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THE

VERBAL EMBLEM II

From
Romanticism
to
Modernism
Words move, music moves
Only in time; but that which is only living
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
Moves perpetually in its stillness.

T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton"

In Chapter 4 I traced the arguments of those who created a tradition out of their countermovement to pictorialism. They sought to use the freedom of the word from the limits of the natural sign in order to claim a special power for it—in its way also authorized by "nature"—and they sought to use the sequential character of the verbal text in order to open the spatial enclosure of the visual arts to the free flow of temporality. But in the later stages of the tradition that I traced back to Longinus, in notions I there associated with Burke or Shelley or Poulet, I claimed to see a wilful neglect of form and the precision of outline (in Burke's terms, the forsaking of the "beautiful" in favor of the "sublime") in order to allow words to be absorbed by the undemarcated reaches of our inner life. Because such theorists as these desire the verbal arts to oppose the restraints of visual representation instead of emulating them, their interests lead their theory to move in an anti-formal, if not an anti-aesthetic, direction.

The force of this opposition leads to a polarity that less anti-formal theorists in their wake seek to mediate. For the latter, language, as we saw in Chapter 6, need not be regarded as an anti-formal element just because it is not to be reduced to its visual appeal, nor does it have to be associated with imprecision. They would argue that the aesthetic game need not be given away to the visual arts, nor need it be condemned. The growing interest in words as a potential aesthetic medium, unlike the media of the other arts yet functioning in analogous ways, can for them yield an aesthetic synthesis that builds on the manipulative possibilities in

*It seemed appropriate to use for my epigraph here a quotation that was central to my earlier essay (see the Appendix), since this chapter seeks to systematize the world of that essay of many years ago.
language to create an object free of natural-sign limitations that can yet stand forth as a construct that is always in motion and yet continually contained.

So there is in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries a growing attention both to the "making" power of words in the hands of an able poet and to the object those words "make," the space they create for themselves out of their temporal character as elements in motion. Having, in the name of temporality, won their battle against the closed eighteenth-century spatial imagination and now enjoying the freedom from enclosure that accompanies their victory, theorists, perhaps looking for a formal principle that can replace visual form, soon begin to work their way back to space. And this is to work their way back to form, since form, at least for the romantic-modernist thinker, is achieved by the poet's imposition of spatial elements on a temporal flow, with that temporal flow somehow preserved even as it is captured. What emerges, in the aesthetic from Kant through the New Critics, is the possibility of a rebirth of the notion of the verbal emblem. But because there is, at least since Herder (as we observed in detail in Chapter 6), a newer and more self-conscious awareness of the potential role of language as aesthetic medium, there must be significant differences between the Renaissance verbal emblem (my "verbal emblem I") and what I will here treat as "verbal emblem II." My purpose in this chapter is to explore the development of this emblem and with it the ultimate modernist return to a newly dynamic spatiality.

The return to a newer conception of form under the control of the verbal imagination is related, in the last two centuries, to the dominant role of the metaphor of organicism in descriptions of poetic production. The introduction of the doctrine of organic form allows the theorist to deny that the final determination of what the poem is to be is derived from any object or code external to the developing verbal creation, while still insisting that there are formal controls exercised upon that creation, even if those controls must be internally developed in the course of the creative process. Not coincidentally, it was in the course of many idolatrous studies of Shakespeare as both master poet and model poet, creator of works whose perfection had continually to be reaffirmed and justified, that many of the romantic discussions of organic form were pursued.

Most notably in the appreciations of Shakespeare by August Wilhelm Schlegel and the derivative (if not directly borrowed) essays of Coleridge, organic form, in contrast to the superficial form disparag-
ingly termed "mechanical regularity," is introduced as the only principle that can account for Shakespeare's accomplishment. In a lecture appropriately named "Shakespeare's Judgment Equal to His Genius," Coleridge argues against neoclassical censure of Shakespeare's art because it violated certain sacred dramatic principles. It is not, he argues, that one must choose between genius and judgment, and praise Shakespeare as a genius though acknowledging that he is without judgment, but rather that genius must include judgment, though Shakespeare's judgment is too intricate for legalistic minds to judge. It is not that Shakespeare's work is lawless because it does not obey their universal laws but that it is responding to more subtly imposed laws that it is itself generating. I am, obviously, using Coleridge to provide the alternative that would mediate between the extremities (enargeia I and enargeia II) that I was left with at the close of Chapter 4. I cannot resist quoting Coleridge's own picturesque defense against the charge that a poet must either satisfy a narrow and externally imposed formal demand or be charged with formlessness:

No work of true genius dares want its appropriate form, neither indeed is there any danger of this. As it must not, so genius cannot, be lawless; for it is even this that constitutes it genius—the power of acting creatively under laws of its own origination. How then comes it that . . . whole nations have combined in unhesitating condemnation of our great dramatist, as a sort of African nature, rich in beautiful monsters—as a wild heath where islands of fertility look the greener from the surrounding waste, where the loveliest plants now shine out among unsightly weeds, and now are choked by their parasitic growth, so intertwined that we cannot disentangle the weed without snapping the flower? . . . The true ground of the mistake lies in the confounding mechanical regularity with organic form. The form is mechanic, when on any given material we impress a predetermined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material;—as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened. The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes, as it develops, itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. Such as the life is, such is the form. Nature, the prime genial artist, inexhaustible in diverse powers, is equally inexhaustible in forms.¹

¹. The quotation is taken from "Shakespeare's Judgment Equal to His Genius," in Coleridge's Essays and Lectures on Shakespeare and Some Other Old Poets and Dramatists
At the close of Chapter 4 I anticipated this theoretical move that would join the expressive human capacity inherited from Longinus, emphasized in that chapter, to the making emphasis inherited from the Aristotelian conception of poesis. Its aim was to evade the alternatives of a dictated mimetic precision at one extreme and a freely subjective obscurity at the other, as it sought to justify the poem as a constructed object, a whole that exceeded the sum of the individual representations within it. And yet, because the metaphor was pressed to the extreme, it was to be conceived as a "natural" object, product of an organic process of growth.2

In this literalized version of the organic metaphor, the poem as a "natural" object was to go beyond the automatic flow of human speech by developing, under human guidance, into a formal completeness, as if as part of the natural process, or at least in emulation of it. As the above quotation has shown us, nature, working through the human creator, is the form-maker, that "prime genial artist... inexhaustible in forms." Hence the number of poems, each with its own form, is endless. Coleridge has learned from Burke, as well as from the German philosophers who led him to his position, that the direction of all representation (or should we in the present instance change "re-presentation" to "presentation"?) must be from inside the human mind outward to the world rather than, as with the natural-sign tradition, from the outside world inward to its representation in the human mind.

As organicism is most consistently defined, the work of art, now shaped as it emerges from the human creator instead of imitating a pre-ordained shape in nature, yet achieves its own special relation to nature. Captivated—and captured—by the organic metaphor, theorists attribute to the work the natural form, the integral system of internal relations, of a biological entity. Signs that in their derivation

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(1) I join Coleridge in arguing for a greater complexity in organicism than is usually granted it in chap. 2 ("The Typological Imagination and Its Other: From Coleridge to the New Critics and Beyond") of my A Reopening of Closure: Organicism Against Itself (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 31–56. I perhaps echo Coleridge's lament in arguing that those who too quickly condemn organicism for requiring closed poetic systems fail to respond to the subtleties that, in its best proponents, open it up.

2. In Chapter 8 I trace the critique, at once semiotic and political, of this notion of the "natural."
may have been arbitrary and conventional are so arranged and transformed by the poet that as they emerge from the creative process, they take on a sense of inevitability and necessity aroused in us by the organic forms of living nature. Here, then, is the third version of "nature" we have entertained, different from either the doctrine of the natural sign (Chapter 3, above) or the vision of nature speaking through the poet (Chapter 4). It sees poem-making as an imitation of nature's creative force, proliferating into an infinity of biological forms. The organic metaphor, pressed literally into becoming the model for poetic form, turns the poem into its own sort of natural sign.

This is essentially the role given the poet by Aristotle, who is the first to adapt the biological model to literature, more specifically in him to the description of the forms of dramatic plots. He finds the power of these forms within their capacity to reshape their external objects, the casual realities of historical events as they occur, into the causal probabilities of the poem as it ought to be constructed—into the poem, that is, as a made object, a complete system of mutually dependent internal relations operating in accordance with our logic rather than with the chronology of happenstance. If we remember Aristotle's desire to elevate the "probable" over the merely "possible" (Poetics, chap. 24), we can understand that the controlling principle behind the sequence of incidents in drama requires that the coherence of human logic triumph over chronological accident; it is to persuade us as aroused witnesses that the humanly created order is the natural order, at least insofar as nature operates in accordance with the teleological principles at the heart of the Aristotelian metaphysic.

