A POSTMODERN RETROSPECT

Semiotic Desire,
Repression
in the Name of Nature,
and a
Space for the Ekphrastic
... and now long needy Fame
Doth even grow Rich, naming my Stella's name.

Sir Philip Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella*, 35

Oh absent presence, Stella is not here;
False flattering Hope, that with so fair a face
Bare me in hand, that in this orphan place,
Stella, I say my Stella, should appear.

*Astrophil and Stella*, 106

The ekphrastic impulse in literary theory, as I have been trying to demonstrate, is companion to the semiotic desire for the natural sign. This latter is the desire to use the word to control the presence of either the god or the lover, perhaps more explicitly so in the Renaissance, when metaphor works to make the lover into the verbal equivalent of the deity. In Chapter 7 we looked into the various ways by which modernist critics used their organicist theories of closure to sacralize the work (the work as *word*) itself, thus turning it into the ultimate container of verbal presence. It is at this moment, when a culture is seen as totally containable within its shaped word, that the postmodern (in the arts or in theory) strikes to explode that stuffed package.

Theoretical developments since the New Criticism, developments usually grouped together as "postmodern," have attacked its formalistic overconfidence in the poet's spatializing power to impose closure despite the usual way words work, despite, that is, the unending openness of what that criticism took to be "normal" discourse. I have tried to anticipate those attacks in Chapter 7. But more single-mindedly than I do there, postmodern theorists have unpacked Joseph Frank's spatial metaphors—especially, perhaps, his anti-temporal seizing upon "juxtaposition" as a literary effect—and lamented the self-mystifying consequence of taking them literally. These theorists have recognized the extent to which modernism represented a completion of the project undertaken by romanticism. What they are resisting is the aesthetic desire for the poem as a totalized verbal system, a notion that is the very heart of aesthetic organicism from the first. Their resistance reflects the postmodern
desire to deny to the poem the opportunity to be accorded the status of a privileged object that is a unique product of a unique working of language, an idealized—indeed a naturalized—object, emblem of teleological fulfillment. Instead, poems, like verbal compositions of any sort, are to accept the general fate of language as arbitrary, temporal signs and not to seek to inflate metonymic modesty into metaphoric grandiloquence, justified only by metaphysical bad faith.

There has been perhaps no more forceful attack against the claims for the power of the poet and the poet’s shaped word to contain its object within it than in the essays of Paul de Man, both before and after his encounter with the work of Jacques Derrida. Much of de Man’s most trenchant writing constituted a polemic against the pretensions of a poetics of verbal presence, speaking instead in a minor key for aporia and an open temporality, for the necessary gap between word and hope in a textual universe at the mercy of a self-abnegating law that rules only in the name of the arbitrary. We have observed the thematic move by which Frank uses his spatial form (the juxtaposition of temporally separated textual elements) to achieve a “juxtaposition of past and present” that rescues us from history by converting it into the “timeless unity” of myth. It is a move not inconsistent with the “natural supernaturalism” of romanticism traced for us by M. H. Abrams. In a countermove designed to awaken us from the aesthetic dream, de Man insists that these delusions of a so-called aesthetic realm that celebrates the transformational power of the created symbol must be dissipated. He reminds us that the myth of an achievable identity between word and world is indeed a myth, as he drags us back to the human condition as the verbal condition of unbridgeable difference, finally an impotent condition trapped in the sequence of unrepeatable, unredeemable befores and afters that constitute both every human text and human existence itself. (We can observe too in de Man a thematic extension of the textual, much as we did in Chapter 7 in the position under attack, though here, of course, it takes a thoroughly negative direction.)

Those in the deconstructionist line whom I have represented here by de Man have been offering an alternative way of grappling with the workings of texts: they reject the claims of any who would inflate those workings and their consequences out of a metaphysical ambition for the extraordinary manipulation of a language that would grant it special entry into the domain of aesthetics. But there are other recent critics who are more interested in reading through texts to their sociopolitical subtexts, and they would deconstruct
those claims (even if they might prefer not to use that word) in another way: from a point of view that focuses on the unrelenting shaping power of institutionally controlled discourse to impose itself on all texts. These critics, whether deriving from Marx or Foucault or both, would expose the fetishizing of "nature"—and, consequently, of natural authority—in the rhetorical subservience of language to the sway of forces vying for power, forces that seek to validate that power by an ideology for which they claim a natural sanction. In their different ways, then, postmodern critics remind us to be wary of the metaphysical dream behind the timeless myth of "nature" and wary also of the post-romantic voluntarism, the humanistic aggrandizement, the hidden quest for private power, behind the modernist's will to totalization, to genesis revisited.

Any of these ways of stirring us out of the romantic-to-modernist dream based on the verbal conquest of temporality and difference, any of these several textual or sociopolitical versions of deconstruction, would will an end to ekphrasis, with its implications about form, as they have sought to will an end to the aesthetic itself. Wary of the dependence of the aesthetic on a nineteenth-century organism that called for a totalizing discourse, these joined from their several directions in a war on the aesthetic, which was now outlawed as a false construct created for the evasive and dangerously complacent comforts of discursive and ideological unity. Yet, as I have already indicated, there remains a significant difference between the deconstruction of texts based on a new way of reading them and the deconstruction of texts based on a way of reading through them to a subtext controlled by the dispositions of social power.

Although in Chapter 7 my ambivalence was intended to be quite evident, and my rejection of modernism anything but complete, I did intend to acknowledge and confront those weaknesses that aroused the concerns that we have been hearing voiced far more negatively in the de Man version of deconstruction, in its charges against the so-called formalistic aesthetic, charges that would reveal the inevitable thematic, and thus the metaphysical, accompaniment to this aesthetic. In the current chapter, then, I am concerned primarily with that other direction from which anti-aesthetic objections, even more forcefully, come. If I am to look back on my subject from our most recent perspectives and see what of it is left standing, I still

must take into account the sociopolitical rejection of the tradition of the aesthetic that culminates in modernism. This is the commonest of the voices we are currently hearing. Indeed, it is one that complains also about the textual version of deconstruction I have here associated with de Man, charging that it too is, in the end, no less formalist than its organicist precursor-enemies and thus is equally, if unwittingly, a servant of repressive political forces. I do not mean to argue the issue here so much as to recognize my need to address this recent widespread assault upon the very assumptions that permit my subject to be treated as I have treated it.

So let me here rehearse the several stages of the history I have traced in these chapters—the history of the natural-sign aesthetic in its several alternative versions—from a perspective that provides an awareness of sociopolitical undercurrents. Are these to be regarded as causes, or accompaniments, or consequences? And what effect should they have on our judgment of the theories being set forth, whether independently of these undercurrents or in subservience, conscious or unconscious, to them? My problem is how to give fair due to the sociopolitical without accepting a complete reduction to it, so that some space may be saved for the aesthetic and, as a corollary, for the ekphrastic. I am making this move, I must hope, not merely to save my subject for this book's sake but to discover it as a subject that, for society's sake, should be seen as saving itself.

