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The *Laokoon* Today: Interart Relations, Modern Projects and Projections

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Dispute alone nourishes the spirit of investigation, keeps prejudice and authority unsettled; in short, hinders painted untruth from establishing itself in place of truth.

G. E. Lessing, *Wie die Alten den Tod gebildet*

Abstract The encounters of modern theory with the *Laokoon* have produced various misreadings of its fundamentals (e.g., its idea of mimesis, its semiotics, aesthetic values, interart relations) and in turn of the operational consequences (e.g., for time/space deployment, for the comparative method, for ekphrasis or the reverse, verbal-to-visual transfer). The misreadings often show a hostile approach to Lessing, as a supposed threat to a range of ideoartistic norms and projects favored nowadays, and all the more dangerous because of his influence. Against this background, the article rereads the *Laokoon* to demonstrate that the closer our engagement with it on its own terms, the better can we use it, or even oppose it, productively according to our lights.

1. After the *Laokoon*

Of all past works on aesthetics, certainly on the sister arts, the *Laokoon* is the most cited nowadays and the worst read. A comparison with the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century responses to it assessed throughout Blümner 1880—or, on a single theme, in Burwick 1999—does not exactly

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flatter modern performances. Least of all does it reflect credit on those you would suppose best equipped to understand the metadiscourse of art from within, incomparably better than in any other age less taken up with the criticism of criticism. I am referring to interpretations of Lessing by practitioners who are themselves anchored or engaged in the theoretical (re)analysis of much the same problems he addressed and within the disciplines he brought together: aesthetics, semiotics, literary, pictorial, and interart studies, down to the arts of controversy. These encounters with the neoclassical classic are by far the strangest, the richest in larger interests, vested interests among them, and the most symptomatic of twentieth-century developments, all the way to paradigm changes or reversals, as well as the most influential on the shaping of Lessing's current image. I will therefore focus on them, without neglecting the relevant scholarly data and aids (e.g., the wider corpus, the draft material, the inferrable trajectories of genesis) that sometimes lie beyond their purview.

Again, disciplinary variations cross with others. Those modern readings of the *Laokoon* thus modulate between full-scale commentaries and passing comments, yet the significance is not necessarily proportionate to the detail. Above all, as regards the interpretive product, the encounters with the text extend from underreading through misreading to outright counterreading, but the second half of the range is the more thickly, and instructively, occupied. At this level of expertise, one seldom comes across a body of interpretations so vulnerable to judgments of truth and falsity to the given discourse, and on key points at that.

Typical examples, often combined, would be the presentation of Lessing's approach to art as mimetic, in various senses. Or the disregard for his aesthetic universals, which evolve and explain the whole theory by a means-end rationale. Or the flattening of his semiotics—and with it his partition of the arts and his repertoire of artistic devices—to one code-variable, namely, arrangement in time/space. Or his oxymoronic but twice-negative imaging as an enemy of pictorial art—literary pictorialism militantly included—and as a throwback to the attacked *ut pictura poesis* tradition at once. Most constant among and across the lines of misconstruction is the failure to see the *Laokoon* as a whole. That an aesthetics so insistent on the need for an integrative, holistic overview of the work's parts (“at a glance”) should suffer this fate makes a rather sad irony.

How are we to account for counterreadings of such an order? Lessing himself must shoulder part of the responsibility, if only for his critics' exercises in atomism. As early as the Preface, he dissociates himself from German overmethodicalness in attributing the work's origin to “chance” and its growth more to “the course of my reading” than to “the systematic

development of general principles”: “unordered notes for a book rather than a book.” Similar disclaimers resound throughout. Against Winckelmann on the Laocoon group, “I will write down my thoughts in the order in which they developed in me”; or, having referred to expectant mothers’ dreams of adultery with pictured gods, “but I am digressing”; or, having mimed an allegoresis of Agamemnon’s scepter, “yet this lies outside my way”; or, the inquiry into Achilles’ shield over, “I return to my road, if a saunterer can be said to have a road” (Lessing 1963: ix, 2–3, 11, 98, 126, 168).

No particular expertise in the man’s art of writing, or the book’s long genesis, is required to sense that he protests too much. That the professed erraticism does not correspond to the actual trajectory of the argument (never mind that of the envisaged three-volume opus) will emerge below. Yet it has encouraged atomistic responses on a scale and to an effect he would hardly imagine, let alone countenance. Thus we find an epigram, a local emphasis, a provisional rule, or a dichotomy set up for analytic exploring, torn out of context; a multiple semiotic taxonomy narrowed down to its thrust at a certain phase, or divorced from its aesthetic regulators; an excursus blown up into a Freudian slip or association that gives away some ominous (e.g., sexist) prejudice; an excerpt deconstructed, by hook or by crook, into self-belying; and so forth, always with the selective chapter and verse to match.

Not that the atomists lack encouragement in the first place, even apart from the inevitable allures of simplifying. Less innocently, for example, singling out a fragment helps to assimilate Lessing to his background—old ut-pictorialist, old/new semioticist, new German aestheticist—via partial and surface resemblance. In turn, putting him in his place generally comes to assume another sense, whereby historicizing doubles as a weapon for normative downgrading, one of many at that. Here indeed lies the crux of the apparent mystery of counterreading. Regrettably, the theory-oriented encounters with the *Laokoon* nowadays are all too often hostile, some more than others, some more openly than others. Readers ill disposed approach it not on its own terms, not even as an alternative, far less a mirror image, but as an obstacle, or *the* enemy, to their own cherished values, concepts, tools, field mappings, (inter)disciplinary alliances, artistic and research priorities. Yet the very assaults amount to a left-handed tribute, the ruptures to a witness of continuity. Had the book not defined and foregrounded issues that remain of major concern, had its solutions not appeared to so many as intuitively right, it would have posed a lesser threat to adversaries. Thus the modern drives against the tyranny of time, against the (neo)classical norms of beauty, illusion, lucidity, economy, rationality,

proper limits, as toward “spatial form,” self-reflexiveness, opaque media and meaning, leveling up or down, composite art or specifically, by a resurgence of the old ut-pictorialism, toward painting/poetry bonding not bounding—all find Lessing in their way. He is the dangerous other, worth dating and disarming, best dead if undomesticable.

This prejudgment would appear to affect, not to say justify, the means exercised on him, the notions imputed or denied to him, the memories retained of his actual argument, and the images circulated. Where reading turns into an ideoartistic battlefield, hermeneutics comes second to polemics and politics. It does not result even in strong misreadings, as productive of fresh theoretical light and energy in their way as strong criticisms and developments in theirs. Little of the kind has been gained from reducing the *Laokoon* to mimeticism, assimilating it to its age, disregarding its value frame, narrowing its semiotics, branding it with iconophobia and sexism, or the rest of the nonconstructive practices of dispute. Earlier encounters with Lessing, or his own and his predecessors’ with *their* classics, especially the *Poetics*, shine by comparison. A corresponding variety of insidious forces generated the versions of Aristotle put together by Renaissance and neoclassicist commentators to suit their own latter-day projects, except that those projections were invariably favorable, their target invoked for his seminality and authority, the departures rich in intrinsic as well as historical value.

In my opinion and experience, unless you want to fight one ideology with another, a change of attitude toward the classic recommends itself, especially with contemporary agenda and developments in view. The most professional way also pays best. My rereading of the *Laokoon* has been undertaken not only for its own sake but equally for ours: the two interests meet. Coming to grips with it on the real issues, I believe, can teach us a good deal, not least about ourselves, about whether, where, and why it should trouble us, and about how to use, even to counter it productively. Understanding Lessing’s masterpiece, with whatever sympathy and admiration, is not yet accepting its premises and procedures, nor rewriting them into the Newest Laocoon. The case, as will gradually arise from my counterproposals, is often quite the opposite, and at principled junctures, too, like the question of narrativity across the arts or the repertoire of semiotics. Such divergences, in turn, go back to a yet deeper one over what I style the Proteus Principle: the many-to-many correspondence between form (sign, code, textual given, uncontextualized part) and function, whose endless interplay Lessing would keep within bounds. To others, understanding will undoubtedly suggest different points of contact and friction that repay inquiry.

An essay, though, cannot cover the whole ground. The following argument draws together some threads from a work in progress on interart (or sister art) relations after the *Laokoon*, in three meanings of afterness: according to, posterior to, and in the light of. This triangulation, I hope, will go some way toward establishing that, despite all readings and claims to the contrary, Lessing's method and the issues on which he focused it are alive today, regardless of how variant our answers may turn out.

2. Mimesis Unlimited, Art Delimited

2.1 The Forked Trail of Mimesis

To René Wellek (1955: 163), Lessing “seems uninterested in or vague about the question: what is the common element in all the arts?” Few modern commentators would agree, but fewer yet—and oddest of all, scarcely any theorists—have produced the imagined absentee by locating the distinctive commonality of art where it plainly belongs from the outset. Instead, we encounter an ever-growing tendency to substitute a false and forked answer in terms of Lessing's drive toward “mimesis.” Wendy Steiner (1982: 13) runs together the chief variants:

[His] distinction between the arts . . . is utterly dependent upon the premise of mimesis, and in fact on the more precise notion of iconicity, as a common feature of the arts. If it were not important for painting and literature to imitate reality, i.e. to be like it, to contain some of its properties, then it would not matter whether actions or bodies were taken as subjects. And why must “these symbols indisputably require a *suitable* relation to the thing symbolized” if not to ensure presence in the work of art? Thus, underlying Lessing's definitive disjunction of the arts is a hidden analogy: painting is as lifelike as poetry is; both are iconic of reality.

Bent on precision, as it were, Steiner equates “mimesis” with “iconicity” in being “like” reality, “lifelike,” hence a crossartistic feature. An odd equation, odder yet for a semiotic theorist to draw, except that it has such a long history and insidious appeal as to pass for self-evident. It goes back to Plato's *Cratylus* (where mimesis foreseeably embraces “natural” over against “conventional” signification) and recurs in strength among Lessing's contemporaries. So an ostensible kindred spirit, Edmund Burke, finds that “poetry is not strictly an imitative art”: “Nothing is an imitation further than it resembles some other thing; and words undoubtedly have no sort of resemblance to the ideas for which they stand” (1967 [1757/1759]: 172–73). If no word-to-idea resemblance, then no imitation. Apropos Lessing himself, the twinning has been most popularized by another modern

semiotician, Tzvetan Todorov, in a flattering comparison with less integrative neoclassicists. Todorov's Lessing outdoes all his predecessors in theorizing why and how "the signs of art must be motivated (otherwise we no longer have imitation)"; and the anachronistic "motivated" attaches throughout, as in Saussure, to varieties of signification by "resemblance" (Todorov 1982: 137ff.; followed in, e.g., Wellbery 1984: 26–30, 201, 236, 269 n. 67; paralleled in Wimsatt 1976: 57–58 vs. 41; Krieger 1992: 44–52). Imitative would then again equal signified-like, "iconic" in another parlance.

Across the centuries, the approaches, and the nomenclatures, the equation betrays the same category mistake, itself part of the fog enveloping the protean tie of likeness. *Mimesis*, as the umbrella term for representation, presupposes a world out there (actual or fictional) to *be* imitated and a discourse that imitates it by fashioning an image, a coded (re)semblance: one that bears in principle no more and no less resemblance to the imitated world (never mind the intermediate, imitation-embodiment code-signals) than the very idea of semblance entails. And in practice, the degree of resemblance will freely shift (as well as the code type) with the goals behind the semblance. Thus mimesis is a relation of likeness between image and object—act, thing, figure, universe—whereby one represents the other through some vehicle. According to Aristotle, for example, art imitates nature in that its plot supplies (via whatever medium, e.g., words or gestures) an artificial analogue to the principle of change built into the natural world. By the same token, if on different premises, the *Iliad* orients its mimesis to the Trojan war; Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* to the Roman empire's decline and fall; Keats's "Ode" to the Grecian urn; the Laocoon statue, to the priest and his sons in extremis; a documentary, to some real-life happening or condition; and so forth.

Iconicity, on the other hand, entails a relation of likeness between marker and thing, signifier and signified: between sound and sense in onomatopoeia, portrait and portraitee in visual media, actor's and character's utterance in the theater or the cinema. Of the work-length examples above, therefore, the documentary and the Laocoon group qualify for iconicity all over, while the verbal texts, no less "mimetic" in image-to-world principle, do not. Yet nor does the former variety qualify *because* the world-images signified necessarily manifest a closer likeness to their "real" equivalents, if any, just as they need not particularly resemble their own signifiers. Icons may distort, caricature fashion, where words speak true—or vice versa.

"For painting and literature to imitate reality, i.e. to be like it, to contain some of its properties," then, neither art would have to be(come) "iconic of reality." If representational at all, as against abstract, they must imitate regardless: in art itself, they can still cross axes with the *Laocoon's* bless-

ing, if not with the freedom wished on them by ut-pictorialists old and new. Painting, its medium definitionally iconic cum spatial, can yet suggest “actions” in time, and literature, definitionally noniconic (arbitrary) and temporal, can imply “bodies” in space, without detriment to their status as mimesis, even as artistic mimesis by Lessing’s exacting criteria. Whether or not iconic of reality’s space and time, respectively, either deploys images of reality, and not perforce true, thick, matchable, *verisimilar* images at that. Whatever the labels used for the two likeness-nexuses, the representational invariant (“mimesis”) has to be kept essentially apart from the variable semiotic type (“icon”), on pain of a category mistake.

And the *Laokoon* does silently keep them apart in analytic practice, even in usage, if only after a couple of false starts. In the first draft, Lessing called both painting and poetry “imitative arts” (*nachahmende Künste*), with the difference that one’s signs are “natural” (i.e., iconic, as well as visual and spatial), the other’s “arbitrary” (as well as auditory and temporal). Then, apparently in an overbid for theoretical connectivity and shorthand, he at once extended the name of imitation to the respective signs: “imitative signs [deployed] side by side” (*nachahmende Zeichen neben einander*) versus “imitative signs [deployed] one after another” (*nachahmende Zeichen auf einander*).¹ Unhappy, the overextension still remains a coextension, across the board. These (con)fused terms for the two sign-types recur verbatim in the later draft sent to his friends Christoph Friedrich Nicolai and Moses Mendelssohn. But when Mendelssohn urged him to equate or replace “imitative” with “natural” on the side-by-side flank, he instead deleted the adjective altogether from the noun phrase in the published version (N: 565, and cf. L: 91). “Imitative arts” or “skills,” yes; “imitative/natural” versus mere “imitative” signs, no. To his mind, evidently, those categories are distinct. Object-directed “imitation” does not interchange but intersects with semiotic “naturalness”; “naturalness” qualifies (because it encodes) rather than constitutes imitation, just like “unnaturalness” at the noniconic, arbitrary extreme. The epithet *imitative* must therefore be predicated either of all signifying features, types, systems—along with all representational practices—or, best, of none.

1. Lessing 1974a: 555. Since the exact provenance of the Lessing quotations often matters and needs to be identified at a glance, I will henceforth add the following abbreviations to the page numbers: the *Laokoon* will be referred to as L; the *Laokoon* notes and draft-material, as N, short for *Nachlass* (remains); and *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, as HD. Of these, again, the standard translations of the public texts, listed in the References, have been silently modified for accuracy, where necessary; the translations from N are my own.

2.2 False Trails: Superficial Iconicity, Unlimited World-making

Now that the conflation has been unpacked into a bifurcation, it remains to show that either fork is false to Lessing. Were iconicity (“naturalness”) by itself sufficient to make art, every drawing of the world at rest, every narrative in time, and every sound/sense echo would qualify. Of course, many do not—on grounds beyond or beneath signifying form, obviously, but on what grounds?² True enough, under the proper interpretation and latitudes, “the signs of art must be motivated” or “iconic of reality.” But the converse fails to ensue in logic or hold in Lessing—that all motivated/iconic signification is ipso facto aesthetic. And the failure should alert iconicists to a missing term of difference, a profounder and finer-grained rationale than the indiscriminate semiotic typology.

The same would apply a fortiori to “mimesis,” even without saying, except for its greater potential slipperiness as well as its yet higher popularity among Lessing commentators. But the meaning they assign to the concept turns out all too uniformly broad for its putative art-specific role, an inverse proportion that already makes you wonder. Steiner thus invokes the authority (and doubles the specular figure) of M. H. Abrams’s *The Mirror and the Lamp*. According to the historian, “Lessing concludes that poetry, no less than painting, is imitation”; he merely “reiterates . . . the standard formula” whereby “Nachahmung” is “the essence” of art (Abrams 1958: 13). Others of all disciplinary stripes echo this view, generally complete with the unsympathetic attitude toward a doctrine so naive and outdated, often also toward the would-be innovator unmasked as reiterator.³ In its routine sweeping form, however, the claim (along with the glee) proves baseless. Lessing’s mimesis, Nachahmung, cannot possibly be the “essence” of art, since it outreaches art on all fronts. Much more so than does iconicity, come to that, for his idea of signified-likeness is properly sharp, while that of world-likeness is properly kept open-ended, as befits the variform representational universal.

Here, en route from mimesis to aesthetic mimesis, Lessing brings an

2. Nor does it exactly help that some (e.g., Mitchell 1986: 99 n. 9, after Wellbery 1984: 26–30) misidentify Lessing’s “natural” signifying form itself as other than iconic.

3. E.g., the aestheticians Beardsley (1966: 160) and Danto (1981: 149, 153), the art historian Barasch (1990: 151–52), the New Critic Wimsatt (1976: 41), and the deconstructionist Jacobs (1987: 495, 498, 501) (“the entire *Laokoon*” is “predicated,” or self-described as, “a treatise” on “the nature of imitation”). Even in the closer and more historicized account of Wellbery 1984, the overemphasis thematically placed on Lessing’s “representational model of aesthetics”—as if representational art could dispense with representation or earlier art theory since the Greeks did—is apt to mislead. Funnily enough, it would appear that the cap of mimeticist rather fits some of Lessing’s modern accusers, including Steiner in her dealings with *ekphrasis* (see Yacobi 1995: esp. 603ff.).

Aristotelian discriminateness to bear upon a Plato-wide field of reference. A central ground for this widening is the juncture of the mimetic viewpoint, now restrictive, now expansive since antiquity, with the fresh approach via semiotics, definitionally open to the representational activity of culture at large. (If anything, the approach here shows the opposite restrictedness in marginalizing nonrepresentational design across the media.) Unlimited to poesis, his “imitation” and kindred terms range over all image-making, every affair of discourse with the world, in whatever form and however ordinary or utilitarian. Practitioners include the scientist, the man of learning, the educator, the courtier, the religionist, and “the prose writer,” alongside the poet, the painter, the sculptor, the engraver, and the dramatist.

Accordingly, the umbrella term can never account by itself for the variations in such diversified representational practice—whether in the choice of object and medium or in their handling and interplay, down to the (in)congruity between their spatiotemporal arrangements. It fails to govern so much as the kind, let alone the degree of correspondence between the imitated and the imitative sphere; the class’s intension (defining features, here the tightness or otherwise of the mimetic nexus) is predictably in inverse ratio to its extension (membership, here without end). The first loosens as the second broadens to accommodate every image/object pairing.

Actually, the class even stretches from pairings to *repairings*, by way of image transfer between and within media. For Lessing equally applies “imitation” to an artist’s borrowing of another’s object or means of representation (L: esp. 33–54, 71–76). He commends the former, especially to the painter, and condemns the latter as an ut-pictorialist excess. But the judgment never affects the terminology, nor does the direction of transfer or its inter- or intra-art bearing. “The idea of Virgil’s having imitated [*nachgeahmet*] the [Laocoon] artists is more inconceivable to me than the contrary hypothesis”; later painters “imitated” *The Sleeping Cyclops* by Tiamanthes (L: 43; N: 647).

A sharper analysis would further distinguish, terminologically as otherwise, patterning after an earlier work from perceptible reworking. It would also mark off first- from second-order mimesis, discourse about the world from discourse about discourse about the world: object representation from image re-presentation in quoted, “allusive” shape, within the same medium or across media (see Sternberg 1982a and 1982b for a general theory and Yacobi 1995 for interart transfer). Nowadays, when representation looms larger than ever, when problems of quoting have assumed central interest in various fields, and when interart study has refocused the ways of exchange—notably visual-to-verbal *ekphrasis*—such distinctions

are indispensable. But this only highlights the extent to which “mimesis” cuts across levels of image-making on top of all other parameters.

The wider the coverage, in short, the weaker the differential force: exactly as Lessing would have it and clean against his reductionist interpreters. At their hands, a true yet nonspecific precondition of art misleadingly comes to the fore, as if it were distinctive. Yes, “poetry, no less than painting, is imitation,” but then imitation outreaches both, as it exhausts neither. And yes, “mimesis” is here “the common feature of the arts” but not common to them only nor their only (“the”) common one: necessary, like iconicity, the condition yet falls well short of sufficiency. All the shorter because the necessity runs to the limit of ineluctable or automatic hold throughout discourse, never taken as other than world-oriented. So the imitative combines maximum extensionality (equaling the discursive) with minimum intensionality (equaling the representational) to leave the aesthetic domain twice unmarked, boundless and featureless at once.