Aristotle shifts easily from the drama as an objective structure to audience response without concerning himself about the differences required by this shift. He seems to expect us to accept the shift from what is logically "probable" in the action to what the audience can be induced to find "credible," believing the order to be "natural" because it is logical, as logical as the principle of coherence, without aporia, that he claims to find in nature. Thus the audience

3. Among the many places I could point to in the Poetics, I need mention here only Aristotle's argument for logical, rather than chronological, definitions of "beginning," "middle," and "end" in chapter 7, as reinforced by his defense of "unity of plot" over "unity of the hero" in chapter 8 and by his calling in chapter 23 for an epic structure that presents "a single action" and not, as history does, "a single period."

4. This shift from the "probable" to the "credible," anticipated by Aristotle as he
response, far from arbitrary, is to be controlled by the teleological pressures exerted by the poem through its objectively formal properties. The Aristotelian action, then, should be taken as the idealized version of the natural order and, as a logical transformation of it, an improved order that we should accept instead of the nature we see, that we should accept as nature’s ultimate form.

The proper drama is, in effect, more than a natural sign as nature’s transparent representation; it is, as substitute for visible nature, the primal creation that speaks for nature itself. As an object for imitation, it is as fixed and absolute as nature itself seems to be for the Platonists—no, more so, since it has behind it the philosophical authority of Aristotle’s teleology, his final cause, to lend it substance. Consequently, as I pointed out in Chapter 3, the apparent appeal to temporality in Aristotle’s view of the plot as a sequence of incidents is deceptive, since that sequence is frozen into the pattern fixed by the logical structure of probabilities. And the logical superimposes itself upon the chronological and changes it, subdues it to order by removing all chance from it, so that—as Aristotle makes clear in *Poetics*—the sequence is ruled by “causal necessity,” by procedures governing antecedents and consequences. Aristotle may seem to focus upon chronology in his central concern for the role played in dramatic form by the terms “beginning,” “middle,” and “end,” but these terms here have only a logical force: the “middle” of a tragedy follows the “beginning” because it logically follows from it, not just because it comes after it; and the “end” is the logical conclusion to the drama, the end of its consequences, not just the temporal moment that arbitrarily comes after the others.

The poet thus fosters within the viewer or reader the illusion that human logic has produced a self-sealing organism, what nature—or a natural history—true to its teleological principle, ought to be, even if in the experiential realm we inhabit, accidents intervene to thwart the realization of potentiality inherent in nature’s substance. We need the arts, it can then be argued, in order to teach us what nature (or nature’s version of history) might be if it were unimpeded by accident. If the dramatic system of causal relations is all it should be, then, it creates the impression of biological nature’s growth and

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moves uncertainly back and forth between the two in chapter 6, becomes a commonplace in sixteenth-century Italian criticism, which often calls itself Aristotelian. As a shift in focus from dramatic structure to audience response, it helps foster those Platonic intrusions that distort the shape of Renaissance Aristotelianism.
fulfillment. As Aristotle claims in his *Physics*, chapter 2, the artist partly imitates nature and partly surpasses it. The objects borrowed for imitation from the outside world must be made to appear as if they develop *naturally* into what becomes their fixed pattern, as if they develop *naturally* into "the finality of [their] form," if I may borrow Kant's words for my purposes.

It is this suggestion that Kant functions for Coleridge and later post-Kantians as a second coming of Aristotle that shows the form-making doctrine of the *Poetics* to be relevant to romantic organicism. The imposition worked by the Aristotelian poet upon his materials from a position outside them is forced by poetic form to seem to us like a flowering from inside. (My vegetation metaphor is intended as an echo of the common language of organicism.) It is this infusion of organic vitality into otherwise inert materials that for the later organicist Coleridge turns the poet's act into an imitation of God's. The poet's own I AM gives life to its objects, transforming them into the mutually sustaining elements of the self-sufficient world it has created, in effect giving birth to what Renaissance critics would have called a "second nature," in its way an improvement over the first.

So here is a return to nature by signs that, as arbitrary and conventional, had begun their career in alienation from it. The vision of the poem as a perfect emblem of organic nature requires a totalized concept of the aesthetic object resting on a teleology (what Kant termed "internal purposiveness") that converts every wayward element into an inevitable and indispensable part of the created pattern. Before turning beyond the romantics, however, I must note again that this need to claim a holistic structure, a system of inevitable interrelations, undermines and renders deceptive the introduction by Aristotle (and Coleridge after him) of an apparently temporal model to counteract the stasis behind all of Plato's discussions of the arts, including the verbal arts. By insisting that the poet imitates an action, a sequence of incidents, rather than individual personages,

5. Richard McKeon's commentary in his "Literary Criticism and the Concept of Imitation in Antiquity" (in *Critics and Criticism, Ancient and Modern*, ed. R. S. Crane [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952], p. 161) is instructive here: "Art imitates nature, Aristotle was fond of repeating, and, at least in the case of the useful arts, the deficiencies of nature are supplemented in the process of that imitation by art following the same methods as nature would have employed. 'Generally, art partly completes what nature cannot bring to a finish, and partly imitates her.'" He is quoting from *Physics*, chap. 2.
Aristotle seemed to be substituting a temporal notion of form for Plato’s spatial and thus static notion. He thus positioned critics to move beyond the obvious pictorialism behind Plato’s concepts in order to exploit the special powers of literature as a temporal art. But the firm commitment to teleological structure turned the action—as a sequence fixed in its system of mutual inevitabilities, in which the beginning was as dependent on the end as the end was on the beginning—into a spatial form after all. Hence we can understand the attractiveness of Aristotelian organicism for romantic theorists, who would recapture for space the temporality let loose by the revolution against neoclassicism, though in doing so they could yet resist the analogy to the visual arts in order to work for poetry’s superiority as a time art. They could, they thought, have the dynamics of temporality without having to give up the fixity of structure.

As criticism in our own century systematically projected this formalism that would impose its spatial fixity upon literature’s temporality, the mystifications of organicism expanded into the worship of form by literary modernism. In the formalist tradition from Aristotle on, the conflict in literature between the temporality of sequence and the spatiality of the form that freezes this sequence is resolved on the side of space. As the New Criticism turned the claims of the Coleridgean formulations into an ultimate critical method, the spatialization of temporal sequence in literature became the object of aesthetic worship. The attachment to myth as human narrative (at the expense of history as an indifferent, inhuman out-there) in a T. S. Eliot or a Cleanth Brooks or—more explicitly for my purposes—in the valorization of “spatial form” by Joseph Frank may be seen as the crowning idolatry of fixed poetic structure in the modernist movement in both poetry and criticism.

As we have seen, the idolatry of the spatial in the theory sponsored by the modernist tradition springs from sources far different from the neoclassical desire, also spatial, for a natural-sign art in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. After all, the discrediting of the natural-sign aesthetic—indeed the very notion of the natural sign—was accomplished during that late eighteenth-century moment, and the modernist certainly would do nothing to restore its credit. As I have sought to show, ever since the work of Edmund Burke and even before, the rejection of the hierarchy among the arts that was based on the hegemony of natural signs led theorists to turn from the limiting precision of visual representation, to turn to the verbal arts as superior to the plastic, and, as this theoretical
direction developed through the nineteenth century, to turn to mu­
sic—the art farthest removed from natural-sign representation for
Addison—as the condition toward which all the arts should aspire.

But literary theorists, however anxious to exploit the auditory
character of the poetic medium, were not about to give up its seman­
tic function. Further, we have seen that aesthetic theory does not
stop with Burke's denial of the natural sign and the celebration of an
unrepetitive temporality: having freed literature from a dependence
on visual precision so that it can explore the wider and less con­
trolled range of reader associations, having allowed literature to
escape spatial fixity in order to indulge temporal expansiveness, the
history of theory, now under the modernist dispensation, reverses
itself under the pressure of the organicist commitment to closure
and encourages literature, still retaining its devotion to time, to be­
come spatial after all. But this return to spatiality is now to be made
on the terms of the verbal arts rather than on those of the visual arts,
in that the spatiality achieved in words is to be a hard-won victory
over the inherent transience of verbal sequence.