I will begin by suggesting a broad—but I hope not too easy—analogy between literary doctrine and political force and then will try to limit its analogical reach. Such an analogy, I believe, can be proposed between the more or the less repressive tendencies in the prescriptions of literary theories and the more or the less repressive tendencies in the sociopolitical attitudes and institutions that may be seen as sponsoring, or at least as finding comfort in, these theories. This analogy can be seen in the ways that a culture imposes its semiotic, transferring its dependence on the natural sign from the realm of the arts to the political realm. It is a transfer from apparently innocent play to surreptitious manipulation. To enforce this transfer, aesthetic theory must use whatever repression is necessary to preserve the transparency of natural-sign reference in art, carrying it over to its political analogue, thereby justifying a general repression in the name of nature.

This subliminal political interest may help account for the restrictiveness of dramatic theory as I trace it in Chapter 2. What controls this analogy is the myth of the natural sign, with its appeal to our
semiotic desire for the natural sign, which I here suggest has been functioning in the realm of the arts in order to help promulgate the legitimization of natural signs in the sociopolitical realm. This myth and this desire, once embodied for us in art, are—though indirectly, of course—to persuade us of the "natural" ground of claims in the sociopolitical realm as these are institutionalized in those other, power-imposing discourses that, nevertheless, may take their semiotic habits from texts whose objectives, as predominantly aesthetic and hence apparently more innocent, cultivate a receptivity in us for that semiotic appeal. Hence we have become generally vulnerable when cultural claims call us to obedience to nature's order.

Throughout this study I have acknowledged that our semiotic desire for the natural sign is a reflection of our ontological yearning: our anxiety to find an order or structure objectively, "naturally," "out there"—beyond society as well as ourselves—that would authorize the signs and forms that our subjectivity projects and that we then want—nay, require—others to respond to and acknowledge as being there. It is an anxiety exploited by all holders of power and bearers of doctrines that they seek to impose through a claim to a natural authority. This attempted imposition so often succeeds because it meets and satisfies our semiotic desire for the natural sign, as it confers the special privilege of nature upon the conventional—and arbitrary—signs dictated by various motives, most of them politically suspect. These are the signs that, however deceptively, function for a culture as its "nature," signs that are extrapolated in order to be insisted upon as everybody's "nature" and to be thus acknowledged universally.

The arts, in their illusionary character, may well lead the semiotic parade in the culture's cultivation of its signs as "natural." It was this illusionary objective for the arts (mimesis in its most extreme, and innocent, sense) that made the arts of sculpture and painting—intended, presumably, as transparent representations of, or even as substitutes for, "real" objects—the model arts for the other arts to emulate. We have seen the primacy of the visual in Plato lead, in his more literal followers, to a "visual epistemology" that would have the arts, in their naive mission to function as natural signs, aspire to the trompe l'œil.2 In other words, the arts, as would-be natural signs,

were to seek an ever closer resemblance to their referents (their "originals in nature," the eighteenth-century theorist would say), a semiotic accord that would approach equivalence. And through much of the earlier history of aesthetics we have seen that even the verbal arts were encouraged—as best they could, despite their conventional and arbitrary materials—to join in this illusionary mission.

It would seem to be a strange and severe requirement to insist upon for the verbal arts, though from their earliest days critics found one kind among these arts—the dramatic—that could emulate or even exceed the more "natural" non-verbal arts, the visual arts, in an apparent dedication to the natural sign. Indeed, the very mimetic arguments that called for such emulation, arguments fashioned in accord with the unproblematic resemblances to their objects that this criticism claimed to find in sculpture and painting, would raise the drama beyond even those arts in its capacity to produce an illusion of "reality." The drama, with its flesh-and-blood creatures, is constituted by signs that far more closely resemble the moving, live world beyond—that consequently could far more easily fool the naive among us—than does sculpture or painting, as unmoving replicas in a lifeless material medium. We can say with Lessing that drama is more faithful than the spatial arts to our ineluctably temporal experience, since it presents "moving pictures" instead of still pictures. Indeed, in the captivating spirit of illusion as trompe l'oeil, we could go further and say that drama presents not pictures at all but the persons and things themselves.

My point about the extension of the natural-sign aesthetic to poetry has been this: the need to link the verbal arts to the obvious arts of visual illusion narrowed the range of what could be represented in the drama as the one explicitly visual verbal art. We have seen this as the point of seventeenth-century French dramatic theory. The restriction of represented objects to the visible was thereby also intended as a restriction of them to natural signs. If, then, all the arts, and the dramatic art preeminently, were to be only illusionary—"airy" embodiments of nature—then those arts were to fool us, to trick the eye, thereby showing the way to non-aesthetic forms of discourse, which were to parade their claims as if they were naturally authorized—and they alone, to the exclusion of all other claimants. In this way the arts could serve the ambitions of ideology in its quest for domination, so that the verbal arts, at least in their dramatic form, could become emblematic of the illusionary function of
would-be natural signs in a culture that could use such signs to au-
thorize its exclusionary force.

The conclusions of Chapter 2 would, I believe, support the claim
that those using Plato's natural-sign argument against drama (though
for the opposite purpose of approving it) were making it our most
restrictive literary genre as an aesthetic correlative of the tightest of
those ruling discursive institutions of which it is to function as an in-
direct representation. The drama is seen as the most restrictive in
that it is the verbal genre most rigorously tied to the "natural sign,"
the genre whose fictions most nakedly seek the status of natural
sign, so that it overcomes the arbitrary stuff of its composition.
Throughout the history of literary theory we have seen critics distin-
guishing drama by this special representational character that they
see in it, in contrast to narrative and lyric genres. In this establish-
ment of the conventional notion of drama as a natural-sign art and
thus as the most restrictive of genres, I must again call attention to
the critical concern about the difference between drama and narra-
tive, between actions we are allowed to witness and actions that are
reported to us by a narrating character. The actors stand as natural
signs in their semiotic relation to their characters (who stand as nat-
ural signs, thanks to the actors, in their semiotic relation to "real"
persons); by contrast, a narrative voice, spoken or written, only sup-
plies the words that our interpreting minds must convert to the ac-
tions we seek inwardly to "see."

Dramatic representation, in other words, is the only true verbal
imitation if by "imitation" we mean—as Plato only sometimes, and
most narrowly, does—the literal mimicking of persons in real life. I
have shown in detail that this attribution of generic specialness sets
in motion, from Aristotle onward, a poetics of drama set apart from
poetics at large; and it is a poetics that remains privileged so long as
painting and sculpture, as natural-sign arts, remain the model for
poetry to seek to emulate, so long, in other words, as the mimetic
aesthetic remains in force and the notion of the mimetic is taken nar-
rowly and literally.

To summarize, the literal restriction of "imitation" leads to a
highly exclusive regulation of the drama: only what is visually rep-
resentable may be represented. The natural sign is to be a transpar-
ent sign, transparent and thus immediate to the senses. The stage
can represent only the limited things that can be shown, in contrast
to the almost unlimited things that, by way of narrative, can be told.
Since, however, for Aristotle compactness, efficiency, and exclusion are prized aesthetic virtues, it is not surprising that not only are those unrepresentable marvels admissible in the epic outside what is permitted the drama but their inclusion in the epic, for all the wonder they inspire, helps Aristotle judge the epic to be a genre inferior to the pristinely exclusive drama. In the ambivalence of chapter 24 of the Poetics we saw Aristotle adopt Plato's equation of "imitation" with impersonating another's speech and attribute unqualified imitation to drama alone among the verbal arts, thereby cutting drama off from the other verbal arts—from the representation of anything that is not, in more than one sense of the word, "sensible."