Hence also the nonsequitur in Steiner’s ensuing argument about the division of world-axes by their imitability: “If it were not important for painting and literature to imitate reality, i.e. to be like it, to contain some of its properties, then it would not matter whether actions or bodies were taken as subjects.” Aside from the doubling of likeness-relations, the premise is trivial, because deemed by Lessing universal, and the consequent undeducible. For Lessing’s prose writer, it is as “important . . . to imitate reality”—or else how would he transmit anything, let alone with, say, utilitarian exactitude?—yet the “actions or bodies” divide need not indeed matter. He will rather alternate freely between enactment and embodiment, (hi)storytelling and describing. Nor, conversely, would the divide matter to the poet or painter if the important thing for them were likewise “to imitate reality” as such, instead of creating imitative art under its peculiar rules. The very Lessingian phrase “imitative art(s)” encapsulates the point. A redundancy to Aristotle, who would find the two terms mutually implicative, it assumes a cutting edge that he might appreciate—even in dissent—where “art(s)” has switched meanings: from the co-referent to a qualifier, delimiter, and regulator of “imitation.”

A, not *the* qualifier, I emphasize, albeit the most far-reaching and well-defined of all, especially in the pressure exerted on what’s by why’s and how’s, on representation by communication. Amid the watchword’s inclusive, Plato-like coverage, an Aristotelian eye for purposive difference guides the subdivision of the resulting mimetic field—into nonart versus art, to begin with. Either subfield has in Lessing its priorities of value, so

that even common ends and attributes (a fortiori means) undergo scalar change between them, reversal included.

2.3 Discourse in a Functional Perspective: The Aesthetics of Impact

Considering Lessing's interart focus, it would be an exaggeration to say that he "defines the position of art within the culture at large" (Wellbery 1984: 234). The scattered hints on the topic, though, show that the key variables in play are the mimetic constant's status and working, not its object and medium. Lessing never quite splits the representable world between culture's general and aesthetic practice, never even earmarks the fictive or the mythological zone, in a way at all analogous to his insistence on, say, the body/action divide within art itself. None of the media is reserved, either, language forming only the commonest common property. Objects, vehicles, and semiotic activities rather group together or branch out according to their teleology—or, in newer and sharper parlance, their dominant.

Extraartistic discourse may thus want to capture reality for its own sake, in pursuit of "truth" or "knowledge" or "understanding" or "completeness." On this agenda, "the prose writer is satisfied with being intelligible, and making his representations plain and clear" (L: 100–103), no matter how obtrusive, tiresome, or communicatively discordant, in short, the representational sequence. Less appropriately, such a rank order of values will guide "the didactic poet (for in as far as he is didactic he is no poet)." Virgil himself stoops to the role of practical biologist when he instructs us how to tell a good cow by listing its hallmarks. "Whether or not all these can be united into a vivid picture was a matter of indifference to him" (L: 106–7).

Elsewhere in life, imitation may bow to sociocultural fiat, as with the pseudo-art dictated by religion. To enhance the image's meaningfulness as object of worship, ancient "superstition loaded the gods with symbols," however disfiguring or even untraditional. To typify "his nature and functions," Bacchus would everywhere grow horns, though "an insult to the human countenance"; the Etruscan furies were piously shorn of their awesome expression and characterized instead by their dress, so generating the mismatch of the tranquil tormentor (L: 62–63, 218–20). In older parlance you might say that everything else about the image, from truth to beauty, has yielded to cultic expediency. But Lessing's turn toward semiotics now enables a critical refinement beyond the language of mimesis proper: "symbolic" (or "arbitrary") has encroached on iconic ("natural") representation.

A similar shift of hierarchy (dominant) can force itself on art—and

in turn force the victim out of the artistic sphere—under other exterior pressures, in other media, along other discourse axes. Take nationalistic or committed poetry. Unlike Achilles' shield, with the diverse scenes imaged upon it luminously evolved in the making, Aeneas's emerges after the event and darkly prefigures the remote future to the greater glory of Rome under Augustus. If in the *Georgics* Virgil represents his livestock as a didacticist, in the epic the imitative artist turns "subtle courtier, helping out his material with every manner of flattering allusion" (L: 114–16).

The arts in Lessing do imitate, then, but hardly "exist to imitate" (Beardsley 1966: 160), less so by far than truth-bound signifying at the opposite pole. To the extent that they find their definition and unity ("common feature") in mimesis, this is never as the single, ultimate, all-regulating end but at most as one artistic end among others: and not the highest one, either, so that it generally serves its betters, with a constant variability and adaptability rather characteristic of a means. Nor does this scale of importance reduce or attach to differences in ontology—for example, worlds copied versus stylized, factual versus fictional, overlying versus occult, or "brazen" versus "golden."⁴ The dominant goals actualized here through imitation of whatever kind are themselves not representational—or for that matter otherwise semantic, or expressive, or compositional—but affective.

In pigeonholing the *Laokoon's* approach as "mimetic," therefore, Abrams (1958 [1953]) confuses means with end, form with function. According to his own fourfold taxonomy, it should have appeared instead under the heading of "pragmatic," that is, audience-directed. Still exacter would be to say affect- or impact-directed, with art uniquely geared to pleasure rather than the postRomantic, Anglo-American way, to meaning. Here lies the single most important thing to realize about Lessing the critic: that he was Aristotle's truest follower among neoclassicists—if not since the rediscovery of the *Poetics* in the Renaissance—as he was his best interpreter.⁵ All his contemporary themes, usages, tastes, alliances, and imports are superficial by comparison. Inversely, even in his departures from the substance of the Aristotelian heritage, Lessing wields the inherited teleological method alongside or against the master, in the spirit of a common pursuit. A thing is what it does, and what art does is to give certain pleasurable impressions. An artwork, like every other human artifact, must work for its keep.

By the same teleo-logic, a functionalist can and today, I believe, should

4. Contra the imputation of fictionality in Ingarden 1973: lxxxii, who otherwise acknowledges Lessing as precursor (*ibid.*: liii–liv).

5. The doyen of the Chicago neo-Aristotelians, R. S. Crane (1964: 78), singles out Lessing as "the chief exception" to the rule of misreading the *Poetics* over the centuries: the ultimate accolade.

move further away from Aristotle's specific doctrines, horizons, even centers of gravity and value: all the way to the integration of feelings with meanings, of world- with discourse-making, of dramatic process with the drama of the reading process, of the objectified with the communicative, in short, as the groundwork for explaining what happens in art. (See Sternberg 1990a; 1992: esp. 474ff., with earlier references.) Lessing would never dream of such radicalism, nor perhaps accept its feasibility and consequentiality on the premises, any more than would the harder-line neoAristotelians of the mid-twentieth century. His performance, though, remains a strong alternative and challenge to the formalist or mimeticist approaches of his day, and not his day only.

The *Laokoon*'s very opening sentence points the way: "The first who compared painting with poetry was a man of fine feeling, who was conscious of a similar effect produced on himself by both arts" (L: vii). He was "first" because the "effect" (*Wirkung*) comes first in receptive experience, and so it likewise presumably came in historical time, along the sequence of mankind's aesthetic discovery. It should therefore also come first in the critical order of priorities, where the aesthetician's analysis, comparison, and theory stand or fall on their power to explain the data of what's and how's: to trace effects back to their sources in the object and means of representation, to correlate experiential with representational similarities and differences. Only, Lessing maintains, it hasn't always come so, with unfortunate results, especially in the ut-pictorialist trend. While the "man of feeling" could not go far wrong in introspection, the critics will lose their way whenever they abandon the realities of feeling (as givens, explicanda, anchorage, guide, and control-measure rolled into one) for superficialities and preconceptions of all kinds. The kind attacked throughout the *Laokoon* are, of course, the interart similarities overdrawn to the point of free, if not mandatory, intersubstitutability and virtual identity. But Lessing also subjects to the same test his own premises and conclusions, including his counteremphasis on difference, hence restricted traffic, between the arts. (The best example is his defense of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* [L: 21–32] against Lessing-type as well as against Ciceronian, French, and English antipathy to a hero who raves on stage. The impression left by this hero turning out unpredictably positive, it launches a quest for a deeper explanation, found on reanalysis in the manifold resources of drama as syncretic art.)

A first principle combined with a final court of appeal, moreover, affectivity requires the finest possible articulation and discrimination. Few aesthetic theories indeed boast such a wealth of effects, often attentively examined, untangled, or compared, always objectified in terms of representational structure. Apart from the master teleology of beauty-cum-

illusion, for example, the argument features pity, fear, wonder, sympathy, admiration, disgust, charm, terror, and ridicule, each traced to its causes. However art's mimesis enters into these, it invariably bears some pleasurable function and takes the appropriate form.

Between the two major subfields, imitation thus turns out least definitional of the aesthetic. Pursued for their own sake, it and the associated values ("truth" included) become unviable here. They will then remain extrinsic even when trained on art itself, one's own or another's: for example, the "knowledge of physical beauty . . . of the laws of perspective . . . of color" misspent by Ariosto on verbal portraiture (L: 132). The only thing such a poet does not know is how to make poetry of "all this insight and learning" by so affecting us readers that we imagine ourselves in front of his "beautiful woman" (ibid.): how to select, verbalize, linearize, mentalize an image, especially in transfer from another representational order. A study in painting does not yet count as an instance of poetry, any more than does the versified anatomy of flora in Albrecht von Haller or of livestock by a Virgil offering us tips on cow breeding (L: 103-4, 106-7).

2.4 Beauty and Illusion as Aesthetic Universals

Positively speaking, art exhibits to Lessing a unique functional systematicity. Just as imitation, elsewhere going up and down, always ranks low here, so the topmost values maintain their priority. Introducing those universals, the Preface to the *Laokoon* not only declares them invariant across the media and millennia since the classical paradigm, reigning wherever artists keep in touch with art's nature. It traces their discovery and analysis to the very origins of aesthetic generalization beyond any single art(work).

The "man of fine feeling," the first painting/poetry comparatist, already intuited that

both arts produced a similar effect upon him. Both, he felt, represent to us absent things as present, appearance as reality. Both create illusion, and the illusion of both is pleasing.

A second [inquirer] sought to penetrate to the core of this pleasure and discovered that it flows in both from the same source. Beauty, whose conception we first derive from physical objects, has general rules that apply to several things: to actions and thoughts, as well as to forms. (L: vii)

So the two distinctive master goals of art, beauty (*Schönheit*) and illusion (*Illusion, Täuschung*), supposedly arose together in history, and arise together in Lessing, at the earliest possible interart juncture to gain increasing elaboration, vindication, medium-specificity thereafter. As this progressive treatment best suits my own analysis, too, an outline of these

alleged aesthetic constants will do for now to mark them off from assorted namesakes and rivals.

What is “beauty”? A “source” of “pleasure,” to start with; and as befits an Aristotelian, one necessarily involving mimesis yet, against Aristotle, not entailed by it. In the *Poetics*, art is coterminous with mimesis, hence with mimetic enjoyment—wherever you have the one, there you have the other. Nothing shows so well how “natural” it is “for all to delight in works of imitation” as the “experience” of their metamorphic power over us: “Though the objects themselves may be painful to see, we delight to view the most realistic representations of them in art, the forms for example of the lowest animals and of dead bodies” (chap. 4; trans. Bywater). Exactly at this historic argument by empirical paradox, Lessing draws the line. (See L: 154ff. for an attempt to minimize the disaccord.) If art no longer coextends with imitation but falls within it, neither will art’s differential enjoyment. Beauty does range widely, from “physical objects” to “actions and thoughts as well as to forms,” over the whole representable world, in short, but always provided that the objects represented are the highest of their kind. For the necessary condition to advance toward sufficiency, the range must shrink vertically, as it were. With the object-field turned scalar (i.e., value-laden, quantifiably, to Lessing also universally so) and the top grades alone qualifying, beauty is the imitation of “perfection.”

The example of visual art suggests itself, because Aristotle invokes it for his own mimetic paradox regarding “lowest animals . . . dead bodies.” Given that the aesthetically pleasurable now attaches to the perfect, the treatment of the “physical” (material, beholdable) world ensues with contrapuntal force:

Painting as an imitative skill can express ugliness; painting as a fine art will not express it. In the former capacity, all visible objects belong to it; in the latter, it confines itself to those visible objects which arouse agreeable impressions [*Empfindungen*]. (L: 153, also 155, 167)

The statement loses in translation a persuasive wordplay, one of many devised by Lessing to clinch an issue. “Art as aesthetic object must have an aesthetic object” would offer an English analogue to the rhetoric of deduction thrown in by the punster. *Fine art* is in the German *schöne Kunst*, whereby the very referring phrase embodies the law of beauty governing the referent and literally motivates the distances alleged to follow from it: between “skill” and “art,” “can” and “will not,” possible reach and self-imposed confinement within the visible world. Likewise with the shrinkage of the poet’s gamut of invisibilia or movements. So aesthetic mimesis looks to the chosen object-with-affect for its differentiability, pleasure, and name

at once. A “beautiful” art trafficking in “ugliness” would be, as it were, a contradiction in terms.

Among practitioners, the “masters of antiquity” never incurred such contradiction, or not without sociocultural reprisals, while “moderns” flaunt it with acclaim and inverted logic:

Painting, as the art which imitates bodies upon flat surfaces, is now generally practised throughout its entire range; yet the wise Greek set much narrower limits to it, and confined it strictly to the imitation of beautiful bodies. . . . Even the vulgarly beautiful, the beauty of inferior types, was only his incidental subject, his exercise, his recreation. The perfection of the object itself must give delight in his work. He was too great to require the beholders to be satisfied with the mere barren pleasure arising from a successful likeness or from consideration of the artist’s skill. Nothing in his art was dearer to him or seemed nobler to him than the ultimate end [*Endzweck*] of art.

“Who would want to paint you when no one wants to look at you?” says an old epigrammatist to an extremely deformed man. Many a modern artist would say, “No matter how deformed you are, I will still paint you. Even though no one may like to look at you, they will still be glad to look at my picture; not as a representation of you but as a proof of my art [*Kunst*] in making so close a likeness of such a monster.” (L: 8–9)

[With] the realm of art greatly enlarged in modern times . . . to extend over all visible nature . . . , truth [*Wahrheit*] and expression [*Ausdruck*] are deemed its first law. As nature herself always sacrifices beauty to higher ends, so should then the artist subordinate it to his general purpose, and pursue it not further than truth and expression allow. Enough that truth and expression transform what is ugliest in nature into a beauty of art. (L: 16)

To the skewedness of the divisive picture drawn here (just recall Aristotle on visual or, generically, comic mimesis) we will return. So, on the credit side, will we to the latitudes offered at further stages of choice and patterning—among the *Laokoon*’s shrewdest developments. Meanwhile, taking the wishful tale of art history at face value, including the double correlation of period with subject matter, let us, rather, explore the normative clash below the narrative.

As latter-day “moderns” will automatically identify with Lessing’s post-classicists, observe that the old/new, old-new duel reduces to no dualism, or binarism, and is therefore all the less decidable in the abstract. The parties divide not by the attitude toward any single value, like beauty, or supervalue, like freedom in art, but by the grading of assorted and adverse values. “Beauty” contends for representational dominance with “truth,” “skill” (or “difficulty”), and “expression”—all goal-driven norms that would at least stretch the representable world beyond the limit of

beauty or even privilege the unbeautiful. And freedom or otherwise, limitation this way or that, accordingly turns on the outcome of the contest.

“Beauty,” as already explicated, requires a “perfect” or “ideal” object for “pleasure”: in a scalar rephrasing geared to the above quote, (life)likeness must wait on liking and, in graphic art, looks. By contrast, “truth” aspires to “successful likeness”—to mimesis for its own sake, as also for that of knowledge or practicality outside art—regardless of the object’s traits, appeal, or order of existence. “Skill,” best exhibited and tested against the line of most resistance, always in search of *difficulté vaincue*, will even disdain the beautiful object as too easy. So will “expression” in its preference for strong feelings.

Hierarchies are therefore inevitable, inevitably antagonistic, not just rival, charged with operational implications, and to Lessing also normatively decidable a priori. “The wise Greek” having recognized beauty “as the first law of arts,” everything else “must totally give way, if incompatible with beauty and, if compatible, must at least be subordinate to it” (L: 11, 13). Among other consequences drawn, the truth of lifelike portraiture gave way (in Thebes, mandatorily) to the heightening of the original’s beauty, while its lessening fell under the ban, and an entire pictorial genre or style with it: distortion for idealization, yes; for caricature, no (L: 9–10). Observe that the question of flattering or offending the portraitee does not come into it; socioartistic demand replaces—in effect, represents, fulfils, objectifies—individual desire. But then, the subject must earn the good fortune of this group sublimation by his own natural claim to aesthetics. Given originals vulgar, inferior, let alone unsightly, not even the compounding of truth with difficulty made them representable in the first place. The artist treated such unpaintables “for his exercise, his recreation,” or else paid dearly: Pauson, “whose low taste inclined him toward the faulty and ugly,” with “abject poverty”; and Pyreicus, who expended “all the diligence of a Dutch artist” on “barbershops, dirty workshops, asses, and kitchen herbs,” with the stigma of “Rhyparographer, the filth-painter” (L: 8–9). As to expressive value, the great ancient masters avoided the intensities of passion that rudely deform face and figure out of their beautiful lines in tranquility. These include rage, despair, anguish—or the excruciating pain that would visibly contort a Laocoon’s features and perpetuate a cavity in the shape of a wide-open screaming mouth (L: 11–15). Throughout, the rank order of artists and artworks corresponded to that of values, to “the degree of beauty they gave their human figures” (L: 195 n. 2).

With beauty-demoting moderns—then as since—the order of priorities reverses, “unwisely” so, of course, to the loss of the hallmark and the very name of art. The lust for truthful imitation, no matter what the object’s

intrinsic worth, is judged to confuse function-marked domains: the regulative ideals of knowledge and practicality with that of aesthetics, lifelikeness with liking. (Compare the master value's alleged sacrifice to the extrinsic idols of religion proper—"meaning" harnessed to "superstition.") Worse yet fares the seeking out of uglinesses for difficult conquest: a "barren [lit., cold] pleasure," an "uppish boasting of mere dexterity," an exercise in imitative skill gone autonomous.

Regarding "expression," finally, it is interesting that Erwin Panofsky quotes with approval Lessing's remarks on the deforming effect of violent emotion and its classical avoidance to bring out the sea change in Albrecht Dürer's variants of the "pathos motif." No longer "'beautiful,'" the postures rather turn "contorted and horrible" or uncharmingly "acqui- escent and devout"—in *Madonna with a Multitude of Animals*, even a mirror image of the original figure (Panofsky 1955: 283–84; for sharper contrast with the *Laokoon* paradigm, one might adduce Caravaggio's *Head of the Medusa* and, within modernist Expressionism proper, Edvard Munch's *The Scream*). But needless to say, and Panofsky doesn't say it, the "modern" turn now assumes the equal viability denied by Lessing himself to all three countervalues, at least in predominance. He might grant that a craftsman as gifted as Dürer can "transform what is ugliest in nature into a beauty of art" (L: 16) but never that the transformation would offset the expense and loss of inverting the classical value-scale, where pleasure accrues to art by nature selectively methodized.

Indeed, affectivity apart, what thematically links "beauty" to the co-universal of "illusion" is the principle of going with rather than against the grain, whether that of human nature and pleasure or that of the artistic medium. For the underlying link to surface, however, the companion affective value has to be elucidated in turn and matched with its objective cause.

As the Preface already generalizes, the "illusions" created by either art "represent to us absent things as present, appearance as reality" (L: vii). By itself, this would offer an age-old definition of the effect—including its (neo)classical interart variant, *enargeia*—one too wide, too loose, because simply lexical, to map itself onto any empirics, subjective or objective. No discriminated illusionary experience—vis-à-vis daydreaming, say, or hallucination—and therefore no determinate correlative in the world outside the mind as trigger. Still less would the vague affect find any anchorage in the second-order world of aesthetics. For the definitional *represent* suggests that Lessing is not much concerned with how and why we (mis)take appearances in the world of objects around us but only in that of images devised for us via signification, at a remove that art would counter(re)move

to produce virtual objecthood.⁶ For better or worse, his “illusion” as picture and power never quite duplicates the real thing. For better, since various evils that would cause pain if actual, or believed so, lose their sting at the remove definitional of mimesis and persistent even amidst illusionary mimesis. “Displeasure” then gravitates toward “agreeable feelings. . . . Terror is almost lost in desire” (L: 153, 155). And for worse, by the same token, given that the artistic image is always liable to fall perceptibly short of the reality, or its impact, even in the most iconic medium, dovetailing audiovisuality with spatiotemporality. “In drama we not only believe we see and hear a crying Philoctetes, we actually do see and hear him,” yet “the actor can rarely or never carry the representation of pain to the point of illusion,” at least not in the modern theater (L: 22, 32). Illusion, as a lifelike show outside life, presupposes a mimesis for art to manipulate somehow into the appearance of reality, the presence of the absent, whatever that may mean.