The rise of semiotics in our century brought modernist poetics to
their concentration upon language as the seat of poetry's special
powers. This linguistically based version of organic theory trans­
formed the workings of the criticism it sponsors. I have just traced
the use of the organic metaphor in criticism from Aristotle. How­
ever, perhaps because of his exclusive interest in the dramatic imita­
tion of an action as a substitute natural sign (see my Chapter 2,
above), Aristotle's organicism, it must be conceded, was restricted
to interrelations among the parts of the plot, defined by him as the
arrangement of the incidents. Because for Aristotle language, as ma­
terial cause, was relegated to a subsidiary role serving the various
moments of the plot, its only requirement was that it be appropriate
to a prior something else (to a speaking character who, in turn, was
determined by what the action required). Consequently, the lan­
guage of the poem was not given a formative role within the grow­
ing organic entity: it determined nothing else and was determined
by almost everything else. Since it did not participate as a gener­
tive force in the growing organic entity, it had, as it were, a one-way,
mechanistic relationship to those elements that were generative.
And organicism was reserved as a way to describe the relations
among the broadly structural elements of the action alone, as if
these could proceed—in synopsis form—without the language that,
in the work, actually carried them along.
As the nineteenth and twentieth centuries take up the organic metaphor for the poem, they increasingly transform it in order to introduce an active, indeed a primarily active, function for language. For the modernist, language is to have it both ways, sharing the temporality of experience and yet giving it the unity of human comprehension by imposing spatial form upon it. If the natural-sign aesthetic was doomed in part because by the nineteenth century a temporal epistemology, sensitive to history, replaced the spatial ontology of rationalism, modernism returned spatiality to aesthetics only while continuing to recognize experience as irreducibly temporal, thereby holding out to poetry the special task of running along like experience and yet rebounding like a human shape. The conception of time as abandoned to Bergsonian fluidity only heightens the aesthetic achievement that seizes it and then displays what it has seized. And poetry becomes the one place in which that victory over time in time can again and again be represented.

Poetry sits atop the hierarchy of the arts by virtue of this double power, allowing its creator the most formidable of displays precisely because of that which leaves language as the least natural (i.e., most arbitrary and most conventional) of media. The special and two-sided role assigned the language medium in poetry allows it to supervise the paradoxical coexistence of time and space, of the sensible and the intelligible, of mimesis and free-ranging expression. In the now obsolete spectrum of the arts we saw poetry caught between the extremes of the visual arts and music, and facing both ways. The old hierarchy among the arts emerging from such a framework first led to the ut pictura poesis injunction, then started an opposed movement all the way to music in pursuit of the non-mimetic. With modernism the verbal arts ascend to the status of model—in the center and facing both ways, toward the plastic arts and toward music, and absorbing both ends into themselves. Now it is the visual arts that are to ape the semiotic duplicity of the verbal arts (ut poesis pictura), though they can do so only at the cost of distancing

6. The need to emphasize the generative role of language in the creation of poetic form is very likely heightened by the fact that in this period critics are dealing mainly with lyric poems, with the emerging form in each of them seen to be primarily dependent on verbal manipulation. Once the methods of linguistic analysis of the New Criticism were firmly entrenched, efforts were made to extend them to certain kinds of prose fiction as well.

7. This is a far different version of ut poesis pictura from the one I suggested toward the end of Chapter 3, above. That one represented the neoclassicist's attempt to force
themselves the more self-consciously from any attempt to function as natural signs, that is, by accepting their role as sign systems within an aesthetic constructed, according to poetry’s requirements, on a semiotic basis. And abandoning naive mimesis, theorists have increasingly argued for all the arts, including the visual, functioning as linguistic signs requiring interpretation.

For many decades now in the plastic arts, all aesthetic signs have come to be taken as both arbitrary and conventional, as anything but natural, since the natural sign has been abandoned as a possibility for even the few kinds of art for which it might appear to be at least superficially appropriate. Indeed, so-called realistic paintings and sculptures, like so-called realistic dramas, are not exempt from this toppling of any remnant of the authority of mimesis, of the natural-sign dream, even as we might have applied it to the few remaining cases in the arts that might still seem to be obvious candidates. Theorists could point to the formidable work of Gombrich in the history of the visual arts as authorizing their increasing awareness of the need to subordinate any mimetic function of the arts (even in what seemed to be the least problematic of the visual arts) to the conventions governing the way art was both made and perceived. Emphasizing “the beholder’s share” and the role of the visual habits, both optical and cultural, in shaping what that beholder sees, in *Art and Illusion* (1959) Gombrich encourages the reader to attend to the devices, derived from convention, that create what we, as human perceivers within our historically bound cultural habits, see as pattern. Aware of these devices, we will not be deceived by what presents itself to our naive response as if it were a natural sign. Gombrich playfully confronts the Socrates of the *Cratylus*, attacking his support for the mimetic pretensions of the would-be natural sign: one should account for form, Gombrich argues, by relating it to function rather than to the external referent. Hence the Gombrichian motto, Making before Matching.

Even paintings produced within consciously realistic movements, such as the seventeenth-century Dutch, indeed, the very still-life

seventeenth- and eighteenth-century narrative painting, by means of the *punctum temporis*, into the static doctrine that had already captured poetry. Here I am suggesting the reverse as a consequence of the modernist aesthetic: that the semiotic notion of art as a language system, most obviously seen operating in poetry, be applied—on the poetic model—to the sister arts as well.

genre itself, can be seen as forcing us to sense the fact that they are paintings, representations that create the illusion of their apparent objects through the manipulation of alien, quite unrelated materials, artificial materials. Unless we are taken in and subject ourselves to a delusion promulgated by the myth of the natural sign, the paintings are to be perceived as self-referential demonstrations of the illusionary powers arising from the workings of the painterly medium, rather than to be accepted as transparent imitations of—or, worse, substitutes for—an apparently identical, or at least matching, "reality." This "reality," with which the natural-sign painting is supposed to have a one-to-one relation, cannot be asserted to have been there to check the painting’s "accuracy," since the reality we see has been created for the viewer by the painting, that compound of canvas and pigment whose clues have worked with the viewer's eye and the viewer's previous experience to create what is now serving as the viewer's illusionary "reality."

As I tried to show in Chapter 3, the trompe l’oeil is the case a fortiori for the would-be natural sign: a representation so transparent that we are presumably to mistake it for a piece of reality; but the Gombrichian perspective can be seen as reversing the function of even so manifest an instance of realism. Instead of actually being fooled, as birds were said to be by Zeuxis, we are to see that we could almost be fooled by so artful a manipulation of painterly devices that demonstrate their illusionary power, though not by altogether fooling our never totally "innocent eye." Because we are not birds but rather are attuned to the conventional nature of the medium, we do not take it as an unqualifiedly natural sign—as a representation so transparent that we mistake it for reality, as not art at all—but instead respond to the trompe l’oeil as a demonstration of total artifice, as an ultimate display of the un-real character of illusion, an illusion that threatens to become a delusion but always remains only on the verge.

As Chapter 2, above, should have amply revealed, the application of this turnabout to the theater is obvious, since from this perspective we can view "realistic" drama—or even more what today might be called a "happening"—as a continual and moving trompe l’oeil only for the hypothetically innocent spectators (human "birds"),

9. I would prefer here the more strongly self-contradictory French nature morte, though both the English phrase and the French emphasize the oxymoron they contain.
who, unaware of dramatic convention, might be free to mistake art for life, to mistake the constructed play for a series of living incidents they have happened upon. But as in the case of the would-be natural-sign response to apparently literal representation in the visual arts, the perspective that theorists like Gombrich awakened in us has alerted us to the self-conscious theatricality that, in conventionalizing the illusionary natural sign, should disrupt and complicate the natural-sign response to even the most "realistic" of dramas. As we see in the trompe l'œil tendency of each "realistic" painting or drama, no agent of disruption is more effective than the self-reference that hides within even the most apparently lifelike representation.

Once the breakthrough occurs that transforms our response so that it addresses self-conscious art rather than natural-sign innocence, then, too, in our experience of even the most apparently static of paintings, time intrudes upon space, Lessing to the contrary notwithstanding. Gombrich once again takes the lead in justifying this invasion in his "Moment and Movement in Art" (1964), in which he shows how the punctum temporis (see Chapter 3, above) is violated by the observer's narrative propensity to impose movement on it. We are moving toward a semiotic—and hence a verbal—model, in which time invades space in the arts Lessing treated as spatial no less than space invades time in the arts Lessing treated as temporal.