The narrative poet, whose represented persons are not seen, may indulge fantasies that could not be brought onstage; even if they could, they would appear ludicrous. Though Aristotle thus bequeaths to Renaissance theory the notion that the marvelous or wonderful is the proper end of epic, he means no elevation of that genre by it. The drama dare not be monstrous (i.e., dare not, in imitation of the epic, include the representation of monsters as the unreal) in so restrictive a doctrine. Instead the drama was to exclude all that was not representable onstage without straining a sensible audience's credibility.

Thanks largely to their Neo-Platonism, Renaissance theorists treated the wonderful and marvelous more favorably (see Chapter 5). With their elevation of the intelligible over the fallen domain of the sensible, they looked to poetry to represent those things that exceeded the domain of sense and of sensible representation and thus, because of epic's power to do so, treated it as superior to drama. On these arguments, which raised the epic to becoming their model literary art, they could even encourage Renaissance dramatic practice to loosen restrictions in hopes of emulating the epic by expanding into the realm of the monstrous the limits of what might be represented onstage. The pursuit of the wonderful, as part of the Platonic rejection of the sensible for the intelligible, brought with it the abandonment of the limited natural sign and license to explore the freer realm of the arbitrary. For the Renaissance preference for narrative marks the transcendence of the finite picture by the infinite potentialities of the word.

We have seen an exemplary version of this theoretical transformation in Jacopo Mazzoni's defense of Dante's Commedia. The attack against which he formulates his defense, Bulgarini's, charged that Dante's visionary poem eludes the world of palpable action, the
realm of human history, in order to indulge the private phantasms of his mind. In order to counter this argument, Mazzoni reformulates and, in the process, distorts Plato’s distinction between the “icastic” (now seen as limited to the external world of the senses) and the “phantastic” (now seen as the mental images limited only by “the caprice of the artist”), though he does so for what he considers to be Platonic purposes. Despite his Platonic desire to elevate narrative over drama, the reasons he offers for this non-Aristotelian conclusion reveal, instead, an Aristotelian influence, even if in an inverted way: he prefers narrative to drama on the grounds that narrative, with its unseen actions, is the more appropriate instrument of the phantastic, while drama, controlled by the sensible limits of the stage, is the more appropriate instrument of the icastic. Much like Aristotle in *Poetics*, Mazzoni, in restricting the drama to the sensibly representable, reserves for narrative the freedom to explore the domain of the wonderful without worrying about credibility, since, composed of non-natural, intelligible signs, it does not concern itself with the visible. But in the Platonic hierarchy, if not the Aristotelian, this is a transcendent virtue. Hence the phantastic can be inscribed in narrative without concern for the necessary exclusions that dramatic representation inevitably carries within itself.

Mazzoni is therefore theoretically comfortable about defending the *Commedia*, since for him the defense of narrative is one with his defense of the phantastic, a free-ranging domain well beyond the mundane (icastic and thus mimetic) restrictions indigenous to the drama, even the stretched versions of drama permitted in the Renaissance.³ In that comfortable relationship between his theory and the poem used to demonstrate it, Mazzoni is in a more fortunate position than Lessing was to be in his *Laokoön*. Especially as we compare Lessing’s statements there with what we found him saying elsewhere, we find a certain theoretical embarrassment accompanying the *Laokoön*. For given his subject in that treatise, Lessing has to construct his argument by constant reference to the epic, even though his major claim—that poems must use their arbitrary signs to create an illusion of natural signs—must rest upon his appeal to the drama, which he elsewhere does acknowledge to be the one

poetic form that deserves to be taken for a natural sign. Despite the similarity we find in the use by these two theorists of the Aristotelian (based on the earlier Platonic) basis for their distinction between drama and narrative, we see that Lessing must return to the primacy of drama in his desire to return to the sensible realm of the natural sign.

But Lessing's distinctions are recognizable as essentially the same as Mazzoni's, except that the preferences are reversed. By now I have traced a series of these distinctions that slide into and support one another. They can be summarized as follows: in the two critics it is the conjunction of the sensible with the natural sign, at once icastic and representable, that both enables and tightly limits the functioning of the drama; on the other side, the intelligible is conjoined with the arbitrary sign, the phantastic as that which is sensibly unrepresentable, to permit the freer realm of narrative. The preference clearly depends on the value to be bestowed upon or withheld from the sensible world.

In the Renaissance the one crossover between these opposing pairs occurs when, because of the primacy granted the epic as the model literary art, the drama is by some less restrictive critics encouraged to expand its own tight bounds in the direction of what narrower dramatic theory would have considered unrepresentable, in the direction, that is, of narrative inclusiveness, indeed of the monstrous. This violation of narrow criteria for dramatic propriety is hardly surprising when we consider the contempt for the enclosing finitude of the sensible that the Renaissance inherited from Plato. So long as the sensible defined the limits of drama as would-be natural sign and the intelligible rather than the sensible was the proper object of poetry, Neo-Platonic critics would elevate the narrative over drama and the verbal over the visual.

As our exemplary Renaissance Neo-Platonist, Mazzoni reveals his favoring of narrative over drama to be an appeal to a freedom of vision over the icastic-dramatic imitation-as-limitation. But can we not see it also, if only subliminally, as a political appeal for the poet's visionary freedom? And the liberalizing of literature, by the move

4. See my discussion of Lessing's letter to Nicolai in Chapter 2 and in n. 12 to that chapter.

5. There are, of course, several other, more frequently cited reasons for the elevation of epic over tragedy in the Renaissance by far more conservative, more Horatian critics. Their appeals to the didactic and to "Virgil-worship" are well documented in the standard histories of Renaissance criticism.
from the sensible to the intelligible through the attempt to represent the unrepresentable, permitted narrative benefits that could even, by extension, be bestowed upon a loosened version of drama that might now indulge its own monsters. I have been trying to suggest, by this appeal to the political, an image of drama as an overregulated body politic in need of liberalizing, if not of revolution: in need of being freed from its bondage to the limited world of one-to-one sensible representation. This is the political extension of the natural-sign repressiveness—in the drama as in a culture's ontological claims—that I claimed to find behind the analogy with which I introduced this discussion.