But manipulate *how*? What *does* it mean, operationally speaking? This now becomes the question, and even when duly trained on art proper, the *Laokoon* opening supplies no clue—not even in proceeding from the “amateur’s” intuitive delighted response to the “philosopher’s” analysis of its “source” and the “critic’s” anatomy of its branches. As first defined by effect, illusionary presence remains vacuous by all standards other than the reportedly experiential. Left unspecified, unexplained, hence indefinite in force and scope as in mechanism, it threatens to encompass imaging at large and indeed kindred object-world experiences along with the artistic variety: everything, in short, that has gone under this name from antiquity to yesterday.⁷ And the coverage would, moreover, run to certain illusion-driven practices that Lessing finds wanting on empirical grounds—notably the so-called Aristotelian unities as carried to absurdity and artificiality in French drama. Yet such testing also dismisses the cold comfort that other accounts over the millennia, if at all applicable, show themselves hole-ridden in the process. As ever, Lessing for one has something definite in mind.

How, then, to narrow the range left wide open in the Preface? First we must specify the term’s intension, that is, the nature of the effect produced on the experiencing subject, preferably in its universality, across artistic limits. And we must assemble it ourselves because the factors involved

6. Whether the two domains vary at all in this regard is still at issue: e.g., contrast Watzlawick 1990 with Mitchell 1990, 1994: 329–44, or their equivalents in Gregory and Gombrich 1973, title included.

7. For a panorama of approaches, see the collections in Gregory and Gombrich 1973 and Burwick and Pape 1990.

emerge piecemeal, often outside the *Laokoon*. (Were the whole concept on record, modern interpreters would find it harder to disregard or dismiss in ways to be exemplified.) Briefly, the state of illusion here is transitory, continuous, voluntary, gradable, less than complete, and oriented to the imag(in)ed matter at the expense of manner.

Though a proper reconstruction of these specific experiential constants would take too long, the following outline will show, I hope, that Lessing had a good sense of their distinctness, their interplays as a set, and their consequences for world-making. And though a full comparative reconstruction would take yet longer, I also hope to bring out the importance of articulating such a sense, regardless of the theory on or toward which it operates. Otherwise, as too often happens, “illusion” will cover a miscellany of elements, with no breakdown to enable testing, textualizing, historicizing, medium-sensitivity, combinational and permutational dynamism, or sorting out of essentials from variables, of ends from ways, or of empirics from the psycho-moral or -metaphysical baggage for which illusion has grown notorious and with which Lessing has been saddled by association. On a higher level, approaches then become proportionally difficult (or all too easy) to compare, never mind adjudicate, and findings or insights to link, refine, generalize in terms of any unified theory. The over-pessimistic belief that “the theory of illusion is the last illusion of theory” (Mitchell 1990: 65) would then realize itself by default.

Among the features of Lessing’s “illusion,” transitoriness is perhaps the most unsurprising, yet still charged with differentiability: the real-life counterpart may endure for life, inducing a dream from which you never awake. Thus the opening’s amateur diagnoses, the philosopher explores, and the critic typologizes the pleasurable affect only after the fact, because their art-wide abstraction and comparison entail re(in)trospection. Or, the other way about, note the care with which our supposed oblivion to the artist’s tools of enchantment is kept “for the moment of illusion” (*Augenblick der Täuschung*) (L: 101–2).

That moment, however, should not be taken too literally, as if denoting minimum extent, maximum transitoriness, with intermittence over longer stretches entailed. It rather emphasizes duration within limits, for the nonce, and the limits may shrink or widen, because they always coincide with those of the given work as we experience it in time. If illusion cannot last, nor must it lapse while the show still goes on. The termini of illusion are the termini of apprehension.

Along the sequence of drama, accordingly, the characters’ passions “grow up” before the auditor’s eyes “in such illusionary continuity [*illusorischen Stetigkeit*] that he must sympathize, whether he will or no” (HD: 5).

Our imaginative engagement mounts unbroken parallel to the dramatized imbroglio. This twofold continuous growth of feeling is irreducible to any automatic formulas, however associated with it in working and even name, like the French neoclassical rules. Imposed on the dramatic sequence, the “unities” of action, time, and place are all forms of continuity; so is the additional work-length “connection of scenes” that promotes “the continuity of representation” by never leaving the stage empty (HD: 139). Under Lessing’s scrutiny of French practice, however, the forms turn out to undermine rather than heighten the vital force, in that the exigencies of their observance strain credulity to the breaking point (HD: 134–42). The more of them at work and the more religious the token implementation, the worse for illusionary continuity. They bear the shared name (*Stetigkeit*) in vain.

Lessing’s harsh judgment presumes that the thread of aesthetic illusion snaps easily. His reason would start as early as the fact that, again unlike its everyday counterparts, we always go into the experience voluntarily, with double-edged results. On the positive, facilitating side, having sought it, at the expense of time and money, we welcome its spell. Yet voluntariness also entails foreknowledge of make-believe, which in turn requires artful modulation into belief, followed by continuous nursing and heightening of the state to the end. Only so would the audience come to disremember, lend credence, tremble, sympathize—and art become duly “moving”—against the initial obstacles.

By illusionist psycho-logic, the earlier the modulation starts the better. The opening, where the artwork crosses the line between worlds, therefore assumes a decisive role. Native settings, for example, have the advantage of familiarity: the writer can “at once let his personages act in accordance with their customs without having first tediously to describe” them and without our having “first to place ourselves in strange surroundings with an effort” (HD: 256–57). Even in painting, “on that first glance the chief effect depends,” our “readiness to be touched” included (L: 74). Again, contrast Dr. Johnson’s (1950: 502) sweeping denial: “The truth is, that the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the play is only a play and that the players are only players.” Lessing would rather distinguish “first” from “last” and oppose both, as the termini of the enframed artistic process, to pre- and post-illusionary wide-awakeness. The sensateness (*Sinnlichkeit*) of the percepts will charm (voluntary) perceivers out of their “senses.”

Next on my list of reconstructed features is gradability. If in affirming illusionism Lessing stands opposed to a Samuel Johnson, then in relativizing it along multiple lines he also differs from the absolutism of total illusion preached by the early Diderot, or Ibsen. Not “*only* a stage and

. . . *only* players” (or their varimedia equivalents) but not an unmediated world abutting on the audience’s life, either, nor even a single uniform in-between state. Faced with the poet’s “sensate (*sinnlich*)” image of reality, “we become more conscious of his object than of his words,” so coming “closer to that degree of illusion which a material picture is especially qualified to produce” (L: 88). The insistent comparatives (“more conscious . . . than,” “closer”), ranking seriatim two distinct pairs at that (“object/words,” then “literature/material picture”), work up to an explicit claim of gradability (“degree”).

Accidentals like skill and execution apart, the quantitative difference in intensity may turn on systematic variables, between art’s media, for example. “The same picture, whether presented to the imagination by arbitrary or natural signs, must always give us a similar pleasure, though not always in the same degree” (L: 43): the advantage can go either way, depending on the signifier’s accord (in, e.g., visuality, linearity, or the reverse) with the signified. Or, within plastic art, the life-size outilludes the miniature (N: 644–48). Or, between the time arts in/with language, the narrative relay of “story” cannot vie with the immediacy of drama (HD: 5). Within drama, again, tragedy should avoid self-reflexiveness more than comedy, for evoking our laughter “does not require the same degree of illusion” as pity (HD: 127–28).

But even at its highest, with the “semblance of truth” carried as far as it will go, tragedy style, illusion is never deemed complete. This finishing break with maximalist absolutism à la Diderot coheres with other aspects of the theory—whether the mimetic elasticity, the lifelikeness-outside-life aesthetics, the functional relativism, or the voluntariness of the experience. It stands to reason that, having knowingly entered the state of illusion, we reserve a measure of self-awareness and -command amidst self-exposure: we never forfeit our aesthetic distance altogether in the process. The less so, as will emerge, because the distancing forces inhere in the very mediacy of signification that defines the appearance of reality. Counterworked yet ineliminable, they help to keep our foreknowledge somehow alive and with it the art/life boundary. It is our aliveness to this boundary that enables the affective metamorphosis of the same object in boundary crossing. Thus most “painful emotions” arise “only in so far as we believe the evil to be actual. The memory of artificial illusion can resolve” them into “pleasure”; tragic fear and pity themselves lose the “keenness” they would have “in nature,” due to our “awareness of illusion” (L: 153, 155).

In power over us, then, Lessing’s “illusion” ranges somewhere, or anywhere, between the extreme of delusion and Coleridge’s “poetic faith” as “the willing suspension of disbelief for the moment”: always weaker, less

spellbinding than the former; stronger, more credible and positive than the latter; and more versatile than either.

The last but foremost specific arises during Lessing's quarrel with vision-oriented ("material," whether painterly or paintable) concepts of the picturesque (*malerisch*):

A poetic picture [*poetisches Gemälde*] is not necessarily one which can be transformed into a material picture [i.e., painting, *materielles Gemälde*]. But every touch, every combination of touches, by which the poet makes his object so sensate [*sinnlich*] to us that we become more conscious of this object than of his words, is picturesque [*malerisch*], may be termed a picture [*Gemälde*]. For it brings us closer to that degree of illusion which a material picture [*Gemälde*] is especially qualified to produce, and which first of all and most easily lends itself to generalizing from the material picture [*Gemälde*]. (L: 88)

The crossartistic "picturesque" (*malerisch*), given to the verbal no less than to the visual "picture" (*Gemälde*), depends on our receiving an impression so "sensate" that we are illuded into believing ourselves in front of the "object" itself. *Picturesqueness, sensateness, vividness, illusion*—the terms converge here on the same experience, testable by the same empirical criterion. For mimesis to "represent absent things as present, appearance as reality," it needs to foreground in our imagination the represented at the expense of the representational level. For example, if "we become more conscious" of the poet's "object than of his words," the illusionary effect has been achieved, one thoroughly "picturesque" even where unconvertible into a "material picture [painting]," not even in our inner eye. The only universal materiality involved cuts across the arts in requiring the salience of (imitative) matter over (verbal, auditory, visual) manner.

But this is easier said than done. (Witness the hole left in the operative mechanisms of illusion by sundry approaches throughout history and the apparent divergence among others, in the route to the common end.) How to translate experiential into representational and communicative empirics? How to map the desired illusionary affect onto its actual cause, the way beauty finds *its* objective anchorage in the image of perfection? Relative to beauty, indeed, this is much the taller order. Instead of picking the right aesthetic object from and by a scale given in advance, the artist must now so bring it to the fore of our attention as to displace a rival claimant already there. In our encounter with the artwork, after all, it is the "words" (or the form and color) that boast immediate "presence," while the "things" remain "absent" unless *made* co-present with them, let alone dominantly present in their stead. And the liberation of the picturesque from the painted or paintable image, with its strong "material"

appeal, hardly facilitates the shifting of the balance of presentness toward the immediately absent. How, then, to carry out the uphill task?

Lessing's work in the 1760s, especially the *Laokoon* (1766) and *Hamburg Dramaturgy* (1767–69), provides various clues to his answer, or set of answers, with different if reconcilable orientations, emphases, and metalanguages. As I would generalize it in brief, the means for illusionary presence range between the older mimesis and the new semiosis, all the way from realistic imaging through self-effaced discoursing to iconic mirroring. Interestingly, the novelty in focus does not advance with the order of publication. It is rather the hints interspersed throughout the later book that converge on the mimetic and middle parts of the spectrum.

The art/life boundary thus gets drawn afresh in the rejection of emplotments consistent merely with premises and beliefs extrinsic to the imagined field of reality—divine supernaturalism in Christian tragedy, for instance. However “convinced” of the “operations of grace, . . . we can only tolerate miracles in the physical world,” not “in the moral,” where all developments have “to be in accordance with the hypothetical character and . . . with strict probability.” The represented interior life, in short, demands a motivation interior to the represented world, or else, even if the artist temporarily “illudes us” into overlooking the dramatic non sequiturs, he will pay for it thereafter (HD: 8). Likewise with outer supernaturalism—apparitions on the modern stage, for example. Pace Voltaire, “religion as religion has nothing to decide here,” nor the latter-day rationalism that pretends to “better knowledge.” Instead, given that the existence of ghosts remains undecided among the audience and “the seeds of possible belief in them sown in all of us,” their germination depends on the artist's illusionist skills. If duly exercised, “no matter what we may believe in ordinary life, in the theatre we must believe as the poet wills.” Shakespeare's ghost comes on in *Hamlet* with such “a real, active” personality, such nice timing, such a vivid impact on the hero, that he registers as natural and “our hairs stand on end”; while Voltaire's will not take in a child, since it adds artificiality to absurdity, betraying “a poetic machine” thinly disguised as a miracle (HD: 31–35).

Thick or thin, the disguise already modulates from the credibility of the world-image per se to a second operational variable of illusion, namely, the perceptibility of artifice below and vis-à-vis the mimetic surface. Elsewhere I generalized the surface/artifice interplay as a universal of representation, which necessarily has two faces: one turned to the text as a model of life, a simulacrum, and the other to the text (including its world) as a discourse with a purpose, a rule-governed communicative affair. Whether from the artificer's or the audience's side, therefore, image making combines two

motivational logics. “It moves between the world and the teleology of art, explaining facts, effects, and choices in relation to the fictive reality that objectifies them (in the form of action, spatiotemporal contiguity, narrative viewpoint) and/or to the aesthetic strategy that underlies or transcends such objectification” (Sternberg 1983: 145). Only, throughout history, traditions of art and art criticism (e.g., pro- vs. anti-illusionist) have fought over the due balance of power, hence the relative salience, between these inescapable logics. Does art consist in the foregrounding of its artfulness or of its lifelikeness?

In the eighteenth century, while the ex-illusionist Diderot of *Jacques the Fatalist*, under Sterne’s influence, gravitates toward what the Russian Formalists would call “laying bare the device,” the pro-illusionist (and Aristotelian) Lessing would bury “the machinery” under the thickest possible layer of verisimilitude. Natural-seeming when provided, the makings of such cover leap to the eye, experiential or analytic, in the breach. Negatively speaking, then, the order of evils on this range ascends by the directness (and, needless to say, the compounding) of the anti-illusionary effect—from the apartness of the represented ontology to lapses in its self-consistency to denuded fictionality or mediacy.

Of the three negatives, the first has already been encountered. Just compare alienness or exoticism and supernaturalism as forms of otherworldliness, hence as forces for distance. The further away the imaginary from what we take to be the real world, the more does it threaten illusion, not just by weakening credibility but also, obliquely, by exposing the work, its world included, as artifact. To use Lessing’s own shorthand, “miracle” implies “machinery.”

Worse yet is the breach in interior plot coherence and followability, against the artwork’s own intent. Wherever consequents (in event-chain, character, expression, arena) lose touch with their premises and antecedents, the discontinuity lays bare some contrivance of art, whether overriding or just botched. The failure to sustain a rigorous mimetic logic therefore takes away even the illusionary benefits open to a duly self-consistent world, however “miraculous.”

In general, the compliance with the rules of neoclassical dramatic art incurs such loss. A Voltaire “moves awkwardly and heavily and makes vexatious gyrations” (HD: 135), thus giving away the underlying exigencies. Likewise with particular surfacings of artifice, rule-governed or not. To reinvoke the ghosts, while Shakespeare’s integrates, interests, hence also includes, like any “real active personage,” Voltaire’s stands revealed as “nothing but a poetical machine that is only employed to help the unravelling of the plot”; figural utterances turn out “mere excuse [for poetic necessity]

and no cause [for dramatic action]”; the utterers, instead of having “simple nature speak from their mouths,” reduce to the author’s “mouthpieces,” so that he “tries in vain to hide himself . . . behind his personages” (HD: 35, 139, 215). Ill-motivated, the machinery peeps out from the fractures in the mimesis. (See Sternberg 1978: 276–303 for Henry James’s comparable theory and practice of exploiting the reality level [e.g., the “ficelle”] as a dissimulated, indeed “dramatized” aid to composition in the novel.)

The ultimate negative on this scale is the text’s overt self-referentiality as discourse, fiction, or artwork, even if short of the artificer’s own self-advertisement. Enough that the *dramatis personae* voice “the mere words ‘stage’ and ‘invention’” by way of comparison to their own existential framework, real life, as it were. Given the high, illusionary conditions of tragedy, the effect on the specimen under review there is predictably judged fatal. But the principle cuts across genres. Had “the literary man forgotten himself less” than to indulge in such giveaways, his audience would have forgotten themselves more (HD: 127–28).

In another sense, though, Lessing would wish that the artist also forgot himself more, or, ideally, altogether, so as to become forgettable for the duration. Were he theorizing in the heyday of the novel, he might anticipate the early twentieth-century campaign against the obtrusive storyteller, often waged in illusionist heat. (See Booth 1961 for the classic documented survey.) As it is, he stretches the criterion to an art form where it does not quite apply, namely the theater, and to a harmless-seeming manifestation at that, because (unlike even the prologue and epilogue) outside the immediate experiential frame, namely the dramatist taking his bow after the show. With Voltaire and his ilk, called out for the pit to gape at, “the illusion must be weak, we must feel little nature and much artifice, if we are so curious about the artist” (HD: 103–4). In itself at most a sociocultural indecorum, and coperpetrated after the event, it nevertheless affords Lessing a retrospective measure of overall aesthetic failure.

The *Laokoon* itself, however, casts and regulates the working of illusion in purely semiotic terms, with no mimetics involved, verisimilar or otherwise, nor any mediacy (e.g., authorial) except the medium’s own. This marks, or reinvokes, a fundamental (if here bridgeable) divergence in theory and practice as well as in metalanguage. “For Lessing, art’s mimetic purpose requires that all the arts (though in different ways) seek a natural-sign status” in order to “become illusionary substitutes for the objects of imitation” (Krieger 1992: 48). The statement conflates anew the two likeness-relations that we disentangled at the outset. The forking of the two books now shows their operational autonomy even when geared to the same affect. Reality-likeness (e.g., “mimetic purpose”) and signified-likeness (“natural-

sign status”) do not exclude but neither do they implicate each other; they may or may not intersect, and they do not in the two Lessing contexts, where you would expect the juncture or a remark on the disjuncture.

Throughout the *Laokoon*, for better or worse, illusionary presence dispenses wholesale with its realistic counterpart in *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, from object to means to end, or subend. (Just recall the cavalcade of Olympians, mythical heroes, beauties that launched ships, and how the argument thematizes them by appeal to the ideal of perfection.) Instead, illusion here turns on the fit of object to medium, signified to signifier. “Naturalness” is iconic likeness between the aspects of the individual sign chosen for art and, above all, between their respective axes of deployment in the artwork as a whole. A visible signified, for example, will best go with a visual signifier; invisible life, with nonvisual, auditory signifying. The emphasis all too notoriously falls, however, on the signified world-time coextending with medium-time to unroll a narrative of events in literature, world-space with medium-space to lay out a description in painting. Given such an iconic fit, Lessing argues, the medium will grow transparent enough to generate a sense of the world’s immediate presentness.

So, amidst the common end, the differences from *Hamburg Dramaturgy* make quite a difference. For example, in the shift from the representational to the semiotic, the illusionary arsenal becomes more precise, narrow, and ontology-free, easier to implement in theory, or on the theory, but harder in mixed practice. (For dramatic illusionist continuity, would the action have to suit the word, the word the action, in Hamlet’s realism-driven sense or in significative terms alone?) Again, the guideline applies more widely (e.g., to the sister arts) yet less discriminately (e.g., between painting and sculpture, or comedy and tragedy). But then, due to the common end, the mechanisms invite coordination.

Actually, considering the experiential dynamism or relativism we have traced on a broad front, the iconic way itself leaves a good deal of room for variation and maneuver, across, between, within the arts. To this we will often come back. At the moment, we need to clarify two principled issues that directly bear on the *Laokoon* and its reception. Either hinges on transparency.

First, transparent discourse (one of which we grow “unconscious”) appears here as the empirical correlate and condition of the illusionary state. But its means do not reduce to iconism (witness the *Hamburg Dramaturgy* alternatives), nor its ends to illusionism (think of the demand for intelligibility in utilitarian writing or, within art, of the poetics of lucidity upheld by Anthony Trollope, notorious for his offenses against make-believe). The three — transparency, iconism, illusion — remain independent factors. It so

happens that all three meet in the *Laokoon*, and their meeting hardly recommends it to critics of our time, when all three have fallen into disrepute.

Second, why does Lessing think that, in iconic harmony, the medium will grow transparent to foreground the matter rather than, say, share the limelight with it? Given that the two mirror each other, what would tip the balance of attention, salience, or presentness between likes—against the force of our immediate encounter with the medium at that? Now this query applies to all accounts of illusion (or, again, transparency), most sharply to the absolutist extreme, of course, but a functional relativism such as Lessing's cannot escape it. And he in effect provides two answers, rising from the general to art-specific. Generally, he implies the built-in primacy of the represented sphere: let the world only emerge in harmony, unoccluded by a superimposed or, worse, self-focused code, and our natural interest will take over.⁸ How much more so in art, which offers the boon of ideal beauty as bonus. In modern eyes, though, the ascending pros recompound aesthetic evils, with consequences for Lessing that we will soon explore.

