequence Aristotle is dependent upon the no­
tion of dramatic form as a spatial icon.

Despite Aristotle’s emphasis on energeia, there is even an explicit,
if momentary, call for enargeia in the Poetics. In chapter 17.1, Aristotle
uses the conventional code words associated with enargeia to invoke
this mimetic obligation, and with the usual appeal to the visual:
"The poet should place the scene, as far as possible, before his eyes . . . in this way seeing everything with the utmost vividness, as if he were a spectator of the action." Even in this appeal to enargeia, it must be conceded, Aristotle shifts in mid-sentence from the object of inner vision (the scene) to a vision of the scene as an action. His primary concern with a sequential plot (as the projection of energeia) somehow has the Platonic appeal to enargeia imposed upon it as a visual appendage in conflict with a system dependent upon the principle of progression. While he remains faithful to that progressiveness, he cannot altogether resist the continuing influence that the visual character of mimesis, even with his alteration of its meaning, carries with it.

It is true that Aristotle's most obvious borrowing from Plato is that literalistic version of "imitation," as applied to the dramatic mode of representation (in his chapter 24), which we traced in Chapter 2. Still, we see in the passages cited here how much the spatial implications that Plato imposed upon that word "imitation" could inhibit the attempts to break free of them even by later critics struggling to do so. But most later critics were far less uncomfortable with Plato's inclination toward the spatial, since they found in it ample precedent for their own similar inclinations.

I am leading us to the most obvious and faithful adherents of the tradition in which Horace's phrase ut pictura poesis serves as an injunction to guide a poetic art that, in spite of its resistant verbal resources, seeks to emulate the spatial and visual arts—the arts of the natural sign—to which the visible world is immediately accessible. As is generally acknowledged, that key Horatian phrase was able to serve this way only because it was utterly misread, or was lifted out of context in order to be misread—and misread in a way that violates the easy, informal, and unsystematic tone of the Epistle in which it appears.6

One can argue, however, that the static nature of the injunctions that Horace proposes throughout the Epistle—whether concerning conventions of character, plot, diction, or didactic function—does in any case suggest a flat conception of the literary work that reveals consistently spatial thinking, so that, it may be claimed, the partic-

6. By referring to the treatise as the Epistle to the Pisos, I am bypassing its more pompous but less appropriate alternative title, Ars Poetica, in order to emphasize its unsystematic informality. Unhappily, the history of criticism records the extent to which the more theoretical impositions upon the treatise were responsible for its continuing importance.
ular misreading of his *ut pictura poesis* is less of a disservice to him than our literal complaints against such a misreading might charge. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that in the passage in question Horace is doing no more than considering similarities in audience (or reader) response to works from different arts: some (as with a picture, so with poetry: *ut pictura poesis*) to be seen close up and some from a distance, with attention paid in the first to petty faults and in the second to a grand scheme, with the faults overlooked. But there is here no suggestion, however remote, that poetry is to be made in order to function like a picture. Horace's words hardly present a position that warrants all that the pictorialist tradition claimed to make it responsible for, whatever we may grant concerning the static tendencies of Horace's continual fidelity to convention and its decorum.

Of course, Horace's phrase, however read or misread when it was picked up in the Renaissance, was hardly needed to establish the pictorialist tradition, though it of course served to reinforce it. Those who invoke the phrase can—and do—freely refer to the much earlier maxim, attributed to Simonides of Ceos by Plutarch, that speaks of poetry as a speaking picture, as well as the reverse, also speaking of the picture as mute poetry. And many in later antiquity—Lucian, Philostratus, and others—often invoke their predecessors and add their own claims to make up an impressive anthology of such sayings for those looking for precedents. It is an easy matter for Horace's phrase, though utterly misread, to be forced into service to capture the intent of an already strongly held position to which Horace's essential spirit is made to lend support. But it is hardly a crucial matter, since that tradition must already be securely in place for the misreading to occur.