Rosalie Colie extends this notion in "Still Life: Paradoxes of Being," a central chapter in her Paradoxia Epidemica (1966), which is deeply indebted to Gombrich's seminal essay, "Tradition and Expression in Western Still Life." Her chapter builds on the space-time, stasis-motion paradox inherent in the phrase "still life," which she relates to my oxymoron "still movement," from my original essay on ekphrasis (see the Appendix). The chapter begins by describ-


ing in imaginative detail a still-life painting in which the objects statically disposed to be imitated are represented as being so delicately transient (thin, transparent, even "partly consumed") that they are seen as only momentarily present: "They seem only barely there, only barely real" (p. 273). The artist wants us to see them as evanescent, as illusions only. In Protestant northern Europe, with its asceticism, the "representation of the transient" is a memento mori, a reminder of the illusory, flimsy, and ultimately unreal character of the things of this fading world in the face of death's eternity (p. 275). No wonder the painting that represented such things was called a vanitas, deceiving the senses as reminders of the deception produced by the vain objects themselves, especially when juxtaposed to the death's head. The static representation, so fixedly out there, is belied by the transitory nature of the material objects of this vanishing realm. Time gives the lie to this vain attempt to stop it, this vain attempt to give it permanence by fixing it in the painting. As an object concerned exclusively with the realm of appearance, then, the painting, a material thing composed only of empty representations—optical illusions—becomes an allegory of the deceptions of the material world represented by the material things it is imitating.

Colie is thus suggesting a daring—even reckless—universalizing and thematizing of this claim. All artists, having become skeptical epistemologists persuaded by their art of the illusionary character of reality, foster the illusionary tendencies of their paintings as self-contradicting objects. "The illusionism that all still-life painters strive to achieve brings to a focus the illusion of all painting and all art" (p. 273) and, by implication, of all material reality too—just the universal theme of seventeenth-century Platonism. A way of reading paintings, and literary works as well, becomes the authority for sanctioning a single metaphysical and moral judgment aimed at the illusionary character of the material—and the materialistic—world: "All pictures are, somehow, vanitates; all pictures demonstrate, not just the weakness and deceits of our senses, but also the relative meaninglessness of things" (p. 298). "Things point to the meaninglessness sub specie aeternitatis; being alive is a memento mori" (p. 291). Here, in this modernist move to substantialize an interpretive method dedicated to the ubiquity of aesthetic illusionism, there is a puritanical discomfort that reveals the striking persistence of Platonic moralism.

Colie's generalization also expands her claims beyond the illusionary plastic arts to the illusionary verbal arts by turning from exam-
ples from painting to examples from drama. She thus reminds us of Cleopatra’s subtle and strangely prophetic acknowledgment in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* that her role centuries later is to be acted—as before our eyes it is indeed being acted, and the very lines being spoken—by a boy: “And I shall see / Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness / In the posture of a whore” (V.i.219–21). “The playwright’s grasp upon his craft was tight enough to permit the risk of breaking the illusion,” of breaking into “self-reference,” just as “the illusionism involved in the still life risks the painter’s art by drawing attention to the artifice” (pp. 273, 362). Once again, as in the history of natural-sign theory and the history of the rejection of natural-sign theory, the would-be realistic visual arts and the drama are linked, this time by the self-referential devices that, in turning them inward, cut their ties to their references.

In this chapter and in a later chapter, “Problems of Self-Reference,” Colie pursues the self-referential habit of the aesthetic object that has art “drawing attention to the artifice.” As one might expect, she is especially interested in the role of the mirror in paintings and comes to concentrate on involute works such as Jan van Eyck’s wedding portrait of Arnolfini and his wife (with its specially reflective mirror in which the artist appears in front of the couple) and, inevitably, that other painting with a famous, problematic mirror, Velasquez’s *Las Meniñas*, a painting that appears to represent its own act of being painted. 12 Such paintings, she tells us, leave us balancing between what are simultaneously “two points of view” (pp. 358–59). It is what Gombrich, referring to Escher as well, calls “visual deadlock,” the painterly analogue to the self-contradictory verbal pun. 13 When she transfers her insights to the verbal arts, Colie focuses upon the use of mirrors or mirrorlike elements first in drama, then also in other literary genres, particularly the lyric. In all these she


13. Gombrich himself uses the phrase “visual pun” as synonymous with “visual deadlock” and “visual paradox.” All of them are attempts to describe perceptual “stalemate.” “the hidden complexity of all picture reading” (see his *Illusion and Visual Deadlock,* in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, pp. 153–56).
finds a similar and insistent reflexivity, which is to remind us of the make-believe illusion that is both art and art's reflection of an equally illusionary material world.

Her interpretive method traces the circularity—indeed, celebrates the vortical principle—of works that continually turn back on themselves, confessing themselves only art and not the actual things. But the method has from the outset been thematized in the metaphysical and moral implications of her appeal to illusion, which ends by suggesting a justification for art. It suggests that all worldly existence is to be seen as delusion, leading us astray, except for the conscious self-referentiality of the work of art: the work's confession that its illusion (in the sense I attributed to Johnson in Chapter 2) reveals itself to us as a self-conscious version of delusion that can serve as our metaphysical beacon through these shadows and snares. In reminding us of its own status as illusion, as soothsayer of our universe, the work of art may be the only thing we can trust, even as it self-consciously retreats before itself. The credibility of Colie's interpretive method, unfortunately, may have to rest on the ontological justness of her claims, and yet, as an aesthetic, it reaches out to proclaim the evidence that argues for them. As we will see, those who follow the modernists worry about so primary a role being assigned the aesthetic, about its arrogating to itself nothing less than universal cognition—about, in short, its aestheticization of the world of knowledge and action.

The ultimate paradox of the modernist commitment to the poem as a "work of art" arises from its confidence that however self-contradictory its ontological status, in its very airiness it is the one sure thing, indeed a solid, reified "body"—there's that word again—in a world that otherwise falls, or ought to fall, away. It is also the one sure thing that the commentator can talk about with precision, so that the critic as analyst-interpreter becomes a major guide for us all. Hence our sense of the object as a spatial out-there, as having its place, was a necessary assumption, despite the fact that we were dealing with a sequence of words, which—as we learned after the fading of our neoclassical overconfidence in their visual power—have neither an immediate physical reality nor even a claim to carrying us with transparency to a mediate physical reality. This renewed commitment to the spatial in modernist theory, I have more than once observed, refers to a very different version of the spatial from that which is related in any way either to natural signs or to picture-making. Instead, in a manner that resembles Renaissance emblema-
tics rather than neoclassical pictorialism, for the modernist aesthetic it is the "body of the poem" itself that claims spatial character. The metaphor of "body," for all its incarnational implications, is taken almost literally and, for this reason, is revealed as another modernist method that thematizes itself. It is worth examining in detail how it does so, since this transforming of a poetics into a subliminal metaphysics is what postmoderns find to be the danger of attributing an independent power to the aesthetic.

As I anticipated in Chapter 6, the spatial is now to be achieved by a transformative use of language as a poetic medium that takes arbitrary signs and literally changes their nature in spite of their prepoetic tendencies, freezing them into a spatial fix, making them into their own emblem, though hardly a picturable one. So the spatial is no longer defined by way of the visual so much as by way of the material, as taking up its own place: the art object, as spatial, is now to lead, not elsewhere to a something seen, but to its own naturelike organic thinghood, rooted in its own integrity. In my examination of Burckhardt's claims for the verbal medium in Chapter 6, I traced the process by which words in poems were to take on a substantive "nature," turning from the arbitrary and conventional to the inevitable and indispensable. Such a change in their function calls for a description that introduces metaphors that treat words as if they were bodies, that treat them as living things, occupying spaces that grow into a pattern, instead of as passing, empty sounds in an endless string coming before and going after. If the sound of words, as poetry's sensible element, has no meaning when the poet picks them up, he is to work it into giving us a special access to meaning before he is finished with them. The trick, as we saw Burckhardt advise, is to take those arbitrary sounds and, through aural or graphic devices, to tie them down, to give them a material character, to force them, despite their accidental character, to take on substantive consequences.

For this theoretical tradition, the aesthetic illusion of the poem's materiality is not, as in theology, a matter of faith but has been constructed by what the poet succeeds in making the medium perform for us. The aesthetic thus becomes the way that modernist theory allows for the secular, textually "earned" equivalent of a semiotic formed out of the Christian mystery: the equivalent of the incarnation, of the "corporealizing" of language, the substantiating of words—allowing them to take on flesh—before a readership whose semiotic habits have been formed by the workings of that mysteri-
ous divine-human paradox in its culture. It is indeed a final carrying out of Matthew Arnold's call for a literature that is a substitute for a defunct religion, a literature that can give us the psychological lift without requiring the price of a faith that cannot withstand the assaults of modern scientifically induced skepticism. Yet, however unmetaphysical a theorist such as Burckhardt may mean his poetics of corporeality to be, the desire to have poets endow the word with "body" (by my earlier use of the word "flesh," I have already revealed the metaphor for what it is) does reflect the persistence of Christian semiotic in the tradition after Coleridge, for whom, we must remember, the term "symbol"—a major source of modernism's "symbol"—derives from his need to find an interpretive method for the Bible. Nor, as I feel the sequel will amply demonstrate, can this tradition altogether cut itself off from its theological source in its attempt to find an independent secular method.