2.5 The Beauty of Illusion, the Illusion of Beauty

Ostensibly two unrelated master goals—elsewhere indeed neither joined nor always valued—beauty and illusion thus meet at the heart of the system. And the closer we look, the closer their interlinkage, to the point of Siamese twinship. First, they are kindred affects in being co-oriented to the imagined reality. Also, either goes, as I said, with the grain: one with the natural delight we supposedly take in perfect things, the other with the artistic medium that encodes the world of things. In complementary terms, either affect arises from some harmonious pattern. Beauty lives on the represented object's agreement with, hence agreeableness to, our instinct for "order and harmony"; illusion, on the agreement between object and medium, with a "harmonious picture," say, as the result (L: 154, 126). Both presuppose, and in turn generate and compound, an aesthetics of representational harmony.

Further, the two are mutually constraining, as well as jointly harmonizing, and for optimum interharmony. Illusion attaches strings to the mimesis of beauty in ruling out every touch that would render the manner salient, "present" to our "consciousness." On the grandest scale, there ensues not only the restraint from the narrative description of a Helen or the visual fragmenting of a perfect action, but also the guidance toward more

8. Assumed as early as Plato and Aristotle, if unwelcome in many later art circles, our hunger for representation would now seem to have been established by biological and cognitive research. See Spolsky 1998, with references.

artful substitutes without illusionary loss. For now, however, think back to the array of negative examples just given.

They often involve objects eligible, even desirable in themselves (e.g., high tragic heroes), only their treatment steals the show in one disharmonious manner or another—medium, miracle, machinery, man behind the artwork and its world. Perfect matter is not enough. Or recall how Ariosto's celebrated hymn to his beloved gets damned with faint praise, as a verbal study in painting. Indeed, more generally, this would help to explain Lessing's want of enthusiasm for wholesale transfer between the arts, whether the visual-into-verbal (ekphrastic) or the other way. To him, such transfer compounds evils: a second-hand mimesis (interart quotation, *representation*) with a jarring of the original space- or time-object against its new, time- or space-medium. The resulting faint image leaves the illusionist cold; the violent friction must turn him hot. It is no accident that Lessing avoids the very term *ekphrasis*; nor that his worst misreaders and detractors today cherish exactly his antivalues and project them exactly onto ekphrasis at its most frictional within the poem, as at its most antagonistic to the despoiled sister art. (The titular battle cry *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* in Krieger 1992 is still a mild example relative to Mitchell 1986: 95–115; 1994: esp. 15ff., followed by Heffernan 1993 and Scott 1994; see also below.) The normative antithesis might sharpen the key issues at stake—illusion definitely included—if the backswing toward the old pictorialism would not pass for businesslike, even logical criticism and newly gained insight into art and culture.

At the same time, the determinant and determined value change roles. If the image given of beauty must be readily imaginable for illusion, it must also be worth imag(in)ing for beauty. Mere *trompe l'oeil* having no such value, it falls below the threshold of interest; and the *Laokoon* accordingly disdains to cite from Pliny, its chief source on antiquity, the most famous anecdote in all art history—the contest between Zeuxis of the bird-deceiving grapes and Parrhasius of the drawable curtain. As Lessing scales beauty/perfection relative to other competitors for dominance, especially postclassical, so does he the objects vying for the embodiment of beauty itself. His most synoptic reference to the topic focuses on visual art, thus enabling us to resume the earlier analysis where we left it, with fresh bearings on the corresponding object domain in poetry:

The expression of physical beauty is the determinant [*Bestimmung*] of painting.
 The highest physical beauty is therefore its highest determinant.
 The highest physical beauty exists only in Man, and only there enables the ideal [*vermöge des Ideals*].

This ideal is already found less among animals, but not at all in vegetable and inanimate [lifeless/*leblos*] nature.

(N: 636; cf. L: 39–40)

The chain of reasoning yields a chain of being long familiar—Man, beast, vegetable, and inanimate—except for its selective carryover from universe to art universe.⁹ The transfer reactivates, or aestheticizes, the degrees of perfection by which the Greeks already ordered the real-life hierarchy. The ontology and sociotheology latent in the established *scala naturae* thus gather yet another axis, or axiology, reinforcing the correlation of aesthetic with existential value. The scale of beauty is, as it were, in the nature of things, if not inherent, then consistent with the universal order to produce the grandest harmony.

As we look closer, these domains grow both less and more unitary. Less, because the respective criteria for scaling do not always match in practice. Ugliness—the (axio)logical inverse of perfection, and so inherent (e.g., as evil) in all but its highest degree—occurs nowhere. Neither relativized throughout on the way down nor consigned in pure form to the bottom, it gets excluded altogether from the art world (to regain admittance, we will find, on the margins). Otherwise, however, the aesthetic hierarchy envisaged proves multiply co-universal.

For one thing, born of our instinct for order and harmony, it claims a validity as absolute in culture as its mates do in nature. A target for amused wonder, the Hottentot idea of beauty (“the pressed gristle of a nose, flaccid breasts descending to the navel”) only marks “their” putative deviance from “our” normality, “and keep from laughing if you can” (L: 161–62). The out-group polarity serves to reaffirm the in-group’s diametric certitudes. For another thing, universality goes with nicety of coverage, because the rungs on the hierarchy lend themselves to subgrading, from the top-most down. Human corporeal perfection may sink to the “ordinary” or “vulgar” level, that of “inferior types,” “common” (*gemein*) in every sense, as it may rise by degrees: “Nireus was beautiful, Achilles still more beauti-

9. For the classic history of this “idea” or world picture (never more widespread than in the eighteenth century) see Lovejoy 1953, with glances at artistic creation as *imitatio Dei*. Significantly, a major force behind the age-old idea’s collapse was the Romantic passion for inclusiveness, diversity, equality (etc.) in all the relevant spheres. This suggests once again the extent to which the postRomantic trials of Lessing’s art theory—still ongoing—can be traced back to antagonistic, value-laden reality models. An awareness of such undercurrents not only makes for a better understanding of Lessing and of how the misunderstandings or deconstructions perpetrated on him give away their own ideological captivity. (If anything, Lessing’s is the freer spirit.) Appreciating the deeper bifurcations, paradoxically, also helps to sharpen the real aesthetic issues and evaluate each fork taken on its real (theoretical, empirical, historical, cultural) merits.

ful, Helen had godlike beauty” (L: 8, 127). The divine term of comparison itself literally occupies the uppermost gradation, because art’s gods are supposed to assume the finest image of humanity.

The entrance of the gods/godlike not only reinforces every parameter of universality already outlined: the normative absoluteness gains superhuman validation; the hierarchy, a universe-wide range; the top, a fitting top-ranker. It also rationalizes the passage’s ascent from “physical” through “the highest physical” to “ideal” beauty, incarnate in the divine-as-perfect by theo-, even quasi-logical definition. In ancient Greece, visualizing “gods and heroes” in other than ideal shape would count as “blasphemy,” for an incongruously horned Bacchus plummets to “a middle station between men and beasts” (L: 196 n. 2, 218 n. 22).¹⁰ Deidealizing, let alone uglifying, is demoting on every axis in force. Conversely with Vulcan imaged at rest and dressed in order to hide his limp, a shrewd maneuver between the exigencies of perfection and tradition (N: 620).

By the same token, the ideal has to disengage from the actual. Pliny supplies a reference to the “outrage” committed by Aurelius in modeling a goddess after his beloved (N: 611, with later equivalents). And, drawing on him again, Lessing extends the principle to mortality—heroes, for example:

Every victor in the Olympic games received a statue, but a portrait-statue [*eine ikonische*] was erected only to the three-time winner. Too many mediocre portraits were not allowed among works of art. For a portrait, though admittedly idealization, must be dominated by likeness. It is the ideal of one particular man, not of humanity. (L: 10)

The move from Olympians to Olympic figures underlines the shared norm in setting perfection above illusion against higher incentives to the contrary. That descent in ontological status is an ascent from invisible to visible existence—hence to a far more salient withdrawal from actuality, regardless of the loss in our sense of the object’s presence. Nobody who has seen the winner can help missing the real features in the glorified image. Yet the Olympic judges, applauded by our neoclassicist, thought the sacrifice worth codifying. So did Theban law in regard to ordinary humans, enjoining imitations “more beautiful than the originals,” never less, least of all to the extreme of caricature (L: 9–10). The order, or balance, of aesthetic priorities holds across the ontic subgrades.

To clinch the matter, it so happens that Lessing’s term for the portrait-

10. Lessing neglects to explain how, of all sponsors, such a desecrated Bacchus was commissioned by the temples: this fact actually grounds his disqualification of religious art.

statue, denied to all but the three-timer, is *ikonische Portrait*. Evidently, his “icon” varies from ours (his “natural sign”) in denoting the particularity of the likeness between the representation and the represented (here also actual) object, not the likeness-tie of signifier to signified, however idealized. Taking the latter signifying mode for granted, as a common Olympic denominator, the term emphasizes the high degree of correspondence kept for the greatest victors. Still, as Lessing predicates illusion on iconicity in the modern sense and as his own “icon” would always intensify the affect by its “actuality”—piling visible on nominal resemblance—the fact that he settles for the lesser iconicity in order to optimize beauty springs into relief.

Therefrom also ensues the standing of works, artists, genres, and periods. Take the rank order assigned to three Greek imagers of the human body: first Polygnotus the beautifier; next Dionysius “the anthropographer,” who “could paint nothing but men” as men, following “nature” too slavishly “to rise into the domain of the ideal”; last Pauson, fixed on or below average humanity (L: 195–96, n. 2). Even Pauson, though, stood higher than Pyreicus the Rhyparographer, wallowing in dirt as if he were “a Dutch painter” (L: 9). Again, as naturalism and caricature rank low among styles, so do not only still life but also flower and landscape painting among thematic genres. In the key excerpt quoted, and often elsewhere, Lessing categorically denies their objects any share in “the ideal”; and if beyond perfection—even that achievable by leveling the individual up to its class optimum, Olympic winner style—then devoid of moving affect too. It therefore seems appropriate to him that no landscape painter arose either in Greece or in Italy (N: 603, 632, 635–36).

While drawing from Pliny all the support it can get on the primacy of beauty, then, the *Laokoon* omits mention of the famous trompe l’oeil anecdote, since it would amount to a contest between unrepresentables. Zeuxis’s grapes and Parrhasius’s curtain instantiate the ideal-less “vegetable and inanimate nature,” equally beneath artistic focus. Given the objects’ ineligibility, moreover, the contestants necessarily appeal to low-ranking values; objective entails normative descent on the appropriate scales. Lessing’s silence on these feats of prestidigitation therefore implies a pox-on-both-your-houses judgment, and we may easily lend it voice from related contexts. “Admiration of the artist’s skill” will divert our minds from the absence of the ideal of beauty, yet this “pleasure is constantly disturbed by the thought of the unworthy use to which it has been put” (L: 154). And even if the “beauty of details” can “illude us” for the nonce “to overlook misproportions,” the artist “only illudes us once and as soon as we are cool again we take back the applause he has lured from us” (HD: 8). The very features of Lessing’s illusionary state, half-awareness

and transitoriness, combine to ensure that it will sooner or later recoil upon its abusers.

2.6 The *Laokoon's* Master Effects in their Time and Beyond: Constraint as an Old/New Aesthetic Principle

From sheer co-universality to co-objectivity to co-affectivity to co-harmony to co-determination, hence equipollence, this Siamese twinship of the beautiful/perfect and the illusionary is extremely important to appreciate, more so than either twin alone; and not just for the sake of getting right the theory's bedrock and balance of master values. It also has decisive operational consequences—still very much relevant, even to antagonists—for aesthetic choice and arrangement, including the time/space battleground. Indeed, where the twinned normative antecedents have been missed or misread, so have the strategic consequences for the (meta)discourse of art. And nowhere is the unhappy chain reaction stronger and longer as well as commoner than among modern engagements with the *Laokoon*, especially those unsympathetic, a fortiori diametric, to its premises, theses, and agenda.

The record virtually exhausts the possibilities of basic misconstruction, from sheer erasure to assorted imbalance. For example, the Lessings projected by Frank (1963) or Gombrich (1984 [1958]) or Todorov (1982) or Mitchell (1986), all otherwise variant, refer aesthetics to neither beauty nor illusion. Krieger's (1992: 44–52) account makes little of beauty, Jacobs's (1987), of illusion. Wellbery (1984) assimilates beauty to illusion and declares the latter itself untenable. All these commentaries evidently have their own axes to grind, overlapping for the most part the negative way only, in their joint opposition to Lessing, or Lessing's. So the outright hiatuses left there in the *Laokoon's* groundwork, hence in its reasoning from desirable effects to discourse strategy and tactics, become almost predictable, and we will encounter some instances in due course. Now, to round off the picture of the joint universals, let us examine the trickier drive toward imbalance in Wellbery's monograph.

This drive has two prongs. One bears on the history of art criticism; the other, on the theory of art itself: above all, on aesthetic value (“then” as against “now,” typically), with its operational implications for aesthetic structure. We will consider the driving forces in turn.

In a way, the high office of the beautiful/perfect as the illusionary's co-equal and counterdeterminer suffers here worse than the usual neglect. It comes down to utter subordination—disappearance by way of mergence—in the attempt at historicizing the *Laokoon*; and the historicizing rises to quite another scale than the customary drawing of local (or for that mat-

ter, overgeneral) parallels with fellow neoclassicists. Wellbery (1984: 49) rather argues for a unified “representational model” of art that “organizes the theoretical activity emerging in the second half of the eighteenth century as the philosophical discipline of aesthetics.”

On top of everything else, therefore, at stake is Lessing’s originality within the new discipline evolved by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten and Georg Friedrich Meier as well as his friend Moses Mendelssohn, whose notes on an early *Laokoon* draft traceably affected the genesis of the book. And, since artistic perfection forms common ground among them all, the issue hinges on its locus. Consensual or disputed? Single or twofold? Residing in the distinctiveness of the imaged world? Or (as on the above “unified” model) that of the imaging treatment? Or (if only to Lessing) of both, complete with mutual regulation between the ontology and the strategy, the life idealized and the lifelikeness experienced?

For brevity’s sake, let us grant Wellbery’s account of the new tradition itself. Let us further assume, counterfactually, the discipline’s uniform approach to the illusionary and related effects, as if the Lessing specifics were the rule. Among the chief exponents, then, Baumgarten defined the aesthetic as perfect “sensate” (*sinnlich*) representation/cognition, marked off from the ordinary kind by the pluses (e.g., repleteness or intuitive accessibility) bestowed on whatever object it draws into its circle (*ibid.*: 49–53). Far from displacing or supplementing beauty, such representational perfection constitutes it and with it the field of art. *Sinnlichkeit* is *Schönheit*. Mendelssohn, though, already wobbled, or maneuvered, or evolved, between extremes. On Wellbery’s view, his aesthetic locus of value and markedness shifted in time from the object to the technique and subject of mimesis—from the rendering of the perfect (good, flawless, desirable) to perfect (sensate, energetic, intuitable) rendering. He switched about the priorities, in short, with art’s very differentia to match; or, historically speaking, retreated toward the Baumgartenian, in effect Aristotle-old pole. Even so, the “representational model” cannot have been very stable in the first place. And yet this privileging of the mimetic *how* over the *what*, we are told, offers a close “correspondence” to “Lessing’s thinking in the *Laokoon*” (*ibid.*: 53–67).

Odder still, when the model-builder comes to the *Laokoon* on this key question, the alleged traditionality, such as it is, never materializes. Nor does a comparative analysis of the theories involved. Lessing himself is barely allowed to speak in his own voice—the eloquent Greek/modern (over)polarization would do—and any ostensible “correspondence” results from his silent yoking with the putative new disciplinary orthodoxy. Having been taken as read, it gets projected by violence into an other-minded text.

An example would be the following paraphrase: “An aesthetic representation affords pleasure by presenting to intuition an imaginary object endowed with value qualities (perfections or imperfections). The highest perfection which can be so presented to the imagination within the boundaries of the material arts is physical beauty” (ibid.: 162). In plainer language, Lessing is said to hold that art in general ranges indifferently between beautiful and unbeautiful objects (“perfections or imperfections”). The visual artist alone “can,” or should, focus the positive “value quality” of “beauty”; but then, even at its “highest perfection,” it remains “physical,” and accordingly (we soon hear [ibid.: 163]) deemed by Lessing “nearly contemptible,” because “amoral . . . external . . . unable to penetrate to the inner qualities of man.” Hence, the illusionist constant of sensateness, appealing to our intuition or imagination, outranks (indeed aestheticizes, valorizes, redeems) its objective target throughout art, one way or another.

All familiar, and all false to the *Laokoon*, as early as its opening statement. “Pleasing illusion,” we recall, always co-occurs with “beauty,” whose “general rules” apply to “actions and thoughts, as well as to forms”: to every art, every object and field of mimesis, every relevant pleasure, with no moralistic strings attached. The entire argument proper, starting with the ideal of beauty and ending with a deterrent anatomy of ugliness, then rings the changes on the thesis; and additional Lessing sources only anchor it faster, elaborate it further.

In truth, the opposite of conformity shows in various forms of divergence. Two symmetrical instances will illustrate the variety. One, explicit and famous, concerns the question as to why the sculptor’s *Laokoon*, unlike Virgil’s, only groans. Against Winckelmann’s answer—to express the hero’s greatness of soul under trial—Lessing pits and develops his argument from visual beauty. The other disagreement, toward the end, involves a friend and kindred spirit—the very one to whom he allegedly most corresponds—which is presumably why it also lurks underground. Its allusive reticence is filled out, though, by the *Laokoon* genesis.

In the original draft, Lessing wrote that since ugliness “generates a disagreeable feeling” (*eine unangenehme Empfindung*), rather than “pleasure” (*das Vergnügen*), it “must remain wholly excluded” from painting (N: 570). “But not always,” Mendelssohn objected: ugliness can serve to heighten beauty by way of contrast, as do the satyrs who pull the wagon of Bacchus and Ariadne; nor does “pleasure” equate with “agreeable feelings” (N: 570–71). But Lessing’s published text firmly reiterates his view, down to the affective epithet in question (“agreeable” [L: 153]). And immediately thereafter he finds a tactful way of adverting to the issue. Rather than openly breaking with Mendelssohn’s idea of pleasure, as he will soon with Aristotle and Klotz (L: 154–55, 157ff.), Lessing does the converse. He quotes with

approval his friend's insistence that "not all *disagreeable* feelings please in the imitation"—especially not disgust as against sadness or horror—and extends it in silence to "physical ugliness" (L: 154, 159). The rhetoric of quotation signals the underground friendly exchange. If an inside message, Mendelssohn for one would presumably receive it loud and clear.¹¹

In a wider view, the assimilation of the beautiful to the illusionary accords with the "modern," beauty-demoting practice of art. So the book's counterblast reveals itself as double-barreled. On one front, it singles out for attack the *ut pictura poesis* theorists, notably Caylus and Spence. On the other, that of aesthetic value, it aims at the offending practitioners and only by implication at like-minded aestheticians, its fancied sharers in the representational model.

This applies with particular force to the normative equilibrium at stake. The following criticism, ostensibly directed at the one-sidedness of post-classical artists, might as well target the Baumgartens who confer aesthetic legitimacy on their "indiscriminate imitations of the first object that comes. Beautiful or ugly, noble or low—everything is just the same, provided that the observer gets illuded" (N: 572). Here illusionism specifies or concentrates the array of more general values (skill, difficulty, and expressiveness) that would replace, where they should reinforce, matter by manner. So does the preceding devolutionary art history, which retells how the quest for change and fame misled latecomers into giving pleasure without, or against, the natural thematics of the ideal (*ibid.*). Illusion's status as co-universal, rather than underling or variable, does not yet make it self-sufficient.

In turn, within the same monograph, Lessing's illusion itself suffers worse downgrading another way: not contextually, like beauty, via assimilation to the age's "unified model," but categorically, *vis-à-vis* fancied twentieth-century advances in aesthetics. Historicizing doubles as outdating, lending the aura of hard fact to a normative paradigm shift which is nowadays sought, and elsewhere made, regardless. Thicker color of authority aside, the fact remains, as usual, that desire outruns reason. A polar ideoartistic mix of taste, structure, axiology, and *zeitgeist* aspires to exclusive (empirical, analytic, even logical) validity, a matter of right and wrong.

Wellbery (1984: 3-4, 8) opens by "fully accept[ing]" Arthur Danto's "refutation" of "the transparency theory of the arts, among whose advocates he numbers Lessing." And so, predictably, contextualizing the

11. At least one outsider did not, conflating the viewpoints to leave it undecidable forever who says, or originated, what (Jacobs 1987: 497-98).

Laokoon in history will bring out “its *otherness*, . . . its position outside our own order of words and things” (ibid.). A retrospect on the *passé*, a conceptual postmortem, in effect.

One would expect present-day philosophers, with their literary or art critical followers, to have outgrown such naive claims. Aesthetic values are no more refutable than any ideology, only displaceable. For example, given a theory that predicates illusion on transparence arising from signifier/signified likeness, how would you refute it by declaring illusion not worth having or making transparence contingent on stylistic variables? (Thus Danto’s [1981: 158, 162–63] sneer at “ocular trumpery,” which has “little after all to do with the concept of art,” and his argument that what would have been diaphanous to Giotto’s contemporaries has become perceptible to us.) Still less will an assault on an all-or-nothing picture of illusion touch a theory that defines the affect as incomplete and multiply gradable, always against the background of its real-life counterpart, and so even accommodates our aliveness to the rest of art’s artfulness in the overall experience. The quarrel typically comes down to the locus of value between object and medium, the represented and the representational, “content” and “style,” or, functionally speaking, between transparent and opaque discourse. In this endless quarrel, moreover, the so-called refutation of Lessing affords a negative object lesson, since it fails, even boomerangs, to an unusual degree.