Further, once the phrase was ready for use (or misuse), the scholar-grammarian created an additional authority to reinforce the phrase by reworking the text in order to justify the misreading. Much has been written on the punctuation of the sentence in which the phrase occurs, with the placement of the comma crucial to the strength of the injunction that later scholars read into it. When, as in the generally accepted text, the comma immediately follows the phrase *ut pictura poesis*, the usual meaning, like the one I offer above, is attributed to it: as with the picture, so with poetry, in the ways in which we observe and judge the art object at a distance or close up. The verb *erit* comes after the comma and begins the next clause to explain how the observing and judging works ("it will be that"). But
when the comma is placed after *erit*, the verb controls the preceding phrase, *ut pictura poesis*, and turns it into a firm statement of how it will be: poetry will be like a picture.7

With this reading, *ut pictura poesis* was just the phrase that Renaissance and neoclassical pictorialists could seize upon as the motto that summed up their view of poetry.8 It helped them insist on analogous relations among the arts, but with the visual art as the semiotic model and the verbal art as being adapted to that model, as emulating it despite the handicaps inherent in its own medium; above all, it helped pictorialists insist on the special role of the natural sign as criterion for all the arts. Thus, by the mid-eighteenth century, theorists could move to the notion of a general aesthetic, a theory of the fine arts (*les Beaux Arts*) as analogous to one another. It was, needless to say, primarily a natural-sign aesthetic. By the mid-eighteenth century (1746) the title of an important treatise by Abbé Batteux contains just the wording that characterizes this program: *The Fine Arts Reduced to a Single Principle*. That principle is, of course, the imitation of nature—yet another, belated reminder of Plato’s insistence that imitation cannot help but be, at bottom, the same thing in all the arts. (As we shall see in Chapter 6, Diderot shortly afterwards addressed Batteux in a treatise that reacts against this general tendency by urging a loosening of his single principle in a way that would produce significant theoretical consequences for the powers of poetry.) There was ample precedent for Batteux’s title, as well as his emphasis, in the work of earlier neoclassicists in the seventeenth and earlier eighteenth centuries: among many I will mention only Abbé Du Bos’s *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting* (1719) and, earlier, Dryden’s “Parallel of Poetry and Painting” (1695).

The latter serves as a preface to Dryden’s translation of Du Fres-


8. At the same time I must observe that some major eighteenth-century commentators, such as Pope and Roscommon, give evidence of having read the Latin carefully, so that they clearly understand the limited application of the original passage that contains the Horatian *ut pictura poesis* and do not misuse this phrase as a precedent for general pictorialist claims, though they sympathize with these claims. See, e.g., Pope’s *Essay on Criticism*, lines 169–80, which paraphrase much of the Horatian passage in its original restricted sense, though without even translating the phrase that proclaims the analogy.
noy's *De Arte Graphica* (1637), a poem in Latin reflecting the extremely conservative mimetic doctrine and leaning upon the *ut pictura poesis erit* formulation. In sympathy with the text that furnishes his occasion, Dryden's prefatory essay strongly urges the typical naive analogies between the two arts, accepting with them the need to turn poetry into something like a natural sign: "To imitate nature well in whatsoever subject, is the perfection of both arts; and that picture, and that poem, which comes nearest to the resemblance of nature, is the best." How can the words of a poem manage to create a "resemblance of nature" as pictures do? Dryden does not address the issue but continues to apply such borrowings from the visual arts metaphorically. Indeed, he acknowledges his indebtedness to "all the particular passages in Aristotle and Horace which are used by them to explain the art of poetry by that of painting" (p. 138).