The coupling of the dynamics of a flowing sequence and the capturing of it within a form, though an always responsive and yielding form, is consistent with the advocacy of the emblematic in poetry, with the call for the poetic "symbol." It is an appeal to poetically empowered words to turn substantive and to hold within themselves the moving world of words and references that are recreated into their text. This paradoxical fusion of historical time and metaphysical space within the word springs from the dependence of organicist poetics upon the form, if not the substance, of the primary Christian metaphor. Its central divine-human paradox in the figure of Christ represents both the impossible union of our chronological time with heaven's eternal now and, when projected into the realm of language, the transfiguration of many running words into the Word. Modernism attempts to secularize this paradox into the poetic metaphor that, from romantic theory on, becomes both symbol and emblem, the device that creates a magical mode of lan-


15. See chaps. 1 and 2 of my *A Reopening of Closure*. In the first chapter I examine the semiotic of the Renaissance love lyric as a secularization of the Christian semiotic, and in the second I deal with Coleridgean and later organicism as a development of this metaphorical habit that has grown out of what I term the "typological imagination."
guage behavior, containing the moving world (and world of words) within a specially created verbal form. For all its inventiveness, the poetic imagination is thus a secular projection of what, after Renaissance practice, I have called the typological imagination.

Adapting the Bergsonian paradox about temporality, the theorist seeks to maintain both the sequence of words (linguistic analogue to the moving sequence of existential moments) and the formal capturing of this sequence in its consummate verbal form (linguistic analogue to life's epiphanic moment, what I term elsewhere an "eschatological punctuation" upon historical sequence).¹⁶ Mutually exclusive as these two may seem, they must paradoxically coexist: the moment must be grasped and sustained as its own space, but without forgoing the sequence of moments, so that, instead, it provides an all-enclosing home for that sequence even as the latter still wanders into the darkness of an ever-unwinding future. The dependence of this paradox in organicist aesthetics upon the two-in-one paradox of the primal Christian metaphor is persistent and, alas, too often uncritical. It accounts, in criticism that follows this line, for the frequency of terms associated with body, corporeality, incarnation—the word made flesh (as Word). Armed with this borrowed metaphor, this criticism moves, with its mystifying appeal to the verbal miracle, beyond the alternatives of monism and dualism—and even beyond a continuing tension between the two—to an insistence on sustaining them, despite their mutual exclusivity, as a both/and.

As just one example, quite late in this theoretical tradition, while it is quite secure in its claim to authority, we find one of the more explicit references to this metaphor, which ties secular criticism to at least the form of theological metaphor, in the culminating resolution that W. K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks pronounce to their ambitious history of criticism. Their rejection of the two disjunctive alternatives, as well as of a sustained tension between them, follows the model I have just described.

The writers of the present history have not been concerned to implicate literary theory with any kind of religious doctrine. It appears to us, however, relevant, as we near our conclusion, at least to confess an opinion

that the kind of literary theory which seems to us to emerge the most plausibly from the long history of the debates is far more difficult to orient within any of the Platonic or Gnostic ideal world views, or within the Manichaean full dualism and strife of principles, than precisely within the vision of suffering, the optimism, the mystery which are embraced in the religious dogma of the Incarnation.17

The Renaissance way of moving toward the verbal emblem in theory (see Chapter 5, above), like its contemporary borrowing of theological metaphors to accommodate the miracles of courtly love, had long before established a useful precedent for organic theory.18 And Coleridge, picking it up in order to define his poet as a godlike wielder of the I AM, clearly derived his most influential claims for the mastery of experience and language by poetic form from the hermeneutic demands of the Book of books, the Bible.19 As he turns to poetry he retains his concern for infusing language with substance, modeling the semiotic of poetry after that of the sacred Word: he seeks mental faculties and linguistic means that will allow the poet-creator to make words "esemplastic" or "coadunative" (to cite only two of his unfortunate neologisms desperately invented as descriptions of that mysterious process by which the poet must use words to make many into one, to achieve "unity in multeity"). In retaining the form of the Christian metaphor as its model, the Coleridgean aesthetic sets its modernist followers on a path that ties their aesthetic to a metaphorical formula that must threaten to carry its own doctrinal thematization (as the formula for a Christian semiotic) within it.

The modernist aesthetic has many ways of asserting the unifying character of poetic form as it acts upon both existential temporality and the flow of words. But these too can be seen as thematizing their aesthetic claims through a semiotic that may be seen as borrowing its form from the Christian metaphor. As an ultimate modernist, Patrick AE. Hutchings reconstructs a poetics that is an emblematics, collapsing time within a verbal form, by appealing to Coleridge's precedent. From chapter 15 of the Biographia Literaria he quotes as an

18. Once again I call attention to A Reopening of Closure; see esp. chap. 1, "The Figure in the Renaissance Poem as Bound and Unbounded."
19. I am referring to Coleridge's influential definitions of "symbol" and "allegory," with the former clearly reserved by Coleridge for the highest poetry (see n. 14, above). This distinction, from The Statesman's Manual, occurs during Coleridge's discussion of biblical interpretation.
epigraph to one of his essays, "Images become proofs of original genius . . . when they have the effect of reducing multitude to unity, or succession to an instant." The title of this essay, "Imagination: 'as the Sun paints in the camera obscura,'" refers to a passage in which Coleridge uses the activity of the camera obscura, its contraction of light into a visual image, as a metaphor to describe the instantaneity of the poetic imagination. In the body of the essay Hutchings quotes the sentence in which Coleridge calls for poetry to display the sort of verbal "painting" that is not an attempted reproduction of the visual object by the fancy but an imaginative creation, "'with such co-presence of the whole picture flashed at once upon the eye, as the sun paints in a camera obscura.'"

Hutchings consistently seeks, in opposition to Lessing and as an echo of the voices of Diderot and Herder, to claim for the poem the power to "escape the serial nature of its medium" by forcing the reader to apprehend it at an instant—tout à coup. He cites the precedent of Herder, who, in his argument with Lessing, argues that the poem "works in space, so that it makes its whole speech sensuous." It is also true that since it is speech, "'it works in time'" and thus shares the temporal succession of words and ideas with other kinds of speech; but it is distinguished as poetry because we perceive it spatially as a "'whole, which is expressed little by little by its parts'" ("'the whole that it constructs through time'). This whole, for Hutchings as for Herder, is the meaning that we grasp from the ver-


22. Hutchings, "Meaning and Simultaneity in Poetry," Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association, Proceedings and Papers of the Tenth Congress (Christchurch, New Zealand, 1966), p. 205. Also on this page: "There is a categorical difference between the signs, serial and temporal, and the meaning of these signs, which is in some sense a-temporal." And later (p. 209): "What we read are words in a serial order: but what we understand is something which, though it may dawn on us progressively as we read, is not itself essentially a thing of parts which follow parts. Neither the meaning, nor the meaning of the meaning are 'objects which succeed, or the parts of which succeed to each other.'" For a much earlier version of such statements see the quotation from Diderot below.

23. Quoted by Hutchings in "Imagination," p. 64. This is one of the passages in Herder that I discuss in Chapter 6, above. See Herders Werke, ed. Theodor Matthias,
bal sequence, which we grasp in a flash. Hence Hutchings's principle: "It takes time to say but not to mean" (p. 65). The sequence of instants that is the text—if it is a proper imaginative whole as Coleridge would have it—collapses into our grasping it all at once.

Hutchings could as usefully have quoted Diderot's earlier argument on behalf of the instantaneity of our mental response that transcends and unites the sequence of words:

The state of mind, in an indivisible instant, was represented by a mass of terms that the precision of language required, and that distributed a total impression among several parts; and because these terms were pronounced successively and were only understood in the order in which they were pronounced, one was led to believe that the feelings of the mind that they represented had the same succession. But that is not at all the case. The state of our mind is one thing, the account we render of it, whether to ourselves or to others, is another; the complete and instantaneous feeling of this state is one thing, the successive attention . . . that we are forced to give to it to make ourselves understood is another. Our mind is a moving tableau . . . : we spend much time rendering it with fidelity, but it exists in its entirety, all at one time: the imagination does not proceed step by step as verbal expression does.24

Here indeed is precedent for Hutchings's motto, It takes time to say but not to mean.