Of his twinned value-universals, Danto renders beauty dispensable and Wellbery incorporates it into standard, limitless, Baumgartenian illusion, conveniently so. For even the partisan thrust against “the transparency theory” would apply (if it did at all, and it doesn’t) to the “unified” illusionary model alone. There everything does stand or fall on this effect, regardless of the value of its imaged object. However, Lessing’s insistence on autonomous, equipollent, codeterminative beauty not merely eludes but anticipates, “refutes,” the would-be refuting argument.

Take Danto’s own account of illusionism. The see-through medium should enable “observers to believe they are in the presence of the things itself—a woman to embrace, as in the case of Pygmalion, or a bunch of grapes to be eaten, as in the celebrated birds of Zeuxis” (Danto 1979: 14, Danto 1981: 151). Evidently by now, Lessing would (in effect does) throw out the second example; nor would even “a woman” qualify for aesthetic make-believe unless she answered to the ideal of beauty. Moreover, where she answers it, as with Pygmalion, she renders the observer’s experience worth having twice over, intrinsically no less than subjectively. And her imag(in)ing ipso facto acquires—owing to her very selection from the range of otherwise co-imag(in)able “things,” her own unbeautiful aspects

or variants included—an aesthetic differential quality absent in the real thing, the flesh-and-blood woman herself. So (e.g., in the examples from Dürer to Munch) would her mirror image under the reverse aesthetics of illusionary ugliness. So would even Danto's own "commonplace" in being distinctively selected for "transfiguration."

This leads to a still more general and operational antithesis. The wishful ranking of the two value-frames (and within the older, the disregard for beauty) interlinks with that of two compositional axes. The judgment on Lessing betrays a strong latter-day prejudice against the markedness and efficacy of *choice* in art relative to *arrangement*, preferably violent and deformative for opacity. Roman Jakobson (1987: 71) codifies this bias in scientific-sounding terminology, whereby "*the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination*. Equivalence is promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence." This act of violence will allegedly guarantee the distinctive "set toward the message for its own sake," investing the arts and features of the language so combined with palpability, always to the detriment of the nonpoetic contenders for our attention: reference, transparency, the signified world, above all (ibid.: 69ff.). In citing the disagreement between Lessing and Herder, further, Jakobson retrojects into it his own priorities. The emphasis falls on Lessing's combinatory, time/space axis; "space" translates into the wider "simultaneity," inclusive of equivalence patterns; and the victory goes to Herder's "synchronic insight" (ibid.: 472).

Counterparts of this linguistic, indeed verse-oriented formalism abound in different genres, different art forms, different nomenclatures, different programs and research fields, different organizational correlates, even different time/space junctures, but generally to the same reifying, monopolistic effect. (See Sternberg 1990a, 1990b, 1992; also Yacobi 1988.) It is as though arrangement were all, and neither the selection of a determinate object (e.g., for beauty *or* ugliness) nor the coselection of signifier with signified (e.g., matched for transparency), *inter alia*, could possibly yield aesthetic value. Between the two choices, if anything, the first would rank lower and the second loom larger as target: this undesirable at least appears to operate, and can be dispatched, on approximately the "right" ground.

The issues are highly complex, but not in essentials. Counter to appearances, we will find, either Lessing universal thus works by interaxial (selection/composition) along with interdimensional (time/space) play. Nor, as a specialist in the arts of arrangement, would I depreciate their allure or power or, within reason, the modern imbalance in their favor. The point transcends such hedging, though, because selectivity does coregulate Less-

ing's aesthetics—as it does art itself, not necessarily his way—and the trend against it has marched under the banner of newly revealed truth, in theory at least. To see the illogic, you need look no further than the basic discourse axiom that meaningfulness presupposes choice, choice implies and guides meaningfulness—from single item to world to theme to genre to code. Instead of a twofold historical, far less evolutionary movement concerning “the order of words and things”—ours versus theirs old-timers—there emerge two principled routes to their ordering.

Finally, once the “other” turns out a diametric opposite, small wonder the extremes meet at a higher level, that of supervalue, notably artistic (un)freedom. From this vantage point, Lessing may appear to compound his breaches of “our” decalogue by prescribing the artist's material and manner with an eye to easy effects, naturally attaching to either prescribed range, as it were. But then, freedom versus constraint and going with versus against the grain are really independent variables. They must not be yoked together even in the role of supervalue under evaluation, friendly or adverse. Lessing's aesthetics of optimum harmony instructively crosses the factors several times over. On one hand, it takes the line of least resistance (by going with the givens, natural and/or medial); on the other, it takes the line of most restraint (in confining the options to suit). And the second drive recurs in many a theory since that would or does reject Lessing as a whole but in effect just reverses his first article to produce a mirror image.

This has notably been the case with twentieth-century approaches that define literature (or art in general) by its medium, usually by a certain forcible, even “spatial” patterning thereof, at the expense of the represented world. Exactly where everything seems to have turned upside down, the underlying family resemblance most comes to the fore and tells most. So, within our paradigmatic counterextreme, Jakobson as restrictively locates the poetic function (with change of media, even the aesthetic) in a network of equivalences imposed on the flow of sequence to keep down reference—against the grain, indeed, but with strict, demonstrably over-strict limitations on and for the marking of poeticity. The markedness would again grow in inverse ratio to the freedom of movement. So the art theories prove otherwise opposed, more discriminately yet less deeply and uniformly, than their own adherents would believe. The joint premium put on constraint even brings a Jakobson closer to Lessing than to the ut-pictorialists, old and new, who celebrate artistic and interartistic license. Constraint is constraint, and if art springs from one of its modalities, there is no ruling out another, what with Lessing's doubling it for extra unique pressure, extra aesthetic power, or supervalue, according to his lights. The other becomes in part one of us, very much alive across all the distance.

3. The Sister Arts as Complementaries

3.1 Axes and Levels of Difference

“The Limits of Poetry and Painting” announced in the *Laokoon*’s subtitle may thus refer to the sister arts’ common functional boundary vis-à-vis nonart. At the same time, and chiefly, the *and* means the disjunctive “as against,” interiorized between those arts. The limits and/or limits within limits, however, alike bespeak a fundamental of the aesthetics that has elevated them to titular dignity. All drawn neither for nor by but upon imitation, they suggest that art lives on representational constraint. As we proceed from all-artistic solidarity to interart typology—a fortiori polarity—universal and medium-based constraint join forces, difference comes on top of difference.

At this juncture, accordingly, Lessing’s distinctive thrust would appear even more unmistakable but does not always prove so in the criticism of his approach. Via another historical domestication, more current than bracketing him with the new (e.g., purely illusionist) aesthetics, we find him retrojected, not without glee, into the older lines, the mimetic and, incredibly, the ut-pictorialist itself. Typical bids for such assimilation have already been cited in my opening. But far from “reiterating” the “standard formula” of mimesis, or never “questioning” it—according to Abrams [1958 [1953]]—he unsettles its very unity along with its determinative power. Odder yet than standardizing Lessing at his most divergent is portraying him as a bold innovator and a covert traditionalist at once. Thus a statement such as “The relation of the arts [for him] was not to be determined by their subject matter, but the subject matter by the relations of the arts, the latter identified with their media” juxtaposes with its diametric opposite, “Lessing ironically shared the assumptions of the arch-exemplars of the *ut pictura poesis* ideology” (Steiner 1982: 12, 14; cf. Wellbery 1984: 105, 198; Krieger 1992: 45–47). The irony rather lies in the incongruity of the charge of self-contradiction.

The former statement is undoubtedly true of Lessing. To him, the object (action vs. body) does or should hinge on the medium (articulate sounds in time vs. forms and colors in space) of representation, yielding a compounded artistic polarity for symmetrical harmony. But this dependence goes against that iterated by traditionalist, mimetic dogma from Plato onward, where objective reality comes first in every sense.

Within the *ut pictura poesis* tradition that the *Laokoon* challenges, the slogan itself unifies the art forms by appeal to their representational common ground, leaving the variant tools to struggle with and for it as best they can. “Whatever is right in one must be permitted to the other; what-

ever pleases or displeases in one must necessarily be pleasing or displeasing in the other” (L: ix). Unrecognized as givens equal, much less antecedent to the existential ones, interart differentiae proportionally suffer neglect, often carried to doctrinal blurring and downgrading, exchange and interchange. The same reveals itself in approaches with a more kinetic ontology than pictorialism’s or a sharper eye for the subdivisions of world-imaging. Even in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, with its variform and internalized and teleological and likelihood- rather than likeness-governed imitation, the reality-first norm of dependence holds and tells. For the imitative as well as the imitated, “natural” worlds are there prior to the imitator’s repertoire of discourse and the art’s specific *modus operandi*. Among other results, since “nature” consists in motion, its artistic image, qua analogue, has to toe the line: the time/space branching of the arts never gets theorized; plot outranks, hence determines character, along with the rest of the world’s statics; and media officially diverge in their materiality alone, as if they had no extension, or none of their own, independent of the object’s (Sternberg 1990a: 52ff.). The ontological first principle controls everything, for better or (outside narrative literature, epically or dramatically “mimetic”) for worse.

The *Laokoon*, therefore, goes further than elevating the inferior vehicle to equal partnership in the making of artifacts. It reverses the direction of dependence, as between the premise and the consequent in the key syllogism of chapter 16: given that the medium is such *or* such, the object must follow suit in either art. The emphasis accordingly gravitates from interart uniformity to differentiability, twofold, matched, and counterscaled at that. If “Lessing argues” that “subject matter” is determined “by the relations of the arts, the latter identified with their media” and needing to “adopt” the suitable “properties,” then how can his argument “ironically” rest on any crossart ontology or will to “lifelikeness”? His movement from the pre-given to the determinable urges quite the opposite law: that either art should abandon the idea of a universal ready-made world order to be represented—never mind pictured—and start instead from its distinctive representational conditions, whether assets or liabilities.

Geared to a single functional hierarchy, the *Laokoon*’s imitative arts yet divide according to their significative or communicative features, so that either sister (*inter alia*) achieves and nuances the shared master ends through the means taken as best suited to it. At this crossroads, we need to sort out Lessing’s argument again, if only telegraphically, by way of rough preview. The branching involves the following variables:

1. All discourse results from two basic operations, selection and combination.

2. Either operation in turn works (possibly coworks or counterworks) at two levels, which we may call primary and secondary. The primary level has to do with global dispositions: the selectional with the choice of reality-field, the combinatory with the field's deployment. The secondary level concerns the treatment of details or parts to be represented/signified—including the repertoire available for their manipulation beyond the primary limit or limits.

3. In art, and art alone, both operations work under the imperatives of beauty and illusion, with the proper (specialized, restrictive, maximizing) consequences, which translate into semiotic as well as mimetic guidelines. Between the arts, again, each operation on the signified reality is primarily governed by another given aspect of the signifier. Selection as a whole forks by the signifier's (im)materiality (optic/phonic) and nexus (iconic/arbitrary) vis-à-vis the signified, combination by its (space/time) extensionality. Correspondingly, maneuvering at the secondary level invests either art with an extra measure of freedom, a licensed encroachment on sisterly limits, always within limits.

So much for the breakdown of operational interart divide into its key coordinates, relations included. As a followable sequel to the first principles discussed above, it not only completes the twice-missing overview and Ariadne's thread, disclaimed by the author himself as self-professed rambler and hardly ever supplied by expositors, some all too happy to take him at his word. It should also proceed to contest his reputation for uniformity across the board—in axis, level, and above all, option and judgment on it. Actually, no artistic structure or practice would appear here quite isolated, no dividing line frozen. Art does thrive on constraint, yet is always able, indeed welcome, to finesse in the middle ("secondary") ground between observance and violation. As our (abridged) analysis unfolds, the divides will turn out even better motivated, the variables more interlinked, their play freer and richer, their interart traffic denser, and, relative to pictorialist laissez-faire, nicer than suggested by this schematic outline. If one must nevertheless quarrel with Lessing, beyond the pitting of dogma against dogma, it is well to know where his limits truly harden, and why.

3.2 From Semiotic Plurality to Aesthetic Polarity: Dialectics, Heuristics, and the Quest for Radicals

To flesh out the above outline, we need to understand how the *Laokoon* aesthetics maps itself on the operative network of semiotics, with particular regard to the first axis of discourse in question, the selectional. And it is in question indeed, liable to vanish altogether, exactly at this juncture. For the antiselectional bias already diagnosed in modern theory now ex-

tends from the definition and valuation of art to the typology of the arts. Accordingly, Lessing's typological horizons and novelties and instruments have as a rule been narrowed to the axis of combination.

That the nonspecialist, admiring or adverse, should associate the *Laokoon* with a time/space binarism is perhaps understandable. That a Jakobson (1987: 472) should follow suit, with retrojections added to amnesia, in promoting a countertheory of simultaneism is, alas, an offensive routine. (Not a word, in an article titled "Visual and Auditory Signs," on their comparison by a pioneer in this interdisciplinary, semiotic/aesthetic enterprise.)¹² A complimentary and nonsemiotic (in)version would be Joseph Frank's (1963) "modernizing" the classic by subverting (officially, reversing) its rationale of literary arrangement, to the same detemporalizing effect. A truer self-declared follower, Mikhail Bakhtin (1981: 251), salutes "the fundamental and seminal way he posed the problem of time in literature": it was Lessing who discovered "the principle of chronotopicity." This would mark the positive limit, amid the customary flattening to one-dimensionality. Even so, one would hardly expect analysts of the work, however unfriendly, to repeat, ratify, and radicalize the popular shrinkage (far less to misconceive the combinatory divide itself, at best oversimplifying it in turn).

Nobody has pushed this narrowing further, in categorical explicitness or otherwise, than W. J. T. Mitchell. "To ground the generic boundaries of the arts on 'first principles,' he [Lessing] does not turn to the venerable distinction between 'natural' and 'arbitrary' signs, nor does he appeal to the commonplace 'sensible' distinction between eye and ear," but opts instead for the claim "that literature is an art of time, painting an art of space" (Mitchell 1986: 95). The opening denials are both downright false; the ensuing affirmation is true, yet not in exclusionary, reductive isolation.

What drives Mitchell to such extreme misreading is easily enough inferable from how he proceeds, as well as foreseeable by now. Were his denials of sign-classifying both true, he might indeed focus his attack on the one-dimensional typology left, claim total victory, and, having disposed of Lessing, as it were, clear the way for his own neopictorialist agenda. Counterprojects breed the strangest projections, here abetted by the modern favoring of deployment over choice.

Viewed as a whole, however, Lessing's taxonomy of signs operates not with one coordinate (feature, variable) but with three at least: (1) "eye" versus "ear"; (2) "natural" versus "arbitrary"; (3) "space" versus "time."

12. In that (Russian) Formalist tradition, a recent attempt at a semiotics of visual art (O'Toole 1994) ignores Lessing altogether, to its own loss. Apparently it takes a Bakhtin, no friend to Formalism, to give Lessing due credit; see below.

The first pair divides by the materiality or sensory channel of the signifier: visual (*sichtbar*) as against auditory (*hörbar*). The next polarizes by the signifier's relation to the signified, between the inner, iconic, "natural" tie of likeness and convention-based "arbitrariness" in the modern sense.¹³ The third bipolarity changes not only aspect but also number, from the individual signifier used to the axis on which the whole lot combines: arrangement "in space," "side by side" (*neben einander*) or "in time," "one after the other" (*auf einander folgend*). Applied to the aesthetic field, the semiotics produces the opposition of the relevant media (codes, signifying forms): painting as visual, iconic ("natural"), and spatial; literature as auditory, arbitrary, and temporal.

Mitchell's narrowing of the typology into a one-feature dichotomy accordingly has the worst of all interpretive worlds. For one thing, as a matter of record, the three semiotic variables come together to draw "the generic boundaries of the arts" from the first page of the first *Laokoon* draft (N: 555). For another thing, as a matter of demarcation, the time/space variable claimed to have been singled out could not possibly mark those "generic boundaries" on its own, since literature would then remain indistinguishable from dance or music, all equally opposed to painting in arrangement (N: 651–55).

For yet another thing, as a matter of explanation, still less would that isolated variable have the power "to ground the generic boundaries" that it cannot even draw. Nor, for that matter, would all three variables together have such explanatory power in Lessing or anyone else. Just as time extends outside literature and space outside painting—both indeed outside art, too—so do the rest of the features, generating an assortment of crosses throughout culture. The semiotics, like the mimesis, shows incomparably richer permutations than the *Laokoon* aesthetics. If we nevertheless find the arts of poetry and painting insistently demarcated by their media along these lines, then, the reason cannot lie *in*, or even among, but beneath or beyond the demarcating lines. As medium-differentials, omnipresent signifying features, vehicles for representation, how would they ever differentiate "the arts" as such, complete with the artistic signifieds, into art *of* time (and/or ear . . .) vis-à-vis an art *of* space (and/or eye . . .)? Unless every word sequence is ipso facto literary, every visual design painterly, a gap yawns between form and function, means and matter and end. In other words, rather than constituting the "first principles" on which "to

13. In arbitrary signs "the meaning depends on convention," while "the power of natural signs consists in their likeness [*Ähnlichkeit*] to the things" (N: 655, 650). Cf. n. 2 above: when Mitchell does glance at the distinction pronounced by him inoperative, he gets it wrong.

ground the generic boundaries,” the various medium-based demarcations of art must themselves trace back to such principles, and of course do trace back to them—via the perfection/illusion fundamentals ignored by Mitchell and others.

To work out this decisive point, let us reconsider the threefold set of medium-coordinates introduced above. Not for nothing have I omitted from the trichotomy any intercoordinator, such as *respectively*. The three diametric pairs never correlate a priori into fixed diametric trios—though they may so interrelate in practice—let alone reduce to one another. The eye/natural/space versus ear/arbitrary/time formations do not perforce click together in reason, symmetrical polarity and all, nor does either constantly and exclusively join together in fact, by some unchanging conspiracy of culture. Less and less so (the attentive reader will extrapolate from the treatise) as we go from code to message and from semiotics to aesthetics, from individual signs to sign systems to arts to artifacts (works, genres, styles, practices). This spectrum would mark an ascending order of contingency, hence of flexibility, in the intersection of the three semiotic polarities. Or, to put this finding the other way around, it would mark an ever-sharper division among the variables in play, and so among them, their lines of composibility, and the composite products—between signifying forms and forces, in short, discretes and discourses, typology and text.

Too good, or too radical, or too systematic, or too identifiable with my own “protean” discourse theory to be true of Lessing? Not quite and not thus far. This rationale of tripartition informs Lessing’s argument, and fragments of it certainly surface in his unpublished notes. Modesty apart, therefore, I don’t think I am simply countering the usual negative projections with an overfavorable one; drawing the pieces together into a coherent approach, the best fitting and available on the evidence, “after the *Laokoon*,” would be again more like it. For the three-way cut of (artistic) signification is by itself a hard and prominent fact in Lessing, undeniable though inexplicably denied. And even if inclined to attribute to my reading the substance as well as the wording and the foregrounding of the more dynamic interplay, you will find it on reconsideration, I hope, compatible with Lessing’s own thrust—except in regard to certain kinds of cross-artifact, notably literary portraits and pictorial tales. My principled divergences from his very semiotics, at its best as at its weakest, in its selection as in its combinatory aspect and implications, will come where they properly arise.

Meanwhile, the fact remains that the *Laokoon* would appear to go clean against mixture and dynamism in encoding, if only on the “primary” level of operations, a caveat vital to remember throughout. The subtleties of limits

would minimize artistic syncretism, free ut-pictorialist exchanges, above all. Where the semiotic typology itself enables so much interplay among the coordinates, the aesthetic theory tirelessly works for two binary unities, or package deals: poetry with its auditory/arbitrary/temporal signification over against the visual/natural/spatial unity of painting. And as the time/space differential is openly combinatory and our immediate business is with (primary) selectionality, we may reflect the coixture of the other differentiae by fusing them even in name: the *auditrary* (if you excuse the barbarism) versus the *iconoptic* signifying mode, either relatable to one-unit choices from any given set of alternatives. Though he knows better, Lessing does his utmost to carry their polarity to the verge of mutual exclusiveness in art.

Hence, first of all, the attacks that we will encounter in strength upon painting's recourse to arbitrary modes of signifying, however optic and (unlike alphabetical inscription, e.g., titles) picture-like, iconic-looking. Symbols, allegories, hieroglyphs, writing type (*Schriftart*), he pejoratively calls them, deviants from the signs proper ("natural") to the art. Conversely with his pregnant silence on encoded, ready-made linguistic iconism. Though onomatopoeia figures in his notes, he does not once mention it throughout the *Laokoon*, not even to brush it aside as peripheral to poetry. In terms of his own approach, this absence springs to the eye, considering the illusionary force built into "natural" signification. But then, iconopsis overshadows iconopoesis in the choice of individual signs.¹⁴

As with the component sign-types and -features, so with the art forms that compose them. In its emphasis on the poetry/painting divide, the *Laokoon* omits, defocuses, sometimes illegitimizes both mixed and special artistic products or even practices—that is, both composites of the polar signifying arrays and varieties resulting from a finer subdivision of the polar components themselves.