One can find implied political metaphors strengthening the pleas for greater imaginative freedom elsewhere in Renaissance writings. I think especially of the language used by Sidney (in a passage examined in Chapter 2) to defend the poet's "freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit."6 Fighting for equality with nature, which is the governor of all other human discourse, "only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigor of his own invention... goeth hand in hand with Nature" (p. 100, my italics).7 More than a hundred years later, we find even in as conservative a critic as Alexander Pope (a major example of conservatism for me later in this chapter) an impressive metaphorical defense against a legalistic criticism that would condemn Shakespeare's own monstrosities: "To judge therefore of Shakespeare by Aristotle's rules, is like trying a man by the laws of one country, who acted under those of another."8

It was this broadening of the criterion of what was includable in the drama that prompted—as a reaction against it—the ultimate restrictiveness of seventeenth-century French dramatic theory that I examined in Chapter 2. In its quest for the ultimate theater of illusion (really for a theater of delusion capable of imposing its literal


7. The subjection of the other human sciences is clearly indicated by the language that precedes this quotation: "There is no art delivered to mankind that hath not the works of Nature for his principal object, without which they could not consist, and on which they so depend, as they become actors and players, as it were, of what Nature will have set forth" (pp. 99-100).

reality upon the naivété of its audience), that restrictiveness rejected as a monstrosity even the slightest extension of a minimalist notion of what was representable. Not only does that purest of theoretical moments return to the restrictions of the sensible world but it reveals the most extreme and most literalistic version of drama as a would-be natural sign, caught within the narrowest limits upon what is permitted to be visible onstage. It thus puts forward the most extreme identification of the natural sign with the sensible sign, by implication leaving for Platonists the opposing identification of the arbitrary sign, as supersensible, with the intelligible sign of narrative.

In Chapter 2 I dwelled on the unfortunate insistence on seeking, in the name of a naive notion of credibility, a verisimilitude that would push drama toward being so complete a natural-sign representation that it was, in effect, a continuing trompe l'oeil. Paradoxically, we saw that such a drama was commonly charged with producing the very opposite: an utterly conventional display of artifice that defied audience credibility. In my recounting of the narrative adventures of seventeenth-century French dramatic theory, we saw an even more important peripety in its fortunes: an intended purity of generic form, through that very purity, turned into the impurities of genera mixta. We found an inverse proportion between the dramatic and the narrative: the less the drama can show, the more frequent and fulsome the intrusions of what must be told. Thus, in this French dramatic theory, exclusions imposed by the dramatic form must result in necessary inclusions allowed to narrative: what was kept offstage showed up, and was welcome, in the stories that had to be reported by those who were onstage, so that the audience could be informed of what had to be known of the action that was not permitted visual representation. In their very restrictiveness, the principles of exclusion could not prevent—indeed indirectly required—the admission of their antagonist, the non-representable, the merely verbal, the narrative, even to the most inadmissible monster that a narrative fable could invent.

If I may continue to press the political analogue, the most legalistic conception of drama as a closed, repressive genre forced it, however indirectly, to open itself to an invasion of what was completely beyond its control. It is a self-defeating paradox: the narrative is a subversive force that intrudes itself just where the impurities it brings are most forbidden. The extreme requirements of exclusiveness permit—nay, require—the very uninhibited, monstrous inclu-
sions it would repress. In this way even the drama, as the tightest of genres, becomes subject to the Bakhtinian carnival, the *heteroglos­sia* that Bakhtin himself reserved for the mixed genre (or anti-genre) of the novel. Through exclusion, pressed to its limits, the drama must let in, if only through the back door of narrative, everything that would disfigure it. As we saw, even the marvelous, and thus the visually unrepresentable, which was carried to extremes in the Renaissance anti-genre of the romance, cannot be in principle excluded from being reported, as the drama is forced to concede that the unrepresentable may be able to find a mode of representation for itself after all, even if beyond the realm of the natural sign.

The metaphor I cited from Pope is applicable: the drama, as mini-republic, must give up its hard-won sovereignty; it must yield through its own devices to the threatening, disruptive force that, far from being excluded by the form, breaks it open. From this theoretical perspective, drama, required to be exclusive if it is to satisfy the interests of order and generic neatness, invites in what it would repress. Surely the political trope beckons: by making its claims in the name of the "natural," as a model of the natural sign, drama may also be seen as reactionary—or at least as being put in the service of a reactionary aesthetic that can itself be placed in the service of a reactionary social structure in search of being legitimized as "natural" and thus as unassailable. For its own political health, drama thus stands in need of being at least in part liberated by that which destroys its purity of genre: by the narrative intrusion that, as intelligible rather than sensible, functions as a Platonically sanctioned freedom from the distorting limits of the *merely* sensible and representable, in pursuit of the visions of the capriciously unpredictable mind. The phantastic, unrestrained by dramatic propriety, breaks out of the repressive limits of the natural sign—withdrawng from the "nature" to which Plato's condemned "mimetic tribe" would bind the sign—to let loose the arbitrary sign that indulges the intelligible realm, the realm of dream, whether of nightmare or, as in romance, of nightmare overcome.

Nevertheless, as many seventeenth-century (and early eighteenth-century) theorists demonstrate—even when moving beyond dramatic theory—strong conservative forces persist, fearful of the threat from an untamed caprice in the poet's mind and blind to the self-contradictory futility of their own dedication to a universally governing "nature." They continue to work for the natural-sign aesthetic and, with it, for a mimesis that is unaware of the naïveté of its un-
questioning pursuit of semiotic fidelity. As I have suggested, this conservatism reveals itself not only in their literary and aesthetic affiliations but also in their attachment to a dogmatic philosophic realism and, behind this, in their sociopolitical commitment to an inflexible notion of order.

The theoretical pressure to establish the authority of "nature" and the natural is never innocent (merely aesthetic)—not metaphysically innocent and, more insidiously, not politically innocent. Behind the effort to convert humanly created signs into an immediate surrogate for the objective natural truth, we find the ontological dependence on an unchanging, transhistorical external reality, a universal structure into which all particulars fall without remainder. That dependence arises from a confidence in that firm, spatial structure out there, whose solid objects, as objects of imitation, authorize their imitations, but only while assuring those imitations of their lesser, secondary status as mere appearances, to which, since Plato, we have habitually condescended. Still, a natural-sign art is to validate nature for us as an ontologically grounded authority to which all our activities and languages are referred for sanction. Nature, then, is both archetype and objective, the origin and measure of its illusionary representation.

We have a prideful confession of this position in its extremity in Pope's well-known injunction to critics (in his *Essay on Criticism*, 1711), with implications that are obvious for poets as well:

First, follow Nature, and your judgement frame  
By her just standard, which is still the same:  
Unerring Nature, still divinely bright,  
One clear, unchanged, and universal light,  
Life, force, and beauty, must to all impart,  
At once the source, and end, and test of Art.  

(1.68–73)

The word "still" confers permanence, a rootedness to regulate whatever humanly contrived flowers we may seek to manufacture. Under such dispensation the prescribed principles for poem-making are found in the order of things as necessary, and not arbitrarily invented by human caprice: "Those rules of old discovered, not devised, / Are Nature still, but Nature methodized" (1.88–89). The rules are summoned in imitation of the natural order; they are dis-
covered *in* the natural order and convert that order into literary method. Thus these discoveries permit us to transcribe nature’s method into our discourse. Indeed, most of those treated in my survey of natural-sign theory, in reducing the order of signs to ‘‘nature methodized,’’ have sought, by conversion, to make theirs into a method naturalized.