This concept may remind us also of the interest of eighteenth-century critics of painting or sculpture in the punctum temporis, which I discussed toward the close of Chapter 3.25 But their "point of time" was to be a single isolable instant that any spatial art had to

24. Diderot, Lettre sur les sourds et muets à l'usage de ceux qui entendent et qui parlent, in Œuvres complètes de Diderot, ed. J. Assézat, vol. 1 (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1875), p. 369; the translation is mine. Diderot's argument for instantaneity in the midst of temporal succession is related to the function he assigns to the "hieroglyph" (see my discussion in Chapter 6) in fulfilling the mission of the poem to interrupt what, in discourse other than poetic, is for him the mere flow of words as intelligible signs.

25. I remind the reader of Gombrich's key discussion of the punctum temporis in his "Moment and Movement in Art." As I pointed out earlier in the present chapter, Gombrich, speaking of painting, disputes the punctum temporis by insisting that it cannot prevent the intrusion upon it of the temporal by the observer's narrative imagination. Hutchings, speaking of poetry, is making the opposite point: that the tem-
extrapolate out of a sequence of such instants in a narrative in order to represent it. Given a series of still frames, each changing just a bit, so that together they make up a picture in motion, the eighteenth-century artist devoted to the punctum temporis must choose the one frame that, at the apex of the line of probabilities, can freeze the action most significantly. That artist, acting as a good empiricist who sees experience as a sequence of perceptible snapshots, is claiming to find that one crucial frame in the series, pick it out, and project it. On the other hand, the instant designated by Hutchings, as non-empiricist, is not one pulled from the flow of instants but the one by means of which the perceiving mind, without stopping the flow, collapses all into one. It is the one instant in which a totality of meaning is grasped as "some indefinite specious present" (p. 65). In his subsequent discussion here and in his companion essay, Hutchings makes it clear that this is an instant which is, as a tout à coup instant, out of time.26

It is this concept of the moment that is outside the temporal sequence yet somehow contains it all that leads Hutchings to call upon the Christian figuralism that projects a miraculous simultaneity between the moment in a historical sequence and the eternal moment out of time. He thus turns to Eliot's Four Quartets, which for him is the poem that makes his claim by in itself being the embodiment of that claim: the poem says it by enacting it. From the epigraph to his essay onward, Hutchings relates his comments on the Quartets to my own earlier discussion of "the still movement of poetry," a discussion largely dependent on my study of the Quartets (as well as Keats's "Grecian Urn") that develops the paradoxical relationship between stillness and movement in the way poems—at least ekphrastic poems—function.27 The Quartets permits Hutchings to move, as Eliot does, from the capture of movement by stillness in the language of poems to the existential and metaphysical—that is, the thematic—extensions of this temporal paradox.

The Four Quartets serves Hutchings, as it served me in the essay

27. I am referring (after Hutchings) to my essay "Ekphrasis and the Still Movement of Poetry; or Laokoon Revisited" (see the Appendix). The Hutchings essay I am referring to is "'Words After Speech.'" The quotation from the Four Quartets that serves as my epigraph to the present chapter is a central passage for Hutchings's discussion.
that helped to prompt his, as more than an example: the poem is an extended, moving argument for the intersection of time and the timeless, of the historical and the eschatological, in the miraculous transformation of the human story under the Christian dispensation, which is analogous to the similarly miraculous transformation of the verbal sequence by the inspired poet. The endless movement of words within a timeless pattern that still preserves their movement is a semiotic reflection of the sequence of our existential moments within the eternal presence of the Christian meta-narrative.

"Except for the point, the still point, / There would be no dance, and there is only the dance" ("Burnt Norton"). For Eliot the "dance" is at once a dance of the language of the poem and the dance of life, both all still form and yet all movement. As if explicating the symbol of the ouroboros, the reflexive meta-narrative conceives of time both as running out, each uncapturable moment succeeded by the next, and as redeemed, the redemption turning time back on itself, changing the graphic figure for time from line to circle. Whether we are speaking of time's moments or their semiotic echoes in the poem's words, the circle is the ideal emblem of that doubleness, since in its completeness it represents an ultimate closure and in its rotating it represents an endless motion to escape stasis. There are no points on a circle, so that any point we try arbitrarily to impose upon it is never at rest but, dissolving into its companions, seems always to be running from itself, though only as part of the process of making the circle complete—as Donne puts it, of making one's circle "just." In this conception, time's moments are in ceaseless flight, as, inescapably, they retrace the circle by coming around (dust to dust). Hence the opening and closing words of Eliot's "East Coker": "In the beginning is my end.... In my end is my beginning." Hence also the closing verse paragraph of the Quartets in "Little Gidding":

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

Eliot captures the divine-human paradox of time as both still and moving, indeed as still moving, in his figure of the wheel, from the circular movement of its hub to the repetitive cycles of its rim. It is the ever-turning wheel of human history, which is tied to the "still point" of the wheel's hub by God's saints, who, like Christ, share the human and divine worlds and the concept of time appropriate to each. The world on the rim, for all the illusion of its forward motion, moves round and round like the repetition of the seasons traced in the *Four Quartets*, finding the meaning of their paradoxical motion in their relationship to the center that holds them, but only by means of those saints, like Thomas Becket, who tie them to the center, that still, turning (still turning) point. The two worlds, then, with their respective concepts of time, are so linked that every moment is doubled—even self-contradictorily doubled—in its meaning.29 Thus the Christian Easter is both one day in the disappearing year and an always recurring event in the transcendent present: "That the pattern may subsist, for the pattern is the action / And the suffering, that the wheel may turn and still / Be forever still" (*Murder in the Cathedral*, pt. 1). What is true of the lived moment of the saint's life can also be true of the written word of a text, or for that matter, of the text itself in its relation to the divine Master Text. Thus, through the figure of Becket, the many lines of transferred text—especially those that carry further the figure of the wheel of time that authorizes Becket's dual role as man and saint—link *Murder in the Cathedral* to *Four Quartets*, which becomes its meta-text, reflecting back on the play and giving new meanings to the gleanings from the play that it contains.

In such modernist commentary as Hutchings's, the formal is being treated as just the other side of, if not actually one with, the thematic. How, apart from a Christian semiotic, does a running verbal sequence get "redeemed"? We consistently find, in the modernist-formalist, a redemption for the word in a text's echoes, juxtapositions, foreshadowings, and returns, which together constitute what Joseph Frank will term "spatial form," ostensibly unrelated to the-

29. One may be reminded of a parallel doubleness, much earlier in Eliot's career as critic, in the theory of history that he introduces in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," where he develops a relationship between the unrolling sequence of literary works and the sudden emergence of the masterpiece that transforms the past as well as the future: "What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it" (*Selected Essays* [New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950], p. 5).
ological doctrine. But the role of Eliot’s work in the development of modernist criticism suggests otherwise. Can these metaphors that seek to account for a moving text returning upon itself, circularizing its linear movement, become persuasive without a notion that permits a claim for the redemption of time, a notion that, because it cannot escape its theological source, firmly ties down the formal to a universal thematic?

This poetic, then, seems to require sustenance by the model provided by Christian orthodoxy, so that its claims for the behavior of words in the texts it reads may require support from a Master Text whose mysteries can be earned only by faith, a faith not easily transferred from the religious to the poetic except by the faithful. Clearly, in Hutchings as in Eliot, the paradoxical coincidence of time and the timeless—of time spent and time redeemed—in verbal representation is a pattern that is dependent on the theological formula. The aesthetic thus may not be much more self-sustaining in this version of modernism than we saw it in the Renaissance, although many critics after Eliot, closer in humanistic spirit to the Arnoldian impulse to secularize the religious, try to drop the theological substance even as they maintain the model. Nevertheless, as we shall see in Chapter 8, their antagonists have reason for their concern that there is at least a quasi-theological mystification—and implicitly a reactionary political agenda—at the base of the verbal miracles proclaimed for poetry by high modernism. I have dwelled on Hutchings here because in him, especially when he uses Eliot as his meta-text, the easily traced relationship between the poetic and the theological, as regards both existential time and textual time, instructs me when I turn to critics who are less explicit about such a relationship, probably because they are less aware of a connection they would prefer to avoid.

Central to the modernist’s emblematic quest is the desire to transform history into myth, a myth whose verbal symbols, like Christianity’s, are filled with presence. And as we saw in the appeal to the Christian metaphor in the passage I quoted from Wimsatt and Brooks earlier in this chapter, the New Criticism, as the ultimate rationalization of modernist poetic practice, required the transformation of history into mythic (i.e., for them, poetic) form to build the “well wrought urn” as their critical emblem.30 Again there is the

30. I am speaking, of course, of Donne’s “well wrought urn” (in “The Canonization”), which Brooks made his own.
need to complement the linear with the circle of eternal return. Other mythic structures sometimes served as well as the Christian: one only need think of the mythification of history in a meta-poem such as Yeats’s *A Vision* or at many points in the work of Stevens. The poetic transformation and redemption of the merely sequential in event or in text is a constant objective, and the pressure toward secular transubstantiation retains suggestions of Christian parallels.