The "Parallel" echoes in its major argument Aristotle's passing analogy, which I have summarized above, between the plot of a poem and the outline of a picture, and consequently between poetic diction and painterly filling in. Dryden uses the term "design" as the creation of the painting's outline, its basic "posture," and then borrows the term for analogical use by the poet. That design is created in a play's scenario ("scenery"): "To make a sketch, or a more perfect model of a picture, is, in the language of poets, to draw up the scenery of a play" (pp. 144-45). Once the design or outline is set, the painter can proceed with the filling in, what is termed the "coloring," another term that Dryden metaphorically adapts for the poet: "Expression, and all that belongs to words, is that in a poem which coloring is in a picture. . . . Thus in poetry, the expression is that which charms the reader, and beautifies the design, which is only the outlines of the fable" (pp. 147-48). He sees the need to compare a painting's "lights and shadows" to a poem's "tropes and figures" and exemplifies such comparisons with the statement that "strong and glowing colors are the just resemblances of bold metaphors" (p. 149). Late in his preface Dryden adds this comparison to a second, the customary metaphor introduced to describe ornament, whether in painting or in poetry, as attractive but superficial garments: "The words, etc., are evidently shown to be the clothing of the thought, in the same sense as colors are the clothing of the design" (p. 152).

In Chapter 2 we saw how neoclassical dramatic theory adapted the illusionistic version of Platonic mimeticism to the natural-sign aesthetic. In it the drama is championed (no longer singled out for censure as it was by Plato) as the most "natural"—and thus the most obvious—way for poetry to join the natural-sign arts. But deriving from Plato's other reason for condemning poetry—its inevitable habit of imitating unworthy objects—we have found neoclassical theory looking another way: by assuming a semiotic process that moved, almost automatically, from verbal description to mental images conjured up by the "idea" stimulated by the words, it could champion poetry as description, so that poetry was to seek, despite its obvious handicaps as a language art, to become the verbal equivalent of painting. And this mission led poetic theory to emphasize the Horatian strain.

The influence of a restrictive Latin tradition, founded on the notion of the Enlightenment as a second coming of Augustan Rome, is evident enough. But besides this principal source of support, neoclassicism, with its notion of a static mimesis, was sustained by a number of different philosophic perspectives, all of which, however much they might be opposed to one another, contributed to the exclusively spatial imagination that characterized the period aesthetic. From the recent past the rationalistic metaphysic provided a full and fully perceptible mechanism of universals that constituted an all-inclusive cosmic architecture. From the opposite end of the epistemological spectrum, an emerging empiricism, for all of its antithetical impact on rationalism, set forth an image of the mind as a storehouse of pictures that only reinforced the theory of poetry as visual imitation. At much the same time, as a late residue of a pallid Platonism, now resurgent with the revival of interest in Greek culture, the static version of a universal classic idealism associated with Winckelmann worked to lead the verbal arts in much the same direction.

Thus by the eighteenth century, which produced several comfortable epistemologies and a set of spatial metaphors for an uncritically mimetic theory, with the visual arts leading the way, the slogan *ut pictura poesis* was totally to absorb the non-dramatic poetic. As James Thomson, in his epigraph to this chapter, puts it, the Book of Nature ("Nature's volume") is to be converted into the poet's book. But for Thomson nature's is a "book" only in the figurative sense because its signs are immediately visible, while the poet's, with its arbitrary signs, must indeed be a book. Still, Thomson's poet is dedi-
cated to converting the one "book" into the other, his own, as an act of literal translation ("Some easy passage, raptured, to translate, / My sole delight"). This poet must spatialize his temporal object by trying to naturalize his arbitrary instrument, so that he might compete in an aesthetic drawn to the specifications of another art, a natural-sign art. He was to proceed, in short, as if the mediating element of language could obliterate itself, or at least render itself transparent, so that the verbal object also could be naturalized. It is not so much that he is converting nature into a text as that he means to convert his text into nature: he can approach the Book of Nature (which is not a book) only by fighting against the bookishness of his own.