Consequently, Pope tell us, when the poet (e.g., Virgil) seeks to copy nature, he finds himself doing again what other poets (e.g., Homer) have done before: ‘‘Nature and Homer were, he found, the same.’’ What follows? ‘‘Learn hence for ancient rules a just esteem; / To copy Nature is to copy them’’ (1.135, 139–40). Since nature has been, is, and remains ‘‘still the same,’’ ‘‘still divinely bright,’’ a natural sign is a natural sign is a natural sign, referable immediately to nature. With nature so constant a referent, the signs that would represent nature must resemble one another. One can only rediscover that which has been discovered: there can be nothing new under the sun any more than the sun can itself be new.

The critic, then, may well creep behind the scientist, subjecting the discourse in his charge to the order displayed by scientific discovery. It is no wonder that Aristotle, primal scientist (‘‘natural philosopher’’), was accepted as the critic to tame the poets: they ‘‘received his laws’’ because they were ‘‘convinced ‘twas fit, / Who conquered Nature, should preside o’er Wit’’ (3.651–52). And nature as a total, and totally explicable, order could be revealed in its completeness and without aporia by the scientist-metaphysician. To the non-scientist, the foolishly prideful layman, these laws, as organizational principles for all that is, may not be properly understood, but—in Epistle 1 of his *Essay on Man* (1733)—Pope takes on the role of the all-revealing scientist-metaphysician who makes the order clear.

This epistle represents the ultimate act of methodizing nature and naturalizing method. Following the instructions given in the *Essay on Criticism*, Pope has in the *Essay on Man* become the master-critic of the master-Work of Art of the Primal Artist. Viewed this way, the three concluding couplets of Epistle 1 are perfectly reasonable, indeed inevitable. The first of these makes my point:

9. I have argued elsewhere that there is a common metaphysical grounding for the *Essay on Criticism* and the *Essay on Man* despite the considerable distance of time (more than two decades) that separates them. See my *Theory of Criticism: A Tradition and Its System* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 104 and the discussion that follows.
All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee;
All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see. . . .

In such a perfect spatial structure, characterized by the totalizing metaphors of the Newtonian world machine and the great chain of being, the impulse toward change is the major antagonist, instigated at once by human pride and metaphysical error. There can be no errant particulars wandering free of their home in the all-inclusive universals of the "universal frame." This frame, of course, must be conceived as utterly immune to historical contingency. Indeed, how could any metaphysical structure be conceived in which history was more completely ignored, or more irrelevant, in which time was more unqualifiedly the enemy of the unfettered spatial imagination?

One need not press this spatial language, or its metaphysical construct, very hard before sensing its sociopolitical implications. And in the sociopolitical may we not perhaps find a subliminal motive for the aesthetic and the metaphysic (really the aesthetic as the metaphysic, or the metaphysic as the aesthetic) rather than the consequence deriving from them? The rule of absolute stasis is an indispensable ideological ground for a society whose hierarchical character was to be fixed. Hence one proclaims a structure—apparently metaphysical, though founded on aesthetic norms and hiding political compulsion—whose perfection had a place for all things but, more importantly, sought to keep everything in its place.

Vast chain of Being! which from God began,
Natures ethereal, human, angel, man,
Beast, bird, fish, insect, what no eye can see,
No glass can reach; from Infinite to thee,
From thee to Nothing. On superior powers
Were we to press, inferior might on ours:
Or in the full creation leave a void,
Where, one step broken, the great scale's destroyed:
From Nature's chain whatever link you strike,
Tenth or ten thousandth, breaks the chain alike.

(1.237-46)

At moments the political significance of the language becomes explicit and the metaphors literalized ("On superior powers / Were we
to press, inferior might on ours’). The price of any aggrandizement of power is a blurring of spatial distinction that threatens to explode the entire structure:

And, if each system in gradation roll  
Alike essential to th’ amazing Whole,  
The least confusion but in one, not all  
That system only, but the Whole must fall.  
Let Earth unbalanced from her orbit fly,  
Planets and Suns run lawless through the sky;  
Let ruling Angels from their spheres be hurled,  
Being on Being wrecked, and world on world;  
Heaven’s whole foundations to their centre nod,  
And Nature tremble to the throne of God.

(1.247-56)

It is the ambition to achieve power (‘‘superior’’ power) beyond one’s station that so darkly threatens the metaphysical-aesthetic order, now revealed to be a political order: ‘‘All this dread Order break—for whom? for thee / Vile worm!—Oh Madness! Pride! Impiety!’’ (1.257-58). As always in this vast, machinelike structure, the proposed similarity among the operational principles that govern its many parts and subsystems permits the rule of analogical argument to go unchallenged:

What if the foot, ordained the dust to tread,  
Or hand, to toil, aspired to be the head?  
What if the head, the eye, or ear repined  
To serve mere engines to the ruling Mind? . . .  
Just as absurd, to mourn the tasks or pains,  
The great directing Mind of All ordains.

(1.259-66)

It is obvious that Pope has, on nature’s transcendent and unquestionable authority, raised the status quo—the notion of place as a permanent station—to an absolute and universal principle that holds equally, through analogy, in all areas of human activity. As in the neoclassical idea of drama, the spatial structure is so complete, so perfect, in its fixity that no change can be permitted in the disposition of its parts without leaving an unfillable gap that would
undermine its working altogether. There can be no unauthorized movement, no slightest alteration, that is other than utterly subversive, producing the explosion of total revolution.

This closed, totalized doctrine clearly is a politically convenient one for the protection of a static, hierarchical social order, though its appeal to the sanction of nature as god ("The great directing Mind of All") invariably rests on a secure metaphysic whose only justification seems to be a spatially complete aesthetic construct controlled by a system of analogies. Once human thought projects nature as a perfect work of art, made by the One Supreme Artist and to be interpreted by the scientist-critic, a system of signs has been constructed that denies the contingently historical conditions of its creation by declaring the system "natural" and necessary rather than conventional and arbitrary. The ideal spatial structure need suffer no modifications from the human realm of temporality. Indeed, if nature is conceived as a perfect work of art from which the possibility of all chance or change has been removed, then how dare any humanly created sign presume not to imitate nature and seek to attain the status of a natural sign, a sign authorized by nature to create human institutions, and not the other way around—even if our subjectivity may, in error, suggest otherwise?

It was, we saw in Chapter 2, Johnson himself who, in opposition to such dogma, pointed out the extent to which human artifacts, and the rules that govern them, are subject, not to nature, but to the conventional—and even the merely nominal—character of human invention. For example, we saw him defend the mixing of genres in Shakespeare by characterizing the pure genres of tragedy and comedy, not as justified in the nature of things, but as created "according to the laws which custom had prescribed," out of which "rose the two modes of imitation, known by the names of tragedy and comedy" (my italics). These dramatic conventions, as human institutions, are anything but natural, as—according to Johnson—Shakespeare's unconventional plays reveal.