By mixed composites I refer not only to inter-polar (intermedia, inter-art) transfers judged demeaning, counterproductive, or simply weak. Such would be unadapted ekphrasis in literature, whereby the "auditrary" awkwardly re-presents the "iconoptic" as the temporal does spatiality; or the

14. By the same token, the kindred expressive sound-resource of interjections occurs in the argument apropos drama, which subsumes iconopsis, and that of large-scale "musical painting" in words apropos poetry itself, because it derives from combinatory rather than selectional iconopoesis (L: 3, 84, 89; N: 649, also 653, where Lessing generalizes the same about music itself: "The individual tones . . . are no signs, they mean nothing and express nothing; its signs are rather the sequences of tones, which can excite and mean feeling [*Leidenschaft*]"). The (teleo)logic of correlating interart with interdimensional partition works both ways. In disregard for it, some expositors import onomatopoeia into the *Laokoon*'s poetic repertoire and/or neglect the claim of musicality (e.g., Todorov 1982: 143; Wellbery 1984: 197–98).

import of writing, even writing-like (i.e., visible yet arbitrary) signification into painting; and further mixtures to be discussed. Yet, in treatment if not in judgment, crosses and syncretisms whose legitimacy nobody would dispute fare little better.

Conspicuously absent are the established semiotic/aesthetic permutations that Lessing himself meant to explore in the sequel to this very book. They cover an assortment of arts: music (natural sequent audible signs), dance (arbitrary sequent visible), and pantomime (arbitrary sequent visible aligned with natural sequent visible) as well as poetry and painting themselves.¹⁵ What's more, the spirit of interplay generally advances here from code-elements to whole arts. Lessing hopes to see (and study) them in union, or reunion, where they would pool resources to the best advantage without detriment to any partner: a marriage of equals, after the classical example. The (re)union of poetry with music, almost designed "by nature itself," comes first; then music/dance, dance/poetry, dance/music/poetry. Even musicalized pantomime can effectively alternate with poetry. The only imperfect marriage remains that of poetry with painting, for their complete diametricity, time/space extension notably included, rules out any coworking other than subordinative, between unequals (N: 651–55). And it is on this imperfection—actually on the milder or local ut-pictura junctures by way of transfer, analogy, or boundary-fudging, as though to discourage worse—that the published *Laokoon* trains its guns with a vengeance.

In the process, it marginalizes even a composite so ancient and so admired as the theater, for Lessing the ideal art. Exactly thanks to its compositeness, the staged drama enjoys the best of all aesthetic worlds: "a living picture" that "we actually hear and see" (L: 21–22), with illusionary force to match. But the suggestive passing remarks on it never amount to anything like a cotheorizing with the arts it syncretizes and surpasses. Appropriately, the drama figures here in none of the three high places of comparison: the title, the preface, and chapter 16's multiple linkage of semiotic with aesthetic typology. (*Hamburg Dramaturgy*, in its way as groundbreaking, will of course repair the omission before long, not to speak of earlier writings or of the much-cited afterthought in the epistle to Nicolai.)¹⁶

Nor is either polar art broken down into its own varieties, which would entail another refinement and complication of the semiotic differentiae bundled together at either pole. What divides sculpture from painting, or engraving from both, never arises except ad-hoc, any more than poetry re-

15. For some elaboration on Lessing's musical notes, see Richter 1999.

16. First singled out in Wellek 1955: 164–65.

cited subvaries from poetry in silent reading, still less oral (e.g., Homeric) from written literature.¹⁷ On the contrary, glossing the work's title and usage, the Preface already stipulates that "under the name of painting [*Malerei*], I include the pictorial arts [*die bildenden Künste*] generally as, under the name of poetry [*Poesie*], I may also give some consideration to the rest of the arts whose imitation is progressive [*fortschreitend*]" (L: xi). And the pivotal chapter 16, besides leaving the theater et al. unmentioned, gears the definitional semiotic features on either side to the polar aesthetic exemplars: "forms and colors in space" versus "articulate sounds in time" (L: 91).

That the pivotal chapter goes on to outline the room for secondary maneuver between the diametric arts, and between their most notoriously diametric (time/space) axes at that, underscores the void left elsewhere on higher, primary levels. There, even the discriminating comments interspersed all along only highlight the avoidance of any orderly mapping of the arts according to their semiotic intersections and/or ramifications. In theory at least, if not ignored altogether, the intersections and their syncretisms have been analyzed into their constituent forms, as is the theater, the ramifications and their variants abstracted into unity, to maximize the painting/poetry antithesis.

How to account for this demonstrably knowing (self-)restriction? Lessing himself offers one ground in the Preface, when declaring war on the ut-pictura school. As they have so wildly overdrawn the interart commonalities, he will redress the balance by underscoring the "differences," or "limits," and the sister arts in question, become all too interbred, are of course pre-given.

However, recognizing the *Laokoon's* polemical, "dialectical" thrust is one thing; reducing it to dialectics for its own sake, born of sheer contrariness and lust for dispute, as Gombrich (1984 [1958]) would have us do, is quite another thing. Actually, Gombrich himself qualifies for the role, what with his self-defeating either/or between polemics and the pursuit of knowledge. Rather than merely overstating his case to the limit from sheer joy of battle, I would suggest instead, Lessing polarizes the terms of his case for a start, with a heuristic end in view. Indeed, dialectics with its binary cuts is a staple of heuristics. As every teacher, every expositor, every thinker, and

17. I discount here the most conspicuous but also the most systemic, Aristotle-old typological absentee, namely, the narrative (in the sense of action-bound) literary genre as against the rest. Conspicuous, because the line drawn this way need not at all affect the posited auditorariness and would decisively affect the temporal options. But the time element also rationalizes the systematic oblivion to this line, except by way of objection, for the only envisaged alternative to narrativity is counter-temporal and -illusionary descriptivity.

every time-artist knows, a crux is often best approached by first drawing a grand, sharp antithesis and then progressively complicating its terms. The more intricate the question, the more indicated the explorative strategy.

(Thus the general-to-specific, essential-to-contingent, and analytic-to-synthesizing trajectories already inform Aristotle's *Poetics*. Millennia after, Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* inaugurates the constative/performative opposition, against the one-sidedness of traditional philosophy, only to break it down in the sequel. Any of the late novels of Henry James subjects the "international theme"—the Europe/America encounter, in the characters' eyes and our own—to the same process of discovery.)

All the evidence in and around the *Laokoon* points in this direction. The ut-pictorialists in effect played into Lessing's hands by providing him with the ideal starting point for a new aesthetics of art and interart relations. Their bracketing of "the sister arts" enabled him to launch his project exactly where boundaries most show and tell, given that the siblings contrast feature by semiotic feature amidst the family resemblance in world- and affect-making. Imagine what a loss the heuristics would suffer (as it did in time) were he faced instead with the postRomantic "literature, or all art, aspires to the condition of music" or with the transfer of speech to the silent film—the very interart alliances that provoked Newer Laokoons, Irving Babbit's (1910) and Rudolph Arnheim's (1966 [1938]), respectively. As it was, he could luminously work, maybe also think his way (or so he planned) from the diametric extremes mis- or over-allied by pictorialist violence toward less frictional, more equal, mutually reinforcing, even highly desirable cross-relations, including those rejected wholesale by his successors under his banner, as it were. Reconsider the thoughtful notes in store on music, dance, and pantomime, in their semiotic composition and their artistic intercomposibility with one another and with literature; or the draft-material on natural (e.g., onomatopoeic) signs in language and arbitrary factors (e.g., scale-reduction) in graphic imagery, by which iconopoesis would come nearer to iconopsis; or the book on drama, idealized for literally giving voice to the otherwise mute picture, as for crossing audiovisuality with spatiotemporality. The order of publication, intended or achieved, reflects the order of the explorer-cum-expositor's priorities: from simple to complex semioartistic oppositions and/or, inversely, unions, from analysis to synthesis.

So, within the published *Laokoon*, does the order of argument about the painting/poetry antithesis itself. Roughly speaking, the first half draws more lines, while the second works out more licenses and alignments. The pivotal chapter 16 in turn miniatures this logic of advance in moving from "primary" distinctive fiats (space/time, hence body/action) to "second-

ary” reciprocal flexibilities (e.g., action in pregnant body, body in narrated action). What with the cumulative effect of the glances at the differentiae of sculpture, theater, epic, seals, bas relief, and shieldwork, readers who have carried away an impression of sweeping disjuncture (possibly given by the Preface or any single fork or just the author’s bad press) would do well to reread.

Heuristic and analytic method, though, do not yet exhaust the reasons for Lessing’s argumentation; nor do they explain the inter-sister-art boundaries marked by the argument and, whatever the secondary crossing points and permits, upheld on principle to the last. Here an ideoartistic superforce enters, for good or for ill. What generated the liberation of art from sociocultural (didactic, political, religious) bondage now carries over to the sphere of the arts, each ideally enjoying a functional autonomy. The insistence on ultimate apartness that detractors would call Lessing’s purism—gratuitously, because nowhere else in evidence, quite the reverse—Lessing himself elevates into the dignity of art: the supervalue of constraint in its most favorable aspect, the prime challenge of aesthetic identity, if you will. A self-respecting art(ist), he believes, is self-reliant, hence self-distinctive, too proud and jealous of its independent character, resources, and skills, to borrow extraneous aids and makeshifts from an opposite number (N: 635–36, 657). His is not a counsel of purity, then, but of living and operating within one’s proper means to a shared all-artistic end.

This vision of autonomy, like all norms, remains in itself debatable, of course. And yet, I would suggest, it contains a grain of hard truth that may be turned (almost overturned, against Lessing’s opposition) to important theoretical account, especially within and due to the irreducible polarity of the sister arts. Very briefly, I have elsewhere demonstrated what trouble theory in various fields has incurred for failing to distinguish, properly or at all, the object of study’s necessary and sufficient conditions from its endless shapes, addenda, and liberties in practice: definitional minimum from protean materializations. Thus consider stereotype vis-à-vis stereotypes, direct discourse vis-à-vis direct discoursing throughout recorded history, or, more to our point, narrativity vis-à-vis narrative text.¹⁸ Unless you pinpoint what makes or breaks a narrative as such, its narrativity, you are liable to overfocus and at that misconceive (e.g., underspecify) the genre’s nonspecifics, even inessentials—language, point of view, well-made plot, spatializing, dechronologizing—as if they were differentials in their own right, even *the* differentials; and vice versa in regard to the generic essentials.

18. On these paradigm cases, see Sternberg 1998: esp. chap. 3; 1982a and 1982b; and 1990b and 1992, respectively, all governed by the law of dynamism that I call the Proteus Principle.

Now, considering that Lessing's "poetry" amounts to narrative, as did Aristotle's, the implications for it should be evident. As long as narratives represent an action to qualify for narrativity, they are free to describe, visualize, multilinearize, insert ekphrases, configure in all possible spaces, as well as to break illusion at will. Whatever his ground, Lessing rightly insists on the action-boundness, but wrongly illegitimizes the spatialities by every empirical or theoretical standard: he overextends the independence to nonessentials and nondifferentials. The converse holds for graphic art. Its practice may or may not (as the record abundantly shows) narrate, symbolize, or incorporate writing from a title upward, but, in either case, it must iconize, visualize, spatialize its images to qualify. Hence, as narrativity is to narrative and narratives, so is pictoriality, shall we say, to picture and pictures.

Here in a nutshell, and to my mind here only, lies the foundation for any theoretical inquiry into the arts that aspires to genuine, unlimited explanatory power: a third way, divergent from Lessing's and old/new ut-pictorialism's alike, principled yet dogma-free and open to the whole range of empirics. It has no vested interest beyond making sense of how the discourse of art operates, how art forms diverge and co-operate, and how artifacts cross-operate, between the must's and the may's.

At any rate, the call for interart autonomy no more works to the detriment of painting than it brooks a regress toward ut-pictorialism, the two directions in which the *Laokoon* is widely imagined to move (by some, curiously, at one and the same time). It now remains to be shown how the whole approach leading up to this ideal translates into an operational comparative aesthetics. A full-scale demonstration, however, would take much too long, even for an overlong essay, and a bare synopsis of one would flatten everything, prove nothing. Instead, of the two major operational axes, the selectional and the combinatorial, I will therefore examine some workings of the former in some detail, with glances here and there at its mate. Cruel though it may be, this decision is yet logical and verificatory—persuasive, if you will. It goes clean against the trend of modern theory and commentary (as well as against the grain of my own chief expertise) but precisely for that reason serves the argument best.¹⁹ On the interart front, I would suggest, Lessing has a great deal more to offer, by way of innovation or provocation, than the time/space branching. The rest follows a *fortiori*, as it were, and can wait a little.

19. For some further notes on Lessing's idea of combination, see Sternberg 1990a: 67ff. and, with special regard to ekphrastic transfer, Yacobi 1995: 603ff.

4. Arts of Selection

4.1 Primary selection

Primary selection, of course, itself operates and ramifies within the narrow field of mimesis *preselected* (“preconstrained”) as distinctively artistic. Even with all its varieties put together, aesthetics in Lessing may exploit the whole coding repertoire, but never the whole objective ontological range, of semiotics. Art’s ideal of beauty, we have already found, draws limits of representability upon a world otherwise limitless and all indifferently open to representation, in culture, or discourse, at large. Those limits, further, are here relatively well-marked in empirical terms. Elsewhere notoriously liable to ineffability, the beautiful is not just functionalized as a master pleasure but also objectified into the perfect on some world scale, from the physical to the spiritual to the actional. It therefore works the negative, exclusionary way, too. Any scale’s range of imperfection would correlate with progressive ugliness and grow unrepresentable to match, certainly ineligible for stardom in any artistic branch.

Such preselection by objective scaling doubtless appears odd, if not outrageous, in more permissive quarters; yet Lessing, with many before him, feels as strongly about its observance. How else would a neoclassical liberal so warmly and partisanly invoke the Greeks’ subjection of artistic license to civil law?

Unquestionably, laws must not claim any restraining power over the sciences, for the ultimate goal [*Endzweck*] of the sciences is truth. Truth is a necessity to the soul, and it is tyranny to impose the slightest constraint [*Zwang*] on the gratification of this essential need. Whereas the ultimate end of the arts is pleasure, and pleasure is dispensable. So what kind of pleasure and how much of each kind shall be permitted may depend on the law-giver. (L: 10)

In founding his call for selectivity on the ancient precedent of censorship, Lessing betrays selective amnesia. Not only did Socrates fall victim to the tyranny Athens exercised on “science.” His own disciple-cum-dramatizer Plato has him banish art from the republic altogether, since its pleasures insidiously offend and militate against truth: one ideal, one standard. Aristotle, as typically differential as *his* mentor was univalent, avoids splitting culture into two zones—of which art alone will operate for its own sake—but rather shifts orientations with the inquiry’s framework: as between the aesthetic and the real-life viewpoint on, say, artworks. The discipline varies, not the phenomenon under study. The *Poetics* liberates art from external control, while the *Politics* socializes it. The one treatise, for example, deems Pauson a comic painter, because his figures are “worse” than ourselves, where Polygnotus’s are “better,” tragedy-like; the other, speaking of

education, recommends that “young men should be taught to look, not at the works of Pauson, but at those of Polygnotus” (*Poetics* 1448a5–10, *Politics* 1340a25–39, and contrast L: 195, n. 2). The “wise Greek” never uniformly manifested the tidy bipolarity desired. The approved dependence on civil authority, moreover, presents an antithesis to Lessing’s own attack on the interference of religious “superstition.” But then, in the former case, socio-politics allegedly agrees with aesthetics, extrinsic with inner law, as well as with civilized taste and the practice of the great masters then and since.

On the other hand, the convergence on the law of beauty from these two quarters renders their possible operational divergence the more dangerous. While the civil legislator can stop here, leaving the fiat to be applied any which way, the aesthetician cannot and does not—or rather, not if he is a Lessing, since the principle on its own might (by default, even design) equally authorize the *ut-pictura* approach to the bounded, “preselected” sphere, free interart transfer and all. Against this permissive confusion, the law of beauty rejoins forces with the illusionary co-universal to disjoin *pictura* from *poesis*: to subdivide not just into workable but into medium-sensitive variants, ever-branching and -sharpening as the focus narrows. Here selection proper enters to map the limits of representability (including re-presentability) onto either art—in the interest of the same twofold master value, on more than one level, and by a progressive bisection of the aesthetic reality-field along semiotic lines.

Recall how “the wise Greek set much narrower bounds” to painting than its technical open-ended range of “objects upon flat surfaces” and “confined it strictly to the imitation of beautiful bodies” (*schöne Körper*) (L: 8). In the final noun phrase, two lines of confinement meet to answer the twin aesthetic universals in specifically pictorial terms. “*Beautiful* bodies,” by all-artistic fiat, excludes the unbeautiful from the primary reality-field, though it is equally imitable on canvas, or in marble, and actually so imitated by overraters of truth, difficulty, or expressiveness per se—overreproducers, in short. At the same time, with an eye to distinctively graphic presence-in-absence, “beautiful *bodies*” excludes the nonbody (however beautiful) as nonvisual, hence resistant to iconopsis, and hence perforce anti-illusionary.

That such *Laokoon* arguments rest on perfection and iconopsis-for-illusion is worth emphasizing, because the fact demonstrates the relative independence of the selectional logic, positive or exclusionary, here in visual art. Combination, which has stolen the show, moves to the fore in the book’s second half only. Right now, as often at this phase, the spatiality of painting’s medium and world does not figure at all in “beauty” (derivable from the aesthetic constant) and just lurks among the properties

of “body.” Even there, the need for medium/world accord fulfills itself in the iconopsis, without special regard to its deployment as an array of co-existents. No doubt, once the latter axis comes into its own, it will prove to exert its influence on the field of selection, too. Yet the double argument from “beautiful bodies” manages well enough to circumscribe the (primary) reality-field allotted to visual aesthetics as such.

The antithesis, and the objection, to the boundary-crossing of “moderns” (practitioners, ut-pictorialists) double accordingly. On top of their reach for “all visible nature, of which beauty constitutes but a small part” (L: 16) comes the hankering after the invisible or allegorical—sometimes in the same work, with losses proportionate to the twofold breach of the illusion of beauty heading the aesthetic value scale. The stricter the joint limitation on primary choice, the more distinctive and affective the graphic artifact, and vice versa.

Or so Lessing implies, to some extent with yet better reason than the sheer differential power (supervalue) latent in any constraint. As usual, the mirror imaging of hierarchies renders this (tele)logic of selectivity useful even amidst the modern’s normative inversion or the scholar’s evenhandedness, for both diagnostic and explanatory purposes. Thus, on examination, the idealized beauty/body package deal instructively breaks down into its components to tell mutable apart from medial priorities. Of the two components, the first does not compare in durability (here, in forced primary eligibility) with the second. Visual art can employ any objective mimetic property, ugliness included, or none whatever, to announce itself as artwork, while the demand for iconopsis (“body,” extendible to the abstract design) persists regardless of the mimesis (“beauty”) and/or illusionism. This reflects exactly the balance between aesthetic values and semiotic code, history and theory of art, may’s and must’s—hence between Lessing’s over- and the pictorialists’ under-discrimination.

Because of the doubling, again, the threshold, the stakes, and the fences mount in theoretical, interart no less than in historical or interschool terms:

Without inquiring here how far the poet can succeed in describing physical beauty, so much is unquestionable: since the whole infinite realm of perfection [*Vollkommenheit*] lies open to his imitation, this visible covering under which perfection becomes beauty can only be one of the least significant means by which he interests us in his characters. Often he neglects it altogether, feeling sure that once his hero has gained our favor, his nobler qualities will either so engross us that we shall not think of his physical form, or, if we think of it, have so predisposed us that we shall naturally attribute to him a beautiful or at least ordinary one. Least of all will he have to consider the sense of sight [*das Gesicht*] in any single detail not expressly addressed to this sense [*Sinn*]. When Virgil’s Laocoon

screams, who stops to think that a scream necessitates a wide-open mouth, and that this wide-open mouth is ugly? Enough that “clamores horrendos ad sidera tollit” [He lifted up his voice in horrible cries to the heavens] has a strong appeal to the ear [*das Gehör*], no matter what its effect on the eye [*das Gesicht*]. Whoever demands a beautiful picture [*schönes Bild*] here has missed the whole intention of the poet. (L: 20–21)

Poetry’s lot never defines itself so sharply as painting’s, much less as the time/space reductionists would have it. The excerpt quoted, the closest approach to a global demarcation of the makeup or thematics of a literary world, seems elusive, zigzag, and all too negative unless read attentively and with the regulating principles in mind.

Once again, the emphasis falls on selectionality. If painting’s space-orientedness lurked in “body,” poetry’s mimesis of time through time does not (yet) even arise from an analogous glance at “action.” Indeed, I would suggest, Lessing postpones discussion of the poet’s access to “physical beauty” because the answer largely depends on combinatory factors and finesse. (E.g., the sequentiality that disables the mimesis of such beauty in its natural coexistent harmony both authorizes that of ugliness, dissipated in the process, and enables the actionalizing of beauty itself, Helen’s famously [L: 126ff., 148ff., 138ff.].)