There is perhaps no clearer application of the natural-sign aesthetic to non-dramatic poetry than we find in a few paragraphs of Addison’s *Spectator* 416, from his series on “The Pleasures of the Imagination” (1712). The distinctions Addison makes there clearly derive from Locke’s definition of words—in contrast to natural signs—as “arbitrary” and “voluntary” signs that, by an indirection modified by convention, work to bring back to our consciousness those “ideas” (i.e., prior sensations) that are stored in the mind: “Words, by their immediate operation on us, cause no other ideas but of their natural sounds; and it is by the custom of using them for signs that they excite and revive in our minds latent ideas, but yet only such ideas as were there before. For words, seen or heard, recall to our thoughts those ideas only which they have been wont to be signs of.”

By adapting Locke’s epistemology too uncritically, Addison—as is so often the case—allows his popularizing intent to denude the more carefully drawn distinctions he has borrowed and to press them toward an extreme, though commonplace, statement; but the special virtue of such simplification is its capacity to expose the posi-

10. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894), p. 417. It is earlier in his *Essay*, throughout the lengthy book 3 (“Of Words”), that Locke worries in great detail about problems with language as our arbitrary-sign instrument. In dealing with words, he consistently emphasizes that “their signification [is] perfectly arbitrary” (2:12), since he does not find “any natural connexion . . . between particular articulate sounds [which are, for Locke, all that is “natural” about language] and certain ideas” (2:8). Yet, he must concede, “it is true, common use, by a tacit consent, appropriates certain sounds to certain ideas” (2:13). This is his way of rescuing language as an instrument for understanding: by recognizing its conventionality, its responsiveness to what, in the quotation cited in the text, he calls “custom.”
tion with the clarity that its very extremity affords. I referred to this passage briefly in the summary that my introductory chapter was intended to provide, but I believe it is worth quoting in full here:

Among the different kinds of representation, statuary is the most natural, and shows us something *likely* the object that is represented. To make use of a common instance, let one who is born blind take an image in his hands, and trace out with his fingers the different furrows and impressions of the chisel, and he will easily conceive how the shape of a man, or beast, may be represented by it; but should he draw his hand over a picture, where all is smooth and uniform, he would never be able to imagine how the several prominences and depressions of a human body could be shown on a plain piece of canvas that has in it no unevenness or irregularity. Description runs yet further from the things it represents than painting; for a picture bears a real resemblance to its original, which letters and syllables are wholly void of. . . . It would be yet more strange to represent visible objects by sounds that have no ideas annexed to them, and to make something like description in music.

Addison is setting forth a spectrum running from the art closest to being a natural sign to the art that is farthest from it, and clearly is assuming the advantaged position of the natural-sign art. Not unexpectedly, his first art is sculpture, the art which, in its three-dimensionality, could almost be mistaken for that which it imitates. “Among the different kinds of representation, statuary is the most natural, and shows us something *likely* the object that is represented” (his italics). His second art, painting, comes close to being as natural an art as sculpture, but the difference between them is a significant one: although in painting there still is, from any distance, an appearance of similarity between the imitation and its “real” object, the two-dimensionality of the representation of a three-dimensional object creates in physical, touchable reality a marked difference between them.¹¹ One might argue that because

¹¹ It is, then, the sense of touch that allows sculpture to be perceived as more “natural” than painting and hence as the closest to a natural-sign art. The sense of touch is commonly associated with sculpture in early distinctions made among the sensuous arts, although the dominance of the visual in the *ut pictura poesis erit* claim usually leads to the distinctions between touch and sight being overlooked in theoretical conclusions drawn about natural signs in art. Thus, for the convenience of my argument, my subsequent discussion will, to some extent inaccurately, also tend to collapse discussions of the two senses and speak, for the most part, of sculpture and painting as twin visual (and spatial) arts.
of this difference, there is a greater need in painting than in sculpture for the medium to create an illusionary naturalness in the art work as sign—which is all it is. Yet, from a distance beyond our touching, the appearance of naturalness persists. As we move further along the spectrum to Addison’s third art, the verbal art, we seem to have left art as natural sign well behind, even though Addison—for good reason—restricts his interest to the art of verbal “description,” the use of words to create a mental picture: “Description runs yet further from the things it represents than painting; for a picture bears a real resemblance to its original, which letters and syllables are wholly void of.” As Addison completes his spectrum, only music, in which, he concedes, mimetic meanings (if any) are “confused” and “imperfect” at best, remains to move us toward the extreme of totally arbitrary signs. It is evident that he does not quite know how to deal with music within this scheme, though even in this case he does not altogether surrender his mimetic objective.