In distinguishing human institutions from nature, Johnson implicitly makes the extension from the aesthetic to the political. Thus, in his impatient and at moments even angry review of the Soame Jenyns treatise, he warns against the dangers of succumbing naively to the semiotic desire for the natural sign: he attacks the out-

rageously callous claim that the several economic levels of a largely suffering humanity are justified by the permanent laws of nature that uphold the great chain of being, whose immutable demarcations between its links are beyond challenge.11

As Johnson’s critique indicates, the naive rationalist’s appeal to the universal hegemony of nature, as the all-controlling out-there, occurs within an invented narrative that repeats the myth of the natural sign. There is no provision in this “nature,” transcendent protagonist of this narrative, for the constructive (and oppressive) role of human institutions and the transforming role of the history they create. At a later historical moment these institutions and the sense of history’s role in creating them were to undo the dogma of a free-standing nature in an attempt to have it seen as no more than a projection of their own activities. From this perspective, the universal nature, “which [for Pope] is still the same,” is never again the same: it not only was changed but was itself made to disappear by reductive concepts that new historical circumstances brought into play.

What we call “nature” thus comes more and more to be deconstructed into a mirror of our own historically conditioned selves, of our desires, and of our desire to validate those desires by grounding them in what we claim to be an objective nature out there. But in the words that Shakespeare, that sublime deconstructor, applies to everything except transcendent love, our several conceptions of nature, far from spatially secure, turn out to be “subject to Time’s love or to Time’s hate, / Weeds among weeds, or flowers with flowers gathered” (Sonnet 124). They are thrall to “policy, that heretic / Which works on leases of short-numb’red hours.” Nature, untransformed by love, is thus reduced to being politically “subject” to time’s caprice, its politics. Such political insecurity, awaiting destruction and replacement, is seen in “Time’s fickle glass, his sickle hour” (Sonnet 126): a concept of fragile, temporary nature that self-destructs under the pressure of its own temporal character. This pre-Popean view of history’s deconstructive and reconstructive power comes to be revived and institutionalized in the historicizing of our concepts of nature during the past two centuries.

Once nature is thus relativized, so that it loses its ontological grounding, it can of course serve no longer as the fixed referent for a natural sign. And the natural sign, no longer authorized, will be

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consigned to the realm of myth and will give way to the acknowledgment of the conventional character of all signs. There is a lengthy history of the different semiotic and, consequently, the different aesthetic that a less dogmatic view of nature permits. Even more than language, art as a human construct can emphasize its character as a made object, product of men and women, themselves products of history and its institutions. As such, it cannot claim to reach beyond its system of conventional signs to find again its home in nature.

We have seen how, as the ultimate extension of the natural-sign aesthetic, the tightest neoclassical formula for drama cannot avoid undermining itself, proclaiming its own artificiality in the midst of its pretension to naturalness, and breaking its form, mixing its representational modes, in the midst of its quest for an austere purity. With narrative as the antagonistic intruder that it has invited in, the very restraints that the drama has imposed on itself lead it to expose its artifice, its awareness of its own failed deceptiveness, its consciousness of the doubleness—and unreality—of its illusionary pretensions. If this is the case even when the fervor of the quest for the natural sign is so great, how much less likely the case must be in milder versions of that quest.

For those who we saw sell themselves on the myth of the natural sign, the drama, in light of its peculiar representational character and its peculiar theoretical history, served as the example par excellence—indeed as the allegory—of how the natural-sign aesthetic could turn its deceived worshipers into willing victims of the temptation to convert aesthetic illusions into delusions of the actual, the natural. The drama could thus serve also as a leading agent in creating an accommodation between the doctrines that a culture would forcefully propagate and those who are persuaded to accept them as part of a naturally sanctioned system. One may see the drama—and, through it, the natural-sign aesthetic itself—as being put to shrewd use by the dominant culture: the illusionary naturalization of the literary sign is to lead the way to the naturalization of other, less persuasively illusionary signs that the culture would impose upon its members.

In suggesting this political extension, I am repeating, though in different language, the warnings of Bertolt Brecht, who in our time related drama to the sociopolitical realm and sought to free us from the illusionary hold on us by them both. For him, as the traditional drama, capitalizing on the credibility produced by its verisimilitude, seize us and takes us in, it is also taking us in on behalf of the dominant political culture: by using its natural signs to take us in
aesthetically, it is imposing upon us a more general naturalization of the sign in order to take us in politically. As a staging of a sociopolitical program, it seeks to manipulate its viewers, and does manipulate them unless it is resisted by those it would persuade. Hence Brecht would replace the theater of illusion with a theater of alienation, a theater that, instead of seeking credibility, forces us to emancipate ourselves from domination by the natural sign in drama and, consequently, from domination by the natural sign in sociopolitical institutions. An alternative to illusionistic drama becomes, for him and his agenda, a political necessity.¹²

But I have been arguing that even if in spite of itself, the drama has always provided its own alternative within itself. Even in the most illusionistic version of dramatic theory as would-be natural sign, the drama it sanctions is driven to undo itself. So while it apparently is seeking to exercise what I have described as its coercive function, the drama, through its inevitable self-contradictions and self-exposure, also, as a mode of the aesthetic, produces its own model corrective, which should help us resist being taken in by the myth of the natural sign—in society as in art, though thanks to art. The fact that drama, despite its avoidance of non-natural-sign representational forms such as narrative, comes to depend on just such forms forces it to disclose its own arbitrary-conventional, its other-than-natural, character. Consequently, the drama’s betrayal of itself as merely a conventionally controlled representation, emptily mimetic, and not the thing itself, reveals the illusionary character of the aesthetic sign’s apparent (as if) pretensions to be a natural sign and stands as an emblematic warning against all claims to natural authority.

Not long after Johnson delivered the ultimate and devastating critique of the natural-sign aesthetic in the form it was given by dramatic theory in its strictly neoclassical version, that aesthetic was abandoned in its naiveté. It is an unhappy consequence (for I think it is no mere coincidence) that once the natural-sign aesthetic is displaced, the drama itself appears to suffer its own decline among com-

¹². Using the practical language of the theater to propose his “alienation effect,” Brecht makes this point again and again in his writings. In Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), something of this sort is said throughout. See esp. “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting” (pp. 91–99) and no. 43 of “A Short Organum for the Theatre” (p. 192), which contains the following as its final sentence: “The new alienations are only designed to free socially-conditioned phenomena from that stamp of familiarity which protects them against our grasp today.”
peting literary genres. In these pages we have watched a newer theory authorize a semiotic that privileges other kinds of verbal representation, mainly the novel and the lyric. But we have also seen that this theory eventually comes to justify these genres as alternatives to the apparently natural signs of the drama through a formalism that would objectify the individual text, thereby finding only another way of achieving an illusionary naturalization of its conventional signs. So though it turns away from the natural-sign aesthetic, the organicist-formalist aesthetic seeks in its own way to naturalize the literary sign so that, still addressed to our semiotic desire, literature can continue to work as a persuasive agent doing the coercive work of its culture. However different in its appeal, this theory may also be traced back to political sources or forward to political consequences. But we will see that as with natural-sign theory, it will have to face an unsettling rebound produced by the stubborn resilience of literary signs.