Meanwhile, he relegates this ocular domain to poetic insignificance compared with the exclusive selectability of “the whole infinite realm of perfection” other than physical: from the characters’ “nobler qualities” to the alternative materiality of sound, their own or their maker’s, imitated or imitative, but always iconlike. Primary eligibles named elsewhere include ideas, thoughts, and divine reality, by nature the most perfect of all, as well as, combinatorily again, well-made (“perfect”) actions.

The heterogeneity of this range (“realm”) may provoke wonder. What does nobility share with musicality to qualify (by implication, even reserve) both for literary imaging? “Perfection” doubtless, yet evidently not perfection alone, since they have it in common with physical beauty, the preserve of the sister art. Again, as with the perfect objects, so with the linguistic arbitrariness of their signification. It indeed enables literature to signify nobility and noise, hence to unify them, but this power might coextend to physical beauty, which it doesn’t or needn’t. The distance between the necessary and the sufficient condition reopens.

To bridge it, apparently, the above quote harps on a negative link among the assortment of poetic representables. From noble to musical, they all stand opposed to “this visible covering under which perfection becomes beauty,” and so encompass among them the complementary reality-field, or subworld, of invisibles.

On yet closer scrutiny, however, this shared negative marker proves to vary in force. It is at its weakest where involving a peripheral rather than criterial antithesis to visibility, a minimum otherness. Take ideas, thoughts, or character traits: invisibility attends but does not nearly define, let alone exhaust them (any more, come to that, than would the antipode of inaudibility). The marker sharpens to the polar extreme in the rendering of a character's speech or cry, which is as positively and centrally, if not exclusively, defined by its audibility as his or her looks by their visibility. In between would fall the divine subsubworld, Olympian or Judaeo-Christian, boasting invisibility as an ontic, operational, observational, qualitative privilege, yet one neither alone nor even irreversible at will.

Thus, even in the advance from makeup to breakdown, from objects to feature-networks under a low common minus sign vis-à-vis painting, the realm's heterogeneity persists and with it the question of what qualifies it all for poetry's counterrange. Why should literary reality be negatively and loosely constituted as one of invisibles? Is it for sheer difference, however otherwise unmotivated?

But then, of course, the reality-items populating literature neither stand nor operate by themselves, though Lessing (perhaps taking too much of his system for granted here or reluctant to anticipate matters) appears to treat them as if they did. As signifieds in (literary) discourse, Virgil's epic for example, they entail a signifying code, vehicle, purpose. And once interrelated with the rest of the factors at work, the negative bond not only tightens and thickens but also turns constructive all along the line, from sign formation to motivation.

To introduce the signifier—as the excerpt quoted tacitly does midway in differentiating objects by the “sense” they “address” and invoking poetry's “strong appeal to the ear [das Gehör], no matter what its effect on the eye [das Gesicht]”—is already to pair object with medium, the world's invisibility with the word's audibility. So far from granting equal status to literature's visual channel, Lessing will not even define the medium as non-visual but as ear-bound, auditory (“hörbar” over against painting's “sichtbar”). Nor, though favored by translators, are the mentions of literary “readers/reading” in his text. He is an unabashed phonocentrist. (Never mind that, to an aesthetics of object-dependent impact, the less reading needed the better for the sense of the world's immediacy, presence, and beauty.)

This normative exclusionary polarity within literature widens the gulf between the arts by extending it to the respective sign vehicles. Where the equipollence of writing would render the signifiers of poetry (audible *or* visible) even less distinct from painting's (visible) than the two signified-

classes allotted (invisibilia as against visibilia), its downgrading renders them more so (audible exclusive of visible, as vice versa). At last, if still only along one line, the sister-arts bipolarity in signifying turns positive at either end, an opposition between equally autonomous and well-defined senses, vehicles, windows on the world.

Yet, as a result, so inevitably do both the signifier/signified nexus and its aesthetic motivation. By this I not only mean that, once signifier and signified come together, as they do now, auditorariness fully polarizes with iconopsis as signifying codes. At the same time, literary auditorariness rivals graphic iconopsis as a distinct representational art, in finding objects of perfection and illusion uniquely suitable (“natural,” iconic) to itself, namely: the realm of invisibles communicated (and communicable without discord) in audible language alone that we never see, either. Even insofar as it brings on visible existents, their visibility (“physical form”) will in the discoursing pale beside or attach by inference to (say) the nobility in representational focus—or, directly portrayed, become a matter for secondary treatment (e.g., body in action).

So, even time/space aside, Lessing’s case for primary selectional bipartition is wider and stronger than his argument for it, which opens and closes with a frown on the transfer of visual materiality. Given the theory’s premises, either chain of reasoning I outlined would march straight from semiotic vehicle to sign as a twofold whole to aesthetic function grounded in the highest affective universals, so that the rationale of choice gathers constructive force throughout. The very medium, all relegated to self-effacement in favor of art’s illusionary object, asserts itself in subdividing the object domain between the arts for code-specific illusion with beauty, illusion of beauty: perfect matter suited to proper manner. The subworlds of poetry and painting, now motivated, are in complementary distribution.

Not such an extreme claim, this, for such a branded enemy of painting to make, one would think, still less unevenhanded. It is literature, if anything, that gets more shortchanged in the divide, from code (writing out) to coverage (of visibilia). After all, old/new pictorialist sound and fury apart, the built-in constraints on poetry’s access to the visible world are really lighter by far—precisely due to its all-inclusive (“arbitrary”) signifying medium—than those hampering visual art’s bids for action, secret life, and invisibilia in general. Even with poetry tied to narrative, it can and does freely describe whatever meets the eye, under other rules of poetic art. Had Lessing not aimed at keeping narratives down to their narrativity, or had he appreciated the unequalled perspectival range open to verbal narrative, his grand bipartition would have been much truer yet—and less symmetrical.

But even if you want to cut the cake otherwise than either Lessing or myself, it remains indisputable that language forms the most powerful of semiotic codes and literature its uttermost reach. The astonishing thing, therefore, is how the *Laokoon* interart symmetry has been so misrepresented—in anything from relative built-in coding power to rationale to result, from limits to latitudes—as if it were an excuse to diminish visual art on all fronts, or those that matter, and to wangle the lion's share for poetry. By implication, any advocate of line-drawing on such grounds would count as an accomplice and, if a literary student, as an interested party with an eye to the spoils.

The interart symmetry would appear to evoke a conspiracy theory, in brief, perhaps with deep historical roots. One sometimes wonders if generic memory is as long as the other collective kinds. Can it be that the millennia when picture-making was deemed manual labor still rankle, even after the equality with poetry enjoyed since the Renaissance and the numberless *paragoni* enacted? Indeed, recent attempts to thrust this topos of strife into the very idea of encounter between the two, in ekphrasis, above all, regardless of their evidently frequent peaceful coexistence and coworking, would suggest the displacement of the quarrel's center of gravity from art itself to (inter)art criticism. The overreactions there to Lessing and his influence may well bespeak the afterlife of the old grievance, the resurgence, if not the resuscitation, of a socioartistic inferiority complex that died hard. Or perhaps the aggressive response shows afresh the difficulty of coming to terms with equality amid difference.

A telltale measure of the forces at work is that they have overtaken a scholar normally so generous to his predecessors as E. H. Gombrich, in a volume entitled *Tributes* at that. Gombrich (1984: 36–37) lends his authority to the accusations that “Lessing did not know much about art” and, worse, “he had not much use for art. . . . The more one reads the *Laocoon*, the stronger becomes the impression that it is not so much a book about as against the visual arts: ‘If Painting is really Poetry’s sister,’ Lessing remarks in it, ‘let her at least not be a jealous sister.’” In a retributive vein, apparently, his own nominal Tribute goes not so much to assess, let alone praise, as to bury the iconophobe. Gombrich’s imaging of Lessing as mere polemicist has already been dealt with. Against the further charge of ignorance, we need only cite the prosecutor’s own dispersed spontaneous reference to “that gem of archaeological exegesis, . . . the little treatise *How the ancients represented death*” and to the “*Enquiry into the Age of Oil Painting* and *Hirschau Stained Glass Windows*, which would suffice to give stature to a specialist” (ibid.: 34, 45). Unless the author of the *Laokoon* underwent

a complete transformation when writing about visual art elsewhere—with several Dr. Jekylls to one Mr. Hyde—he must have known his business.

Among kindred overreactions on record, let me exemplify how, invoking Gombrich, others diversify the charge sheet. Wellbery 1984, we recall, would fix on Lessing the equation of visual materiality not just with heaviness and coarseness and imaginative unfreedom but even with “amorality,” deemed “nearly contemptible.” Gombrich’s judgment of the *Laokoon* as an anti-pictorial book, he concludes, “is entirely accurate” and verified on further grounds (*ibid.*: 161). If anything, the semiotized thematic boundaries drawn to promote the universal effects of either art only underscore the absence of any prescaling by ethics; and the secondary latitudes will relativize the material, visible/invisible divide itself.

As usual, however, it is W. J. T. Mitchell who carries the fight *à outrance*, with the usual penalties. Having tried for a logical refutation of the space/time divide, he goes on to claim that the issue reflects “a dialectical struggle in which the opposed terms take on different ideological roles and relationships at different moments in history” (Mitchell 1986: 98). So, as Gombrich already noted, Lessing adjusts his map of Europe to the boundaries he wants to draw upon that of art, picking national allies and opponents accordingly (*ibid.*: 104–6). But Mitchell (*ibid.*: 108) shifts the emphasis from international to sexual relations (cf. Freedberg 1989: 372–75; Gustafson 1993; Scott 1994: esp. 35ff.) and pushes an argument so extraordinary that I find it almost embarrassing to confront.

It all turns on a Lessing digression retelling the ancient stories about pregnant women who dreamed that they were visited by a serpent, and identifying the visitor as an emblem of some god whose picture or statue they had viewed during the day. From this excursus, Mitchell jumps to one conclusion after another. Lessing supposedly betrays his fear of “the irrational, unconscious power of images, their ability to provoke ‘adulterous fancy,’ the imagining of improper, scandalous conjunctions.” By the same token, adulterating the arts, or genres, counts for him as “an incitement to the adulteration of every other domestic, political, and natural distinction, and it is an incitement peculiar to images.” He also discloses “what is probably the most fundamental ideological basis for his laws of genre, namely, the laws of gender,” whereby visual art plays the female to poetry’s male. And it is because of these sex roles, the analyst further concludes, that space attaches to the one, time to the other (Mitchell 1986: 108–10).

The special pleading leaps to the eye throughout. For example, if images wield such power, then Lessing counters it the wrong way, as did antiquity. Why ban the ugly ones and enforce the beautiful, those aptest “to provoke

‘adulterous fancy’”? Again, if mixing the arts is an incitement to general promiscuity, why blame and bind the image rather than its literary partner in crime? (The two elements or directions of *ut pictura poesis* indeed share the *Laokoon*’s strictures.) Even more to our point, why should dreams of adultery evoked in some women under specific psychophysical conditions by certain graphic images they had viewed—the exceptional piled on the exceptional and the image-makers, all men, left out altogether—come to feminize for Lessing graphic art as a whole down the ages? And if feminized, why spatialized in turn? Instead of a reason, we encounter a stream of free association projected onto Lessing and offensive to every right-thinking contemporary. “Paintings, like women, are ideally silent, beautiful creatures designed for the gratification of the eye. . . . Paintings are confined to the narrow sphere of external display of their bodies and of the space which they ornament, while poems are free to range over an infinite realm of potential action and expression, the domain of time” (*ibid.*: 110). In pressing the buttons of political correctness, the putative associations get further and further away from the original alibi-cum-trigger. The fanciful mothers become Everywoman; turn from viewer to viewed object, now on “display” for our (lustful? men only?) “gratification”; and assume the beauty of the earlier imaged gods but not their power to affect the mind in (night)time, far less to range over space and time.

As concerns these world-axes, the rhetoric of substitution further extends to the origin, the ideoaesthetics, and even the language of gendering. For it is Blake, cited in Mitchell’s (*ibid.*: 95) epigraph, who would perform the binary sexual reification: “Time and Space are Real Beings // Time is a Man Space is a Woman.” Hence, Blake’s relevance aside, Space/Woman equals graphic space art, as it were. Apply this equation to Lessing, however, and it goes from unreason to self-defeat, because German inverts the sex-roles assigned: *Zeit* is feminine, *Raum* masculine. Judging from the grammatical gender, womanhood falls to poetry instead, by dint of its very temporality.²⁰

Worse yet for the reifier, neither gender-to-sex hypostasis obtains. If you consider the fields involved, rather than their time/space extensionality, “Art” itself (*Kunst*) and its antithetical varieties (the title’s “Poesie” vs. “Malerei,” also “Dichtung” and “Bildhauerkunst”) are all feminine. Moreover, that nouns in German are necessarily marked for gender in no way remains here a dormant linguistic property, since we find the constraint turned to discursive account within the very arena of interart relations. If Blake and Mitchell after him ignore the age-old topos of the sister arts,

20. Compare the testing of the reification against Isak Dinesen in Yacobi 1995: 645–47.

ut-pictorialism's figurative core, Lessing does not, not even when he re-sexualizes it. In actual usage, he brings it to life, for pleasure and profit. Playing variations on the game, he semanticizes (personifies, literalizes, analogizes) the arts' language-bound genders into sexual roles acted by quasi-characters. The two may then figure as either females or males, but always of the same sex and always with balanced jurisdictions.

In role-casting them as women, for example, Lessing not only echoes the "sister arts" idiom but elaborates, "realizes" the traditional figure of speech to enact a miniature sibling drama or plot. Thus, apropos the rendering of a personage (e.g., Venus) in untypical (e.g., fury-like) action: "Just because the artist must forego this device, is the poet to abstain from it, too? If painting claims to be the younger sister of poetry, let her at least not be a jealous sister and let not the younger deny the older one all the ornaments unbecoming to herself" (L: 61). Conversely with the warning issued to poetry against taking the pictorial "road" to the mimesis of visible beauty, "where she will perplexedly grope her way in the footsteps of a sister art without ever reaching the same goal. One does not thereby close against her every other road whereon art in turn can only follow with her eyes" (L: 136).²¹ The equality runs from sex role to the division of artistic competence.

Nor does the principle change with the double inversion of sexual identity into the masculine and of limit into latitude. "As two just and friendly neighbors do not indeed permit the one to take unseemly liberties at the heart of the other's domain, yet exercise a mutual forbearance on the borders . . . , so with painting and poetry" (L: 110). Or, again, witness the ideal outcome: "Zeuxis painted a Helen, and had the courage to write beneath his picture those famous lines of Homer where the enchanted greybeards confess their admiration of her. Never did painting and poetry engage in a more even rivalry. Victory remained undecided, and both deserved to be crowned" (L: 140). Two male artists, two female arts, a shared womanly challenge and manly crown—with the elders roused by godlike beauty thrown in, if you will, to counterbalance the divinely inspired adulterous longings of the mothers-to-be.

4.2 Secondary Choices: Latitude within Limits

As we advance from primary to secondary selection, the focus narrows from the eligibility or exclusion of whole object domains (visibilia as against invisibilia, above all) to parts or details thereof. But the range of choice

21. You may recall that Gombrich cites the earlier, poetry-favoring allocation of "ornaments"; the companion piece appears to have slipped his mind.

open to either sister art does not necessarily shrink to match in the process. On the contrary, it may widen in nicer ways beyond the primary limit, without infringing the value universals, so that certain subdomains turn out common artistic property amid semiotic difference. As the focus narrows, the finesse and with it the freedom of representation then grow, if the artist (or theorist) only maneuvers where postclassicism will take liberties and ut-pictorialism hardly sees any boundaries.

Within the visible domain, for instance, how can secondary outreach primary choice under the law of beauty? The following excerpt implies one answer, whereby maneuvering for a share in the unbeautiful trades on the possibilities of thematic modulation between the extremes:

There are passions and degrees of passion which express themselves in the most hideous contortions of the face, and which throw the whole body into such unnatural positions as to destroy all the beautiful lines that mark it when in a state of greater repose. These passions the ancient artists either refrained altogether from representing, or softened into that lower degree in which they preserve a certain measure of beauty. Rage and despair disfigured none of their works. I venture to maintain that they never represented a Fury. Wrath they tempered into severity. In poetry we have the wrathful Jupiter, who hurls the thunderbolt; in art only the severe Jupiter. (L: 11–12)

The primary constraint on selection, and therefore on expressiveness, derives here from beauty alone, since illusionism accommodates all subject matter, too temptingly so for ugliness-privileging latecomers. Given the object's visuality and the medium's iconopsis, bringing them together will do the trick. But the shift in level now redraws the lines of pictorial representability to moderate the constraint without reducing art to trickery.

That licensed, secondary shift toward the unbeautiful is encapsulated in the claim that the ancient visual masters "either refrained altogether from representing, or softened" the body-contorting emotions that the poets treated at will. As a primary ("altogether") selectional negative, "refraining" (or for that matter, its positive counterpart, treating) apparently bears no determinate, much less teleological relation to "softening," least of all one of alternativity. The two procedures enter into such a relation, however, once you forget Lessing the reputed dichotomist and think back instead to Lessing the scale man. As he scales artistic goals, artists, genres, or existents qua viable objects of imaging, so does he now the objective realm of ugliness itself.

Previously, or primarily, excluded altogether from the chain of artistic representability—as if below even the ideal-less vegetable or inanimate life—the ugly is found at second glance to be a matter of "degree": hence

gradable not just like but in inverse ratio to the beautiful, so that the two mix at all gradations in between the extremes. Recast in such terms, the problem becomes one of working out a tolerable mixture, and the logic of choice suggests itself, namely, that the image has to keep a perceptible “measure of beauty,” the larger the better.

Violent and visibly deforming emotions, for instance, range themselves along scales of the kind implicit here: from wrath to austerity, from anguish to sadness, from the extremity of pain where Virgil’s *Laokoon* cries out or Sophocles’ *Hercules* writhes to the moderate degree that elicits a sigh. Each range also goes with a proportionate decrease in the “hideous contortions” of face or body; or the other way around, with a gradual increase in “the beautiful lines that mark it when in a state of greater repose,” always assuming an object “perfect” in that natural state. Accordingly, the wise visual artist will choose, as the Greeks did, the least contortion expressive of the relevant scale of emotion, and thus gain something of the poet’s freedom even here. While regarding either scale (let alone the joint physical/emotive scale) as a whole, the two arts fall into a primary divide, a No/Yes binarism, they can yet meet, and compete, in selected grades: where, say, ugliness shades off into beauty under tormenting pressure, for expressive value.

But secondary choice has its restrictive as well as its permissive face, issuing in constraints not imposed or stressed or explicated, if only because not germane, on the primary level. This antithesis to the example just given of scalar logic may correlate with other differences, which I will now multiply in illustrating it, for emphasis and variety and theoretical interest.

Illusion may thus replace beauty as the aesthetic determinant in force. Such is the case with the frequent appeal to the object’s identification or “recognition,” an effect whose importance has been more appreciated in literary, especially dramatic, than in art criticism. Lessing both duly foregrounds it in interart perspective—echoing Aristotle on the role of discovery throughout mimesis—and assimilates it to an affective universal of his own. For a successful crossing of the line between the actual and the illusionary world, the represented objects must be identifiable without delay, ideally at a glance. “If that necessitate a tiresome guessing and pondering, our readiness to be touched is chilled” (L: 74). Numerous consequences ensue, not least for selection of every magnitude. Across art, primary thematic familiarity and reworking come to outrank novelty value (L: 72–76, 103). Between the arts, the exigency of smooth reference weighs most on painting. Where poetic figures (e.g., gods) can appear in and/or out of character, because invariably known by name, their pictorial equivalents “must always be characterized in the same way, or we fail

to recognize them" (L: 58–61); nor must the visual artist, denied the shortcuts of language, bring visibles and invisibles together, on pain of typal, ontic confusion (L: 77–82); and so down to minuter selectional features, whose variance will run through the paradigm case below.

In this shift from secondary latitudes to limits, then, everything turns around: the master value (from beauty to recognition/illusion); the balance of comparison (tipped in favor of literature, against mixture); and at times, as in the following example, even the coherence of the aesthetics with the semiotics (which breaks down under the load of overzealous polarizing). The example at issue begins with a quote from *Polymetis* by Joseph Spence, triggering one of Lessing's most instructive reponses:

"As to the muses in general," he says, "it is strange that the poets are so parsimonious [*sparsam*] in describing them, far more parsimonious than might indeed be expected for goddesses to whom they were so greatly indebted."

What is this but expressing surprise that the poets, when they speak of the muses, do not use the mute language of the painter [*stumme Sprache der Maler*]? To the poets, Urania is the muse of astronomy. We recognize her office from her name and her doings. In art she can be made recognizable only by the wand with which she points to a celestial globe. This wand, this celestial globe, and this posture of hers are the letters [*Buchstaben*] from which he lets us spell out the name Urania. But when the poet wants to say that Urania had long ago foreseen his death in the stars, . . . why should he add, out of regard to the painter—Urania, wand in hand, with the celestial globe before her? Would that not be as if a man, who can and may speak aloud, were yet at the same time to employ the signs which the mutes [*die Stumme*] in a Turkish seraglio had invented among themselves for lack of a voice [*aus Mangel der Stimme*]? (L: 67–68)

Like that with Caylus about the handling of Olympian Invisibles alongside terrestrial visibilia in either medium, the quarrel with Spence on whether the poets underdescribe the Muses not only focuses an issue of secondary choice in need of comparative analysis. It also runs much deeper and further than appears—even to Lessing himself in certain regards that will gradually emerge, beginning with applicability outside the cases adduced.