As a young, sympathetic companion to this effort, Joseph Frank, strongly influenced by Eliot, sought to produce a justification as well as a philosophical genealogy for a poetics of “spatial form.” His definition of modernism—as art that favors spatial juxtaposition over temporal succession, the formalistic over the historical—is drawn largely from Wilhelm Worringer’s grouping of periods by their emphasizing flatness or depth in art, from Mircea Eliade’s conception of “sacred time” as made spatial through the ritual recurrence of moments that redeems them and sets them apart, and from Ezra Pound’s definition of the image (to which Hutchings’s formulation may be indebted) as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.”

I find few examples that demonstrate as clearly as Frank does the critic’s, and especially the modernist critic’s, habit of adapting metaphorically (and uncritically) for the verbal arts terms that are used literally in formalist criticism of the visual arts. Frank’s discussion of what he claims to be the spatial character of literary form in modernist literature—“word groups [that] must be juxtaposed with one another and perceived simultaneously,” or a poem that “dissolves sequence” and “the inherent consecutiveness of language”—moves easily, too easily, into

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31. The quotation from Pound appears in Joseph Frank, *The Widenin Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), p. 9. These influential essays on “Spatial Form in Modern Literature” originally appeared in 1945. Although Frank has written later both to defend and modify his views on the subject, it is these early essays that, in the reckless extremity of their claims, help us appreciate the modernist critic’s spatial bias in trying to collapse verbal sequence into formal structure. The rest of my comments on Frank are drawn from this group of essays.

32. In “Spatial Form in Literature: Toward a General Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 6 (1980): 539–07, W. J. T. Mitchell explores the complications of the notion of spatial form and the unfortunate reduction implied in the simple opposition of time and space in the rhetoric of criticism. He rejects any exclusive claim to temporality that is unaware of the intrusion of spatial elements, as well as the reverse claim. He raises a series of important questions to pursue those complications. I hope my efforts in this volume go some way toward answering those questions.
the thematic spatializing of history in such works: works like *The Waste Land*, *Ulysses*, and the *Cantos*, which "maintain a continual juxtaposition between aspects of the past and present" (pp. 15, 10, 12).

Frank's key notions, the juxtaposition of represented elements and the simultaneity of perception, are borrowed from Lessing, who, using them literally, reserved them for the spatial arts and thus denied them to the verbal arts. In rejecting Lessing's distinction while borrowing his notions—and even, in the case of "juxtaposition" and "simultaneity," his terms—Frank hopes that they can be made to exert enough figurative force for him to apply them to the temporal art of literature. His call for the "juxtaposition of word groups" in modernist writing may begin only as a metaphor for the spatial (because, as Lessing has told us, a text is in fact not a canvas and can only be read word by word, page by page), but it comes to be literalized, in transforming not only the temporality of our reading experience but the very representation of time itself: verbal juxtapositions slip into temporal juxtapositions that undo actual chronology. Following Eliade, Frank moves from the formal to the explicitly metaphysical, from the dissolution of verbal sequence to the mythic dissolution of history:

By this juxtaposition of past and present . . . history becomes ahistorical. Time is no longer felt as an objective, causal progression with clearly marked-out differences between periods; now it has become a continuum in which distinctions between past and present are wiped out . . . .

Past and present are apprehended spatially, locked in a timeless unity that, while it may accentuate surface differences, eliminates any feeling of sequence by the very act of juxtaposition . . . . What has occurred, at least so far as literature is concerned, may be described as the transformation of the historical imagination into myth—an imagination for which historical time does not exist, and which sees the actions and events of a particular time only as the bodying forth of eternal prototypes. (Pp. 59-60)

This language, in moving into the thematic, still reverberates with the absorption of time into the timeless that has been embedded in the Western structure of figuration at least since the late Christian

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33. Even the criticism of Wordsworth, hardly an ideal poet for the modernist, was affected by the spatializing of the temporal, so that there was for a time considerable emphasis on the "spots of time," as well as the "genius loci," used by Wordsworth to collapse temporal distances (see esp. Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964]).
Middle Ages. And as elsewhere, its habit of metaphysical projection has been hard to resist. Indeed, in the timelessness proposed by Frank we find little of the paradoxical dynamics of circularity, with its still movement, that I have observed in Eliot.

Cleanth Brooks, in his study of one of our great ekphrastic poems, the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," makes a similar claim about the transcendence of history (as mere facticity) by the mythopoeic. The title of his essay, "Keats's Sylvan Historian: History Without Footnotes," anticipates the modernist argument. It enables him to explain the urn's lack of interest in answering the factual questions being asked about the figures represented on it and their actions: "Mere accumulations of facts . . . are meaningless. The sylvan historian [the urn] does better than that: it takes a few details and so orders them that we have not only beauty but insight into essential truth. Its 'history,' in short, is a history without footnotes. It has the validity of myth—not myth as a pretty but irrelevant make-belief, an idle fancy, but myth as a valid perception into reality" (p. 151).

Now such an ontological claim is a good deal for critics like Frank and Brooks to make. They may begin, apparently as freestanding modernist critics with a formalist bias, by turning poems into spatial entities whose form triumphs over sequence, changing befores and afters into the simultaneity of juxtaposition. They can perform such analysis only by means of a controlled parade of modulations, repetitions, and echoes, all of which, through a loose metaphor, are pressed to serve them as temporal equivalents of juxtaposition, as if juxtaposition could have a temporal equivalent. But as they betray the metaphysical grounding of such claims that would freeze the temporal into the spatial, they bring even their strictly formalist practices under the suspicion that they rest on a prior thematic commitment. In retrospect we can see that they present an obvious target for the theoretical demystifiers who follow. In the modernist moment, then, there returns to the poetic word the renewed attempt to earn for it the status of verbal emblem, of the letter as substantive. Unlike the formulation of the verbal emblem in the Renaissance, however, the modernist formulation relies on an appeal not (at least not ostensibly) to the mysteries of Christian Neo-Platonism but to the craft of the poet, who struggles with a medium—at once aural, graphic, and both referential and self-referential—to allow it

to achieve dimensions that will persuade us to set the poem and its complex workings apart from other discourse. In Chapter 6 we saw these strange labors and their marvelous products most tellingly set forth for us by Burckhardt, as we will see them condescendingly denied by the postmodern skepticism we will meet in my final chapter.

It is hard to see how even those of us who would like to see such claims made believe they can be made metaphysics-free. Yet for all the smuggled metaphysics that thematizes the modernist critical method, let us concede that it can often allow a winning, impressive, and persuasive account of what it wants to find going on in many poems—those splendid works, most of them of high estate in a limited elitist canon—that the modernist method has with least strain accommodated to its extraordinary analytical instruments. We should not lightly dismiss such profitable and pleasurable accomplishments as we wrestle with the cost of having them, or the cost of abandoning them.

Critics must have the substantive notion of the poem as body to make good their attempt to turn the poem into emblem, Renaissance or modern. The emblem is the ultimate ekphrasis, as natural-sign mimesis—even of works of the visual arts—was not. In the ekphrastic emblem what is to be imitated is not just an object external to the poem, as the individual work of sculpture or the painting was the object of imitation for the ekphrasis in the most literal use of that term, with which I began. What is rather to be imitated is the status of the sculpture or painting as a physical art object. That status is achieved for the poem by its making a claim to an integrity like that of an object created by the plastic arts, an integrity marked by the wholeness of that spatial character which results from the exploitation of a sensuous (or an illusionarily sensuous) medium. The poem, then, would, if it could, imitate the spatial object by being one too.

Thus, so long as the merely figurative sense of this concept is acknowledged, this theoretical tradition can redefine the proper ekphrasis—conceived as verbal emblem, whether Renaissance or modernist—as the poem that imitates the completeness of form of its visual object of imitation by seeking its own form, indeed by shaping itself as a similar form. Tracing it back to the ouroboros, I have already indicated how, with its potential for paradox, the circle is made to serve this tradition as the most likely shape both for the object of imitation and for the form of the poem that uses it for its theme and its own shape. Since probably no shape so clearly as a circle represents the closure of form that the modernist seeks, it be-
comes a major formal principle for modernist criticism. On the thematic side I have already emphasized—in Eliot's beginnings and endings, in Frank's adaptation of Eliade to texts and history, in Brooks's commentary on the round surface of the urn—the idea of the circle of eternal return that controls their conversion of chronological time into mythic time. (With Yeats we could retain a circular shape so long as we changed the circle into a spiral, thereby once again combining progressive movement with eternal recurrence.) And we have seen, especially in Colie, that self-reference, in its reflexive turnings, leads to a circularity of form that has illusion multiply itself into a disappearing vortex.