I have, in these chapters, traced three very different versions of the claim to an authorization of poetry by "nature," one picking up from the demise of the preceding version, as if poetics could not survive without such a claim. After narrating the rise and fall of the natural-sign aesthetic, I turned to the line of theory that is founded on a special power in the poet that is claimed as the direct expression of the power of nature. In Chapter 4 I found in followers of the Longinian tradition the shift from an interest in natural-sign representation to an interest in the natural expression in language of the human creature as creator of the sublime. And in Chapter 7 I described as the third version the organicist insistence on the poet as a quasi-divine maker of an object whose teleological completeness makes it an idealized realization of a natural object. Organic nature, working through the poet, expresses itself in the shaping, in and through a medium, of an object—a perfect substitute for, and improvement upon, nature’s objects, and sanctioned by that natural principle of the organic that it so fully satisfies. To elaborate this claim here I could recall from Chapter 7 Coleridge’s remarkable quotation on the intrinsic character of organic form as nature’s. I repeat only the conclusion: "Such as the life is, such is the form. Nature, the prime genial artist, inexhaustible in diverse powers, is equally inexhaustible in forms." Following upon the tradition from Longi-

nus to Burke to Shelley that found nature in the language of unmediated expression, organicism—developed from Coleridge to the New Critics—returns to the poetic object by way of a theory of forms that also leans on a natural sanction, though it is internally rather than externally derived. However revisionary, it even claims its special object to be a kind of natural sign, though the concept of "nature" being appealed to has little in common with the nature of the natural-sign aesthetic.

Thus behind modernism's myth we still find the appeal to nature, as Schiller long ago reminded us: it is an appeal to nature as model, if no longer as object, though it is an appeal in its way even more presumptuous than what we observed in the natural-sign aesthetic. What modernism unwittingly shares with the natural-sign aesthetic is a flight from the arbitrary and conventional as insecure and the desire to claim an authority beyond the fleeting vagaries of time. Hence modernism returns to spatiality, though it does so in a metaphysical context that has acknowledged the epistemological dominance of the temporal. In following this theoretical development and expressing my concerns about it, I have continually conceded that the organic aesthetic carries with it a mystification with almost as much power to deceive as those simpler claims for nature made on behalf of the mimetic aesthetic of natural signs that we examined—and discarded—earlier.

The making of a "second nature" by the poet's I AM asserts human mastery over accident, a godlike act of genesis that subdues the unshaped in the name of power, the creative power. Seen thus, this relentless power, a projection of the liberated human ego, which absorbs whatever it touches into the shapes formed in accordance with humanly imposed ends, can be viewed as an aesthetic reflection—an idealized version—of the dream of private enterprise, as the purest extension of a humanistic dominance produced by an ultimate engineering. Indeed, in the nineteenth century the rising idolatry of the national state as an organic construct, with a growth that has been guided into the created perfection of a work of art, may be viewed—and these days is invariably viewed—as another reflection of a language that permits the aesthetic to be extended into the sociopolitical realm, so that it is seen as a reflection of that

14. I have borrowed this notion, which runs through Schiller's Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man (1795), and adapted it to the development of literary theory as it moves into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
realm, or even, perhaps, as a product of the rhetorical motives generated by that realm.

Accordingly, we have properly come to view this theory with suspicion, and to question its claim to "disinterestedness," while fearing for the hidden political consequences of its aesthetic realm and the organicism sponsored by that realm in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Granted, with organicist theorists we are far removed from the world of Pope and the reactionary motives that earlier I suggested his rhetoric may have preferred to conceal, but the dubious relationship between the rhetoric of the organicist aesthetic and either its sociopolitical consequences or its sociopolitical motives can be shown to be similar. Once again the arbitrary play of institutional power seems, however subliminally, to be guiding the aesthetic much as it does the other elements of culture, all as part of an ongoing arena of conflict for control. Consequently, as the postmodern disposition examines the claims for the "disinterested" power—at once moral and normative—of the literary work, presumably backed by an objective natural authority, that disposition invokes its own rhetoric of suspicion to reduced those claims to their historically contingent, institutionally instructed biases.

In Chapter 7 we watched as critics inflated the visionary ambition of poems as modernist aesthetic objects, as verbal emblems. They used poems to project visions of temporality, collapsed within their spatial confines, into the realm of myth seen as metaphysically authorized transformations of human history. These were to become authentic visions for us all, their poetic status legitimizing them as ultimate forms of nature. The poem, then, was in the end revelatory, and what it revealed was somehow out there for us all, through careful enough reading, to apprehend. It was, finally, a simulacrum, and somewhere it had its object. For all that modernist theory would deny to earlier claims for mimesis, in making these claims it too, in its own way, could be seen as reaching for a metaphysical imitation of nature and hence as setting itself up as a natural-sign aesthetic after all.

The myth of the natural sign dies hard, and its persistence is very likely related to the unspoken sociopolitical interest in catering to it. At a number of points in this study we have seen the extent to which Gombrich's work on illusion helped to expose the potential deceptions in the illusion of the natural sign, to reveal the bankruptcy of an aesthetic that took it as truth. There may, then, be no better example for me of the persistence of the natural-sign myth than Gom-
brich. Even for Gombrich himself, who has been credited with burying it for good—and has been so credited by me—it never quite died. Indeed, in his later work it has been reemerging explicitly—and embarrassingly for those of us who thought of ourselves as following him. Many of Gombrich’s readers saw his earlier arguments as leading to the claim that all art arises out of, and functions by way of, conventional signs. But Gombrich was himself to reject this reading of his work as part of his general rejection of what he terms “conventionalism.”

The temptation to hang onto the belief that the “nature” of one’s own culture is nature for all leads its victim to believe that he or she knows what nature objectively is, what it demands, and what it looks like for all who would imitate it. It leads both to cultural provincialism and to cultural imperialism. In the face of all he contributed to the treatment of art as a series of interpretable codes, Gombrich nevertheless remains such a victim of the temptation held out by the natural-sign aesthetic, despite the fact that his distinctive authority comes from his apparent resistance to that temptation. In retreat from the denials (attributed to him) of nature’s singleness, knowability, and authority, Gombrich now denies instead that his theory “lent support to an aesthetics in which the notions of reality and nature had no place.” Thus he denies too that he “had subverted the old idea of mimesis and that all that remained were different systems of conventional signs which were made to stand for an unknowable reality.” Assured of the universal dominion of the reality established by and for the English scientific tradition extending from the original Royal Society to his colleague, the perceptual psychologist James J. Gibson, Gombrich must reject such readings of his work with the familiar charge that they represent “an out-and-out relativism,” presumably the enemy to British scientific hegemony, which is here made synonymous with the pursuit of truth.

My language here makes evident my own acknowledgment of the cultural—and, beneath that, probably political—consequences of any commitment to a monolithic concept of nature. This commit-

ment would project the arbitrary and yet conventional product of cultural institutions into "nature," "out there," to be used by those institutions to make their claim to be universally controlling forms. Even if unconsciously ethnocentric, the commitment cannot help but try to be hegemonic, even in so innocuous a disguise as that of an aesthetic theory. As Brecht warned, in its yearning for the "natural," it can use the aesthetic for a subliminal political persuasiveness. Our desire to read the sign as natural can thus have effects that are dangerous as well as illuminating: it may reveal the idols of our culture to us but may also enslave us to them.