Addison’s spectrum of the arts, carrying an implicit hierarchy within it, seems to urge that poetry, reduced to verbal “description,” should look to the natural-sign “sister arts” to define for it its representational function. And that function, clearly, is still what from Plato onward has been termed enargeia: to use words to reproduce in the hearer or reader the perception of the natural object itself in all its vividness. But might I not also claim that a subsidiary mission is also justified, one that would reinforce the semiotic claim of the natural-sign aesthetic by reinforcing the mimetic relation of poetry to the natural-sign arts that were to be its model: that is, to reproduce in words a natural-sign art object in the absence of that object—in short, to make a literal ekphrasis? As the third art in line along Addison’s spectrum and emulating the first two, poetry thus would also seek to imitate—in this case, to represent—the art object, in effect performing an ekphrasis by way of enargeia. This would thus provide a verbal equivalent, in all its vividness, of the sensuous experiencing of sculpture or painting, using enargeia to emulate, by representing, the most natural of natural signs as an alternative to nature itself. In a period such as the early eighteenth century, in which nature and art can be conceived as substitutes—mutually reflecting signs—for one another, such alternatives seem justifiable.

This concept of natural-sign representation as the ideal end of all the arts rests on Addison’s mimetic definition of the “secondary pleasures of imagination.” These secondary pleasures, Addison reminds us at the start of Spectator 416, arise from recollections in our
mind of our original sensory experiences, including those recollections that have been strengthened through the stimulation of an art object ("I at first divided the pleasures of the imagination into such as arise from objects that are actually before our eyes [primary], or that once entered in at our eyes, and are afterwards called up into the mind, either barely by its own operations, or on occasion of something without us, as statues or descriptions [secondary]"). This is, of course, Addison's extension of Locke's basic distinction between "sensation" and "idea" ("sensation" as original sense perception of an object, and "idea" as mental image, the recollected "sensation" in the absence of the object). Thus those secondary pleasures deriving from art, rather than from unaided memory, proceed "from that action of the mind, which compares the ideas arising from the original objects, with the ideas we receive from the statue, picture, description, or sound that represents them." This mimetic view seems to value the art object largely because of its function as a mnemonic object, an aid to memory, serving to remind us of the primary object of actual sensation which it seeks to imitate. (In the case of ekphrasis, mnemonics would function at two removes: the verbal description of a visual representation of nature.) The art object is to help us restore the liveliness of the original sensory experience within the idea that preserves the fading memory of that experience inside us after we have been removed from it. The pleasures of art are not called "secondary" pleasures for nothing.

So literal a sense of imitation (as natural-sign imitation) must assume that the original sensory perception is superior to its reproduction in art: the "real" object is superior to the imitation whose role, primarily, is to point toward that object as its "origin," recalling for us the stored mental snapshot of our sensory experience. Consequently, this reductive notion of artistic mimesis assumes—as Plato did—that the work of art can be no more than a collection of individually represented objects, each related, separately, to its original rather than to the other represented objects that accompany it: the art work is to consist of discrete objects as imitated rather than being itself a single, made object. This is why it is more accurate to speak of the origins of the work of art as those "real" objects of experience out there rather than as the creative mind of its author as maker, since that mind is given little enough to create, especially when the artistic process is to seek representational immediacy. In the case of the poet, such immediacy must be emulated even though
it seems folly to maintain that a verbal entity can avoid the intrusions of a medium in its attempt to represent an object.\footnote{Addison himself, in the same 
*Spectator* paper and, indeed, almost immediately after the passage I have quoted, will give ground before this difficulty, as we will see in Chapter 4, in which we see him in retreat from the extreme position I am attributing to him here.}