The special relation between ekphrasis and the circular figure (literal in the form of spatial objects, metaphorical in the form of verbal objects) is emphasized in Leo Spitzer's seminal essay, which I have leaned upon from the very beginning of my efforts in this book. Speaking of Keats's "Urn," Spitzer observes that the structure of the poem imitates the urn's shape: "The poet describes an urn . . . bearing in typically Greek fashion a circular 'leaf-fring'd' frieze (and it is, I submit, mainly for that reason that the poem is circular or 'perfectly symmetrical' . . . thereby reproducing symbolically the form of the objet d'art which is its model)." The balance of the paragraph follows the stanzas of the poem to demonstrate that circularity. It concludes: "The circular form of the frieze makes it necessary for the main elements of the first scene to reappear in stanza v." Like the modernist-formalist that he is, Spitzer, in a footnote to this passage, extends his perception to cover the ekphrastic impulse itself: "Since already in antiquity the poetic ekphrasis was often devoted to circular objects (shields, cups, etc.), it was tempting for poets to imitate verbally this constructive principle in their ekphraseis. Mörike's poem on an ancient lamp shows the same formal circularity motivated by the form of the model as does Keats's ode on the urn."35 One could add, as I have elsewhere, that Keats's shows a thematic circularity revealed by the urn as symbol: the circularity of the human life represented by the urn as both womb and tomb, holder of life and receptacle of death.36

35. All the quotations from Spitzer in this paragraph are from "The 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,' or Content vs. Metagrammar," in his Essays on English and American Literature, ed. Anna Hatcher (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 73 and n. 5. See the epigraph to the Foreword, above.

36. Once again I refer to my original essay on ekphrasis, which serves as the Appendix to this volume.
percent of what I have several times observed in the tail-eating serpent that, from my frontispiece, has recurred throughout this book. The modernist, Spitzer or Brooks, views the enactment of this theme of paradoxical circularity in the form of Keats's ode as being a paradigmatic realization of the verbal emblem. In this continual reference to the circular, both in modernist formalism and modernist thematics, the mythopoetic assumption is that chronological time must be bent into circular time. Mythic temporality, converted to space, is shaped like a poem, which in its self-enclosure becomes the verbal emblem of temporality as mystery.

It should not be surprising that I feel a similar temptation concerning the shape of my own book on ekphrasis as a book, a temptation that has led me to complete my circle by coming back in the end to the circular shield, and to Spitzer's circular claims, with which I began. But I must resist: here, in modernism, where we are trapped in a static formalism, is not the place for me to end my book, since my insistence that the ekphrastic object is in endless motion counters any one-sided commitment to its stillness. Not that I mean to make modernism into a single, fixed theoretical category. Within modernist theory and practice there are varying degrees of satisfaction with the collapsing of time into spatial pattern and thus with the circle as the figure of formal closure. I would distinguish three varieties within this range of attitudes, moving from (1) the overemphasis on timeless form suggested by Spitzer or Frank to (2) the paradoxical insistence on both temporal and spatial claims in Eliot or Brooks to (3) the shifting of dominance to the temporal almost to the rejection of spatial form by those who verge on the threshold of the postmodern. I should quickly add that each of these in his own way alludes to the precedent of Keats.

Within the third group I would point especially to Wallace Stevens, even as early as his anti-ekphrastic ekphrasis, "Anecdote of the Jar" (1919). The "gray and bare" jar is a considerable comedown from Keats's urn, with its "leaf-fringed legend," its "brede / Of marble men and maidens overwrought." And as a jar it demands none of the special semiotic deference we pay to the urn as symbol. Further, Stevens is writing a mere "Anecdote" and not a far-reaching "Ode": as an anecdote his is only one of the small stories (petites

37. The poem appears in its entirety in the Appendix (see p. 286). My present purpose requires me to give it a far more extensive reading here.
histoires) that Lyotard calls for in his postmodern assault on any master narrative.

Yet even this minimal jar insists on the unifying act of enclosure performed by its circularity as an artifact, though only at the same time as the poem attests to its existential insufficiency. The jar’s roundness is the emblem of the formal control it forces upon whatever would resist form, so that however “slovenly” the “wilderness” may be on its own, it is made to “surround”—to group itself as a circle—around the hill, itself shaped round by the jar’s presence. Closing the first quatrain by repeating the word “hill,” now controlled by “surround,” emphasizes the shaping power of the jar.

The brief poem seems to be directed by the playful persistence of the “round” both in that very word (lines 2 and 7) and in the companion words governed by “round”: “Surround” (line 4), “around” (line 6), and even “ground” (line 7). Indeed, its final appearances in line 7 (“The jar was round upon the ground”) are most telling: the word “round” reminds us of its presence in “ground,” although it turns that word into a self-contradiction, at once the earthy wilderness and yet with the formal reshaping literally within itself. The “round upon the ground” permits us to witness the verbal transformation of the wilderness.

The final quatrain has no variety of “round” in it, and needs none, since the jar has by this point taken “dominion everywhere.” Now the repetition has for the first time shifted to rhyme (“air,” “everywhere,” “bare”). The hard-won dominion everywhere has left everywhere bare, thanks to the gray bareness of a form that, unlike Keats’s, has no representation of life on it, only the emptiness of that form itself. Late in his “Ode” Keats may have addressed his object with the harsh words “Cold Pastoral,” but they would resound as being far more desperately earned in the Stevens poem. The rhyme of “everywhere” and “bare” in the shadow of the jar’s dominion is a deadening echo. The final two lines might have been free of the jar’s circle with the mention of Tennessee’s life in bird and bush or anything else, except that they are utterly negated in their very statement (“did not give,” “Like nothing else”). Even as the universal dominion of the gray and bare form is established, the jar is revealed to be isolated from the natural reality it would reshape, in its deadness to be the very opposite of what it would emblematize.

If the final two lines appear to break the circle by introducing bird and bush, the persistent negations keep the wilderness (“no longer
still under the jar's dominion. The circularity of the poem itself is restored and made "just" by the final word, "Tennessee," which is the very word, and world, that concluded the poem's opening line. It should be needless by now to add that in this negative and circular context, "Tennessee" here at the end is only a word in the poem, referring to the word in the poem's first line rather than to that real living place existing beyond the jar and the poem. In bringing the poem around, Stevens has satisfied Spitzer's claim about the metapoetic circularity of the ekphrastic poem that seeks to emblematize its circular object.

But we must remember, too, that Stevens has written a poem far more devastating in its concern about the existential emptiness of aesthetic form and the ekphrastic itself. If I earlier delineated a spectrum running from those modernists who are less uncomfortable with, or are even seeking, the stillness of the still point to those who are restive in their awareness of temporality and, even further, to those who reject the stillness of form, while still in the end coming to terms with it, the Stevens of this poem is in the latter group, trying to beckon what is beyond the circle without being free of that circle himself. The poem, in short, recuperates what it would destroy. Stevens, as a poet with an acute interest in the plastic arts, succumbed to—while he struggled to reject—his own ekphrastic inclinations. Is this, then, a poem by a modernist who beckons the postmodern to destroy the circle of form or by a postmodern who still must surrender to its formal persistence? Whichever way we answer this question, we are in effect projecting a postmodernism that is continuous with modernism, in contrast to the more severe postmodernism that surrounds us, which would disrupt history by totally deconstructing the totalizations of its predecessor and would permit no remnant of spatial form to stand.

I would justify my decision, on this one occasion, to dwell at an incommensurate length on this single brief poem by citing it as an appropriate response to the verbal economy practiced by modernism at its most intense. For me too there is always the inner resistance of words, which insists upon the incapacity of the circle to hold. Not only does Stevens's jar attest to its own insufficiency to hold what it claims to contain but it reminds us that even in its circularity, Keats's urn, whose beauty may be all there is to know, displays still-moving figures who, in their uncapturable historicity, leave forever open their unanswerable questions. But this is to move
beyond modernism in all of its several varieties and to my next chapter. As it is my final chapter, my discussion there must deal with those for whom any figuratively circular shape—together with the circular process of ekphrasis—is broken open in the very process of being formed, its contents dispersed, floating off, like this book, on the unpredictable wings of the postmodern.

38. My A Reopening of Closure: Organicism Against Itself deals principally with the extent to which the closure imposed by organicism carries within itself the countermovement that would explode it.