In my survey here I have tried to show how, under the pressures of a philosophical tradition and the hierarchy that follows from it, convention intrudes upon the arbitrary, catering to our desire to see it too as natural, and in a way that connects semiotic explorations in aesthetics to our attitudes toward sign-functioning in sociopolitical areas of human concern. Seen from this perspective, the history of sign-functioning as attributed to the arts by aesthetic theory, with its narrative of conflicts and delusions in the alternating fortunes of natural and arbitrary-conventional signs, can be viewed as an allegory—with the special illusionary purity of an aesthetic allegory, if you will—of the story of signs, with their dangerous and error-filled pretenses to authority, in society's long chase after the power of enforcement that claims to derive from "nature." But I have tried to show also that the aesthetic can have its revenge upon ideology by revealing a power to complicate that is also a power to undermine.

I have argued that these complications, and hence these underminings, are introduced into our flight from the natural sign by means of the duality of the word's power both to be and not to be an image—in an older jargon, to be intelligible without yielding up an attachment to the sensible. Whether in drama or a less visually mimetic genre, the verbal arts, more than any less ambiguous sign system, remind us of the illusion at the base of our semiotic desire for the natural sign: that it is less a desire for pure presence than for an illusionary presence, the idea of a presence that can extend, or, even more, elevate, the pleasures and prospects—while postponing the death—of the sensible. But since it occurs only in words, the attempted deception is always only half meant. So long as those shaped words, even or especially shaped into an ekphrastic form, are there to remind us that we are not intended to be deceived—not even when they are most like images—we should be in less danger of being taken in by the monstrous attempts, at every level of our cul-
ture from the aesthetic to the political, to claim a natural sanction for human inventions, those wayward institutions that would rule us.

Indeed, I do not mean to dissipate the aesthetic, with its dependence on the recurring illusion of the natural sign, by reducing it altogether to the interests and powers of sociopolitical reality. The history of the tenacity of the natural-sign aesthetic is more than the history of error (and, when that sign is projected into other areas, of dangerous error), though it is that. What lies behind it is the history of the semiotic desire for the natural sign, the history of the unavoidable longing, in the individual and in culture, to find and to nourish a language authorized by its mirroring of the external reality we call "nature," though, alas, always in accordance with our imperialistic tendency to see contingencies in all conceptions of what is "natural" except our own. It is a longing I have been noting ever since the desperate, and desperately complex, ironies of Plato's *Cratylus*, and it is one of the more potent stimuli for culture's persistent indulgence of the arts. It accounts for the pleasure that Aristotle reminds us we take in imitation and for the fact that some trace of the mimetic appeal of art pops up again each time we think it obliterated.

So we ignore this longing at our peril. The postmodern perspective reminds us that many works these days routinely play self-consciously with their status as art to the point of destroying it. Such outrageous self-consciousness, the more so for having become routine and even conventional, obliterates the subtleties of self-reference that in older works sustained the illusionary aesthetic for which I have been arguing. And yet, as our continuing fealty to older works in our tradition reveals, the longing persists, and will very likely withstand the most radical toying with it that we find today—even in the technological innovations of the film. If the longing will not go away, no matter how we deconstruct it, we will do well to try to understand it and how to live with it, to allow it its role in our anthropological fullness, though without succumbing to it. In recognizing this longing and coming to terms with it without totally yielding to it, the literary work of art thus takes on the social function of serving as a model for less aesthetic discourse. It is exhilarating and, except for its self-corrective tendencies, would be dangerously deceptive in its illusionary character. (I suppose I still think of drama as leading the way, although in this study I have tried to argue that the ekphrastic element in any literary work should allow it to be accorded similar power for those of us who will see it there.)
The literary work of art is exhilarating in its appeal to our semiotic desire for the natural sign, but it can be admittedly deceptive in the illusory nature of that appeal, as—in our best cases—it appears to confess whenever, in self-reference, it reveals its merely conventional, its artificial, basis. Following Brecht, I am claiming that we need art's self-undoing to stimulate the alienation that warns us away from a culture's delusions that would legitimize its authority by an appeal to nature. Its ideology derives from a totalizing that would delude us by denying its status as conventional only, and hence as illusionary. By contrast, it is art that is the de-totalizer by means of its self-awareness, its self-display of illusion as illusion. Just as an art with pretensions to being a natural sign may set an example by which a culture's other, non-aesthetic signs—reflective of power—can legitimate themselves through the claim to natural authority, so an art of self-conscious illusion may set an example for the stripping away of such claims. Thus, contrary to the charge of recent theorists, to aestheticize the political is to dis-arm it, provided we have a full enough sense of what the aesthetic can do. It would thus provide a counter-ideological, rather than an ideological, service. In this way we can make use of the semiotic desire for the natural sign instead of being abused by it. And it is the role of art to play the unmasking role—the role of revealing the mask as mask. Within discourse it is the literary art that is our lighthouse, serving as both beacon and warning, as it demonstrates what discourse—discourse that is less self-enveloping and self-disclosing and hence more suspect—can lead us in unwary moments to accept as "natural." By means of the literary art and the shrewd self-awareness it encourages, we can create for ourselves a second innocence, but this time one that is armed against what would take advantage of it.

This, then, is one of the major functions of art in culture: within the received language of a culture, the arbitrary-conventional comes to take on the appearance of the "natural," and its arts flourish to the extent that they create their illusionary "realities," which, under the spell of aesthetic experience, carry the conviction of their naturalness, whether on canvas, in stone, on stage or page. In sophisticated cultures they also undercut that conviction by their self-consciousness, their confession of the art they are and the reality they are not. It is a self-consciousness to be encouraged, for in this reflexive action they serve their culture well, as emblems of the semiotic ambivalence each healthy culture ought to have, cherishing the illusions it has created, provided it never stops distrusting them.
and their claims to be a "natural" reality. While it examines those illusions and those claims, a culture discovers itself through questioning its reasons for attaching itself to them. And self-discovery, with its attendant skepticism, would constitute a worthy end for the cultivation of all the arts.

But this may sound too positive as a conclusion for a chapter promising postmodern skepticism. Let me here too introduce the doubts I proposed earlier, doubts created by the fear of parochialism, as I worry about putting forth, as if it were universal, this unique cultural mission for literature: the mission of catering both to our need for semiotic illusion and to our need to see it, for all its glory, as illusionary. What if our commitment to this mission is too readily in accord with the political reasons that justify and extend our comforts? Even more damning, what if, as Chapters 5 and 7 surely suggest, we can see our language and our arts being made by poets to work in these ways for us only because they appeal to the Christian semiotic habit of metaphor built into our cultural history and thus into our private psychological and linguistic histories that follow from it? How far need we retreat, once we concede this much to our history? On behalf of at least some of those oppressed by that history—as well, perhaps, as liberated by it—how can I resist asking why we should reject such a luminous gift of illusionary verbal presence (dare I say a present of presence?), even if it is we who fill it with that presence—first our poets and then ourselves in a happy complicity?