In this aesthetic such fidelity to external, "real" origins in experience is what makes the natural sign the highest achievement of the work of art. It also dictates that the visual arts, as natural-sign arts, are to be the model arts for the other arts—source of the metaphors that are to govern our criticism of them—so that the disadvantaged art of literature must struggle against its handicap as an arbitrary-conventional-sign art and still try to imitate as best it can, seeking to do in its way what comes naturally to sculpture and painting: the providing of "images" to match "reality." Hence *ut pictura poesis erit*. It is no wonder that Addison in this passage speaks only of "description" as the product of the verbal arts and that "landscapes" and "portraits" were treated in the eighteenth century as poetic genres as well as painterly genres.

If we extend this line of argument, nature itself, the prime mover, is itself as much superior to the visual arts as those arts are superior to literature. With us still are the descending values associated with Plato's doctrine of imitation, which projects a downward succession of objects and imitations of those objects, with each object of imitation better (in the sense of being closer to its origin) than its imitation, the latter becoming in its turn an object for yet another, and more distant, imitation. Logic would suggest that given the absence of the original thing itself, as is the case in art, the best art object is the one that tends toward self-effacement as art in the apparent attempt to appear to be the natural object itself. All works of art try to become a reality-substitute without difference; all would, if they could, approach the *trompe l'oeil*. We should therefore accept the special virtue of sculpture and the special disadvantage of the verbal arts, unless, of course, arguing from the Platonic precedent, we claim an exception for the special mimetic immediacy of the drama, as Addison does *not* in this discussion.

So confident a doctrine of pure and unimpeded representation rests not only on a self-assurance about the transparency of representational media (the visual ones easily and automatically, and the verbal ones insofar as possible by emulation) but also on an ontolog-
ical assurance about "real experience" that even the epistemological doubts suggested by empiricism could not shake. The spatial fix on the object caught in the visual snapshot of our phenomenal experience is secured in the frozen image drawn by the painter or by the poet who seeks to adapt his words to the painter's objective.

My focus upon the total surrender to the visual and the spatial in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with poetry creeping after painting as its model, may seem to overlook the reverse tendency, which was also common in this period, to make painting like literature. For all my insistence on poetry as a "speaking picture," I should give due emphasis to the attention paid to the other half of the mutual crossovers attributed to Simonides—to painting seen as "mute poetry." We should not ignore the widespread indulgence in narrative and genre painting, and the critics' encouragement of it. If I have been addressing only the encouragement of poetry to emulate the arts of portraiture and static description, I cannot fail to mention—in addition to the painting that represented spatially fixed objects—the painting that was to emulate literary narrative. This latter emphasis would seem to be working the opposite way, with the visual seeking to forgo the spatial in pursuit of temporality, of sequence.

Does my recognition of this reverse tendency undo my argument? On the contrary, once we examine it, I believe it will provide only reinforcement. As Lessing never tired of reminding us, the theoretical support for narrative painting had to come to terms with the need for the artist to select out of a narrative sequence the single moment to be represented. The spatial art had to settle upon the one point of time (referred to again and again in the eighteenth century as the punctum temporis) that it was to represent.13 But it was hardly to be any random point of time. Instead, it was to be carefully and wisely selected as the "pregnant moment," the one moment to which all preceding moments in the narrative sequence led and from which all succeeding moments descended. In effect, it was the narrative's spatial equivalent—the moment that held the en-

tire narrative—full with potential, awaiting the inevitability of realization. Aristotle, the architect of dramatic and narrative form, was reinvoked to be adapted to an aesthetic of painting that could proclaim that superiority of the picture to the poem in attaining the purity of a story's necessity and probability. So long as the choice is right—and the judgment of the work will rest in large part on the shrewdness of that choice—the high moment of that one pregnant instant, the punctum temporis, can in the picture have all the lines of narrative flowing into and out of it without the trivial and minor and barely relevant (or, even worse, irrelevant) moments in the sequence detracting from its eminence. It is the representation of the soul of the narrative because it is the representative moment of it.

Here is a forceful reminder of my earlier suggestion that Aristotle's alternative to Plato's call for stasis was only deceptively temporal, since the sequence he called for, in its formal perfection, was a frozen sequence and not freely temporal at all. Those who defended the capacity of the picture to portray the essence of narrative seized upon that formalizing, and hence spatializing, of the temporal by Aristotle to argue for the painter's or the sculptor's power to take over the poet's province. Thus, far from introducing temporality into painting, the justification of narrative painting only reinforced the triumph of aesthetic spatiality by extending it beyond still persons and still lifes and landscapes into the domain of moving life—but only by stilling that movement. The ut poesis pictura, in this version of it, was no less founded on the principle of spatial reduction than was the ut pictura poesis.

Before moving beyond the picture-poetry analogy as I have traced it across the centuries, I should make explicit the misleading grounds on which that analogy was formulated and broadly accepted. In their desire to read one art in terms of the other—poetry in terms of painting—the critics we have observed have repeatedly been comparing elements in the two arts that do not correspond with one another. Because it is assumed that the picture can reproduce its object without any distortions being introduced by the making process, an unmediated, one-to-one relationship between the sign and its referent is also being assumed. But in poetry as a verbal art what is at stake is the character of mediation itself, which keeps the interpreting mind at some distance from the would-be referent. So picture-making and poem-making are being compared on misleading grounds: on the side of the visual arts critics are forced to speak of the natural objects themselves (even if by means of their painted
surrogates) as if there were no medium, while on the side of poetry critics must speak with an awareness of a medium that, unable to reproduce literally, can only indirectly represent an object. They seem to assume that there is no work in pictorial representation, which is the model that the descriptive poet must work to emulate. Thus pictorialist literary critics are not comparing one art with another so much as they are comparing nature itself, in an unmediated reflection, with the workings of words in a struggle to represent. Nevertheless they treat these incomparable characteristics as if they permitted a proper comparison between the two arts—indeed, permitted a translation of one into the other.

Because the elements of their comparison are not comparable, their supposed comparison turns out to be no more than a loose analogy (\textit{ut pictura poesis}) that unjustly forces one art to deny its own characteristics in order to try to behave in the terms of the other, even if it is incapable of doing so. Further, their ontological commitments contribute to the same consequence by conferring upon nature the sacramental status of an all-controlling origin, thereby reducing what claims to be a comparison to the emulation of a superior by a disadvantaged inferior. They thus are led to collapse one art into the other rather than to sustain any balance between them. Yet it was on such a false claim to comparison that the pictorialist aesthetic was founded.

This aesthetic could no longer be maintained (though the comparison between pictures and poetry could be made the more cogent) once drawing and painting and sculpture also came to be seen as working processes; once, that is, criticism admitted both the conventional character of visual signs and the artists’ struggle to manipulate their materials in order to make perceptual structures of them. This recognition that such processes obstructed the easy immediacy of representation led to the rejection of any claim to natural-sign transparency. The grounds were thus cleared for proponents of the arts of the word, now able to champion their conventional medium instead of masking it, to claim a comparison with the other arts that, thanks to arguments similarly slanted by their self-interest, could invert the hierarchy to favor the primacy of their own subject. As if to follow their lead, recent critics of the visual arts, often applying to paintings the techniques we associate with literary interpretation, have come increasingly to treat them as texts to be read, embracing them as conventional-sign systems.