The quarrel is deeper, since it miniatures the gulf between the embattled approaches to art. The traditional lust for representation per se (here mimesis in its "descriptive" aspect) bumps against the shift toward communication for a purpose (here under the exigency of making identifiable the object represented or described) and the leveling pictorialist against the limiting comparatist. Deeper yet, the two polarities become one, namely, that opposing the indiscriminate mimetic fiat to an acute sense of functionality, hence of discriminate and rule-governed variability in (e.g., semiotic, art-specific) context. For example, does the same object invite, or even re-

quire, the same descriptive thickness across the arts, if only possible? Or is copossibility (i.e., equal selectability) one thing, coefficient (e.g., equal necessity for identification with illusion) another and higher thing?

The gulf also outreaches the cases officially at issue: now the Muses, later the Moralities (Virtue, Temperance, Constancy, Justice) deified in antiquity and personified in its art. Again deceptively overfocused, perhaps, the supernaturalism is a contingency on which little hinges in theory. Nor does the front line just stretch to the existents populating classical mythology—and recurrently imaged after it—humans included. Nor does it entail an aesthetics of lucidity, illusionism, or whatever. Across all discourse universes, as across all communicative systems, “How and how much to specify the referent?” is the most universal and urgent problem of reference, because establishing who’s-who, what’s-what comes first in making sense of the world. (Delaying, ambiguating, even blocking the resolution—against transparence—is merely the obverse of the same coin, except that our aliveness to the gap and to the gap-filling task’s priority sharpens in the thwarting.) The question therefore concerns every represented object in every imaginable world, once we relate the answer to the variable balance between the forces of image-making and discourse-making at work—specifically, between the describable and the identifiable in a comparative light.

This universal range easily escapes notice, as it does Spence’s (if not Lessing’s own) and his many equivalents ever since, within or without pictorialism. Even in language, where reference has been most studied, its resources and their variability are all too often taken for granted. A comparison will therefore serve to highlight the former’s medium-dependence and the latter’s goal-directedness, the dovetailing of typology with teleology in verbal representation. Provided that the wider horizons remain in sight, we may focus on the immediate clash, starting with the unequal treatment of the Muses.

Apropos them, Spence marvels at how the ancient poets join thanklessness to artlessness in skimping the description of their patron goddesses. Lessing’s counterattack appears somewhat abrupt, if not beside the point. On the face of it, we encounter a double jump in lieu of a transition—from represented object or product to medium and from quantity to quality. Is “descriptiveness” unique to “muteness,” outside the reach of language? Surely not. Then why does the opponent’s quarrel with poetic undertreatment (or overselectivity) betray a category mistake—in the expectation, foreseeably disappointed, that poets should resort to “the mute language of the painter”? What with the undisputed facts of the case and the rhetorical question trained on them (“Would that not be as if . . . ?”), the

self-betrayal must ostensibly go without saying. So it indeed does, if we begin earlier, or deeper, with the premises.

Lessing's counterargument rests on two unspoken but well-founded grounds. The first is theoretical, namely, that description, like all mimesis, is a purposive activity, not an absolute imperative unthinkingly carried out by the artist to the limit of feasibility. The second is empirical. Among the goals possibly bearing on this case, it so happens that thorough description for description's sake had no appeal to the literary practitioners charged with its absence, from Homer onward. Where the Muses enter poetry, their physical appearance hardly matters: they receive such and so much portraiture as will answer to the work's genuine needs. And on the operative scale of priorities—even assuming the type- or class-identification qua goddess—telling the sister goddesses apart from one another leads the way, on pain of referential (here, also illusionary) trouble.

From this tacit groundwork, there lucidly ensues the given countercharge: Spence, in taunting the poets with ingratitude to the source of their inspiration, would have them “use the mute language of the painter.” He has neither traced the description to its regulating end—or to any end outside the automatism of his mimetic fiat—nor weighed together the means available for the purpose to each art, especially within the economy of the respective semiotic systems. If he had, he would have found poetry's description of the Muses entirely adequate to the end, the rigorous secondary selectiveness justified and artistic—or conversely, the turn toward picture-like fullness wasteful—on account of the shortcuts built into its signifying mode.

In Urania's case, for example, “her name and her doings” are enough for us to “recognize her office.” And/or, Lessing might have said, because Homer leaves the Muse invoked as anonymous as himself, and yet we know whom he addresses by her dramatized role within the epic frame: her vocal art (“Sing”), her choice to plunge into the middle, her services to memory, her general inspiring effect. These reveal her unique office of poetic muse in the doing, embodied in what she and she alone generates, verbalized in and through the march of the song type she patronizes, to the exclusion of any formal descriptive apparatus. Trained on the Daughter of Song, the measures, the medium, the movement, even the music of representation fit the message best, crowning guaranteed and economical identifiability with a singular iconicity. Apropos Urania, similarly, the devices chosen to pick out an otherwise indeterminate female (or, if class-marked, goddess) as the muse of astronomy boast a medium-specific compactness. The poet speaks “her name” in the language of words; the plot bespeaks, or respeaks, her identity in the code of “doings”—possibly along

the sequence of the represented world itself, not or not just that of the representing discourse, Homer style.

Without denying Spence's facts of poetic brevity, then, Lessing so contextualizes them as to invert their meaning and valence. The alleged underportrayal turns into due selectivity, the accusation of obliviousness to the Muses into a commendation of an artfulness worthy, indeed born of them. A brilliant stylist, he even encapsulates the whole debate and reversal in the key word, *sparsam*, which changes evaluative along with other connotative poles: from the censorious *stingy* to the laudatory *economical*, with its nuances of elegant efficiency in making a little go a long way. An English equivalent would be the bivalent *parsimonious*, similarly ranging, and here invertible, from lack to law—from a double minus, in coverage and hence in judgment, to an aesthetic plus grounded in the semiotics of literature.

Actually, this law of parsimony invites further theorizing. For now, observe that either identity marker used by the poet belongs to a well-defined axis of the verbal code: the "name" to the selectional or paradigmatic (where it interchanges with, say, a pronoun or a descriptive phrase), the "doings" to the extensional, combinatory, syntagmatic (where they enact themselves in time). And just as the resources afforded by the medium's axes are twinned, or twinnable, so are the routes to their parsimonious exploitation. Here the referent gets identified both on easy terms or effortlessly, via one-word nomination, and productively, not least unobtrusively, via action that cofulfills other ends. Two orders of economy thus join forces: minimum expense (as it happens, though it needn't, at the signifier level) with multifunctional working (among the signifieds).

Next, the contrast drawn with painting is again liable to baffle followability, if not to provoke resistance. The visual Urania, we hear, "can be made recognizable only by the wand," and so forth. Why "only," excluding in toto the art's iconoptic along with the sister art's alternative expedients? The intermediate steps leading up to this exclusionary conclusion are, I believe, reconstructible as follows.

The painter can use neither of the poet's identity markers, with the economy attached to it, or not qua painter. Reference by name (e.g., in a title) would go against the distinctive iconicity (so-called naturalness) of his signs and reference by doings (via a plot image) against their distinctive collocation, their spatiality. He must not fall into the inverse of Spence's error—expecting the poet to "use the mute language of the painter"—in himself using at will the arbitrary and temporal language of the poet. (Nor must we conflate the two, if bent on sorting out the differentiae of the respective art logics, without disqualifying the crosses between them in

practice. By what I called the third way—to repeat the gist—as narrativity to narrative and narratives, so pictoriality to picture and pictures.)

But then, the painter's own integral tools, iconopsis combined with spatiality, also fail him where the Muses are to be described. For how *does* Urania look? What visibly sets her off from other women, other goddesses, other Muses? Even the poets do not say, which is exactly what Spence holds against them. Exactly yet erroneously, because they need not say it here (as, for the same recognitive purpose, they do need to untangle the visible/invisible, human/divine mix of chapter 12 and can accordingly extend the service to pictorial transfers.) If no literary model, then no graphic equivalent, at least not in the absence of an autonomous iconographic tradition.

Hence, by elimination, Lessing's "only." What remains is "the wand with which she points to a celestial globe." Wand, globe, and pointing gesture supply together an oblique and costly identification of the muse of astronomy through her occupational accessories. Oblique, because they fall as short of immediate signifier-to-signified, icon-to-object portraiture as of the directness of nominal reference. And costly, even apart from their multiplicity, because they neither save the artist the work of portraiture (unlike the "name" in literature) nor necessarily (unlike the "doings") serve any further goal. The artist might therefore dispense with them if he could. Failing either line of economy, selective representation must bow to successful communication—elegance to reference, density to identifiability. It is this pictorial baggage shouldered for want of anything better that Spence would impose on the poet, who can travel so fast and light to the same destination.

Thus filled out, the argument would be simple enough and ("purism" aside) strong if Lessing himself knew where to draw the line, in every sense. It rather gets overdrawn, mainly by way of figurative excess that carries him, and the unwary reader with him, beyond the argued, or arguable, limits. Nothing of the kind would happen if he used the travel metaphor, or some other uncomplicated vehicle, to express the interart contrast. But his own figuration is more ambitious, salient, thematic, and problematic:

- (1) "This wand, this globe, and this posture of hers are the letters from which he [the artist] lets us spell out the name Urania."
- (2) "[Suppose the poet, in referring to the Muse without any descriptive intent, loaded her with the same accessories.] Would that not be as if a man, who can and may speak aloud, were yet at the same time to employ the signs which the mutes [die Stumme] in a Turkish seraglio had invented among themselves for lack of a voice [aus Mangel der Stimme]?"

Between these two tropes, across all surface differences, manner and matter recur, formal compounds with semantic likeness. Formally, either develops an analogy in the rigorous sense, that is, a four-term homology (A:B = C:D). Semantically, the tropes concentrate throughout (from A to D) within one field—a field thematic at that, literally significant. The figurative vehicles (“letters . . . spell out . . . name” and the entire “as if a man . . .” clause) share with the figured tenors (“wand . . . globe . . . posture” and the poet as vocal speaker, respectively) a bearing on the domain of semiotics. Yet more to the theme, they all pertain to the domain’s bipartition between the very arts at issue. The aesthetician’s metadiscourse on the subject thus draws all its terms from the pertinent media, so that the oppositional interart comparison figures, or configures, as a two-phase interart analogy charged with progressive disanalogizing force:

- (1) “The wand, the globe, and the posture” are to their composite signification what the component “letters” are to “the name Urania”;
- (2) The poet stands to the former as a vocal communicator does, or would, to the sign language of the mute.

Even in broad outline, either figurative inter- or cross-semiosis militates, rhetorically, against the figured artistic intersemiosis by way of transfer. The dissuasive effect, moreover, sharpens from (1) to (2), which resumes and unsettles (“mute”) an otherwise possibly neutral-looking balance: no equality amid disparity, hence no free exchange of signifying measures. Nor do the analogies reduce to their shared or joint propositional content. They grow more and more suggestive (elaborate, complementary, incremental, affective) on inspection *in* their figurality.

Compare the two comparisons. Not only does the tenor reverse between them, from painting to poetry. The details and development of the analogy change with it, as when the poetic medium shifts channels: from “letters,” most groupable with the painter’s visual sign type, to “speech . . . voice,” most contrastive with the painter-like, because visual, sign language. The shift gains further point if we remember that voiced sound alone (*artikulierte Töne* in the key definition of chapter 16) qualifies for Lessing’s poetic medium. Writing comes in here just for the sake of argument by analogy. Nor is the direction of the shift accidental but suavely as well as aesthetically right. The proper literary channel enters when it can help to discourage any lapse into voiceless, painter-like impropriety. The proper is to the improper what having is to losing, the free to the coerced, the exercise of a basic natural faculty to the unnaturalness of its deprivation. To reinforce the deterrence, the deprived figure not as the socioculturally oppressed—let alone wisely muzzled under, say, the Greek law of beauty—

but as the physically, irremediably handicapped within an alien violent culture: those unspeakably doomed to speechlessness. “The mutes” also personify the earlier glance at the painter’s “mute language,” yet only to render the voice-giving (prosopopoeia) that often goes with personification all the more conspicuous for its absence, and thereby to dramatize the irony at pictorialism’s Simonides-old slogan: “Painting is mute poetry and poetry speaking painting” (L: ix). An ad-absurdum counterfiguration.

For good measure, the incongruity of the extremes that pictorialism would yoke together by violence gets encapsulated in wordplay: Stumme (mute)/Stimme (voice). The continuity between the ersatz and the proper medium, as between the terms for them, is by implication only surface-deep. Or rather, to crown the thematic irony, only sound-deep and even so literally outside the reach of muteness, being itself expressible, like all homophony, in the channel of voice only. By its very tenor/vehicle interplay, the analogy demonstrates, as it were, what it argues about the interart gulf, to the foregrounding of literary specificity in particular.

Lessing’s countercharge thus builds up a firmer and thicker whole than appears, implies more than it says. The entire Urania paragraph not only turns on the comparative figure of speech(lessness) but progressively develops it: from the bare opening reference to visuality as “muteness,” through its operational consequences for the use of objects as “letters,” to the ultimate generalization in the form of an elaborate punning analogy that draws all the terms together, each with its like, its role, its sphere, and its value. Such artful metadiscourse also draws progressive notice to itself, not always in its best interests, as Lessing himself should have known. (Contrast the demand for illusionary transparency in artistic discourse.) The rhetoric of argumentation, with its troping, retroping, and countertroping, brings the argument’s minutest details to the fore and invites their assimilation to the semiotic polarity advocated. Once inspected accordingly, however, they also reveal aspects other than welcome to the persuader or even considered by the theorist.

Those awkward aspects hardly include the ostensible loading of the dice in the speaking-versus-mute dichotomy, because Lessing (recall his enactment of “the sisters”) just turns against the pictorialists their own established paradox. Further, the traditionality of the figurative antithesis loaded afresh here should have been enough to avert the innuendo, literally below the belt, read into the passage by a hostile commentator: “The tongue, of course, was not the only organ that the mutes in the Turkish seraglio were missing. Lessing’s fear of the literary emulation of the visual arts is not only of muteness or loss of eloquence, but of castration”

(Mitchell 1994: 155). At the expense of the sexually challenged, as it were, Lessing would infect the writer and reader with his own secret fear. An aspersion, this, as wild as it is trendy in its Freudianized political correctness and tendentious in its anti-Lessingism across the board. In fact, it resumes the weapon of sexual typecasting directed against Lessing in Mitchell 1986: esp. 108–15. The target now shifts roles from woman- to eunuch-hater, yet always supposedly gives away his fear of the visual in associating it with lost genitalia—iconophobia as castratophobia.

To the old figure of muteness taken over from the ut-pictorialists, rather, Lessing adds the “Turkish seraglio” only because (vis-à-vis the communication held among the speaking) he needed a community of mutes to “invent” and exchange “among themselves” (*unter sich*) “the signs” in question, and where else would he find one?²² Nor can speechlessness insinuate castration even so, regardless of the added heterocultural detail, for the pictorialists would then defeat their own end in tipping the wanted normative balance against the “mute poetry” of painting.²³ Again, how does the castration “threat” soon “re-echo in the transformation [of the word-painted Olympian] from ‘superior being’ to ‘doll,’ a mere feminine plaything” (*ibid.*), if the superiors involved are feminine anyway—Temperance and Constancy, as Urania before—hence already “castrated” by (Freudian) nature, prior to literary treatment?²⁴ It is scarcely Lessing, any more than his pictorialist adversaries, but the neopictorialist who turns out to deal in sexual stock responses: hitting below the belt carries its penalties even outside the boxing ring.

Not the least of them is missing the genuine problem, namely, that the rhetoric counterclaims by figuration more interart divides than the theory either states or warrants. Within each analogy, the terms of the comparative argument exceed the official and defensible contrast in economy. They forcefully suggest what chapter 12, on invisibility, argues in plain words: that when it turns to such devices for recognition, the graphic image grows

22. Let alone one both ready to hand and on historical record. To appreciate these advantages, note how Bertrand Russell (1921: 190), examining the prehistory of language, is instead driven to fictionalize “a parliament of hitherto speechless elders.”

23. Come to that, even if the association had occurred to Lessing or his readers, see Richter 1999 and Gustafson 1999 in this volume on the favorable, at worst mixed attitude toward castrati at the time.

24. As with the grounds for Mitchell’s attack, so with its object. Even if “mute” and “doll” were psychosexual deterrents, neither would harp on “ekphrastic fear” (Mitchell 1986: 154–55). Not only does Lessing recommend certain (e.g., Homer’s) modes of ekphrasis. His concern here is semiotic choice and exchange at large, with an emphasis on the transfer of imaging devices rather than of particular finished images—of artifices, not artworks, in short—from the visual to the verbal code. By the same token, that transfer never involves the cross-allusive bond peculiar to artworks and definitional of ekphrasis qua *re*-presentation.

arbitrary, as well as cumbersome, relative to the poetic, and doubly so in transfer to poetry. It is a matter of degree (though the troping never quite concedes even this much) yet willy-nilly pushed under graphic constraint toward qualitative difference, and accordingly beneath literary emulation, recoding, adding to the home team. Or so Lessing would have us gather.

Thus, analogizing Urania's pictorial accessories to "letters" implies not just a common visibility but also a common derivative, second-order footing and functionality, because letters are themselves deemed makeshifts for "sound" or "voice" in language, that of poetry above all. The figurative cross-semiosis that appears to join the two arts, on the ground of their covisible media, proves to oppose, at least to scale them. By another dig at the favorite ut-pictorialist cliché, painting here lacks even the mediate immediacy of speaking but offers an image at two arbitrary removes from the object. The hiatus of auditoriness doubles in inscribed/encrypted visibility. Failing an adequate (i.e., recognizable) iconopsis of the Muse—correspondent to the built-in privilege of her name—the substitute must allegedly be letter-like, a twice-removed twice-unnatural image, not to say a parasitic order of imagery.

Again, the analogy to "the signs" exchanged among the "mutes" in the harem imputes arbitrariness to the pictorial term in yet another sense. Apart from lacking both motivation in the deiconized signifier/signified nexus and immediacy relative to the first-order, voice-like channel, this grapheme wants institutionalization, encoding, usage within a wide, natural community of medium-users (or outside an isolated, factitious coterie). How else to account for Lessing's expense of words (as he preaches economy) where he could make do with juxtaposing the bare essentials: "Can and may speak" versus sign language? How otherwise to integrate the details added? Why is the sign language ascribed to "the mutes in a Turkish seraglio" and said to have been "invented among themselves" (*erfunden unter sich*) rather than inherited? Surely this was done with a view to divesting it of the basic conventionality attaching even to such a language (never mind Language proper) in general use, or to stamping it with the ad-hocness of a counsel of despair taken ("invented") by those cut off from the rest of the world, including their fellow unfortunates outside the seraglio.²⁵ We are, in

25. Interestingly, among the few extralinguistic "semiological" systems mentioned by Saussure (1966: 16, 68), "writing" also juxtaposes with "the alphabet of deaf-mutes," but to the opposite effect: system, verbal or otherwise, entails convention, code codification. Lessing himself elsewhere defines "the language of the mutes" as based on "arbitrary sequent visible signs" and as an "art" allied to pantomime, hence coded (N 655n.), but he does not refer there to any special, "invented" variant like the harem community.

short, encouraged afresh to tighten, or close, the simile beyond the ostensible interart dissimilitude in sheer parsimony.

With Lessing's companion example, moreover, the figurative insinuation of arbitrary on top of wasteful portrayal grows strategic. It breaks surface, gathers detail, hardens into a nomenclature, and rises to yet another level:

Spence expresses the same surprise in regard to the moral beings, those divinities who, among the ancients, presided over the virtues and the conduct of human life. "It is observable," he says, "that the Roman poets say far less about the best of these moral beings than might be expected. The artists are much fuller on this head, and one who would know what each of them looked like must go to the coins of the Roman emperors. The poets indeed often speak of these beings as persons; but of their attributes, their dress, and the rest of their appearance they generally say very little."

When a poet personifies abstractions [*Abstracta*], they are sufficiently characterized by their name and the action[s] he has them perform.

The artist lacks these means. He must therefore give to his personified abstractions certain symbols [*Sinnbilder*] by which they may be recognized. These symbols, because they are something else and mean something else, constitute them allegorical figures [*weil sie etwas anders sind, und etwas anders bedeuten, machen sie zu allegorischen Figuren*].

A female figure holding a bridle in her hand, another leaning against a column, are, in art, allegorical beings. For the poet, however, Temperance and Constancy are not allegorical beings, but simply personified abstractions.

Necessity invented [*erfunden*] these symbols [*Sinnbilder*] for the artist, who could not otherwise make it understood what this or that figure is supposed to mean. But why should the poet, for whom no such necessity exists, let himself be forced into the necessity under which the artist labors?

What so excites Spence's surprise should, in fact, be prescribed as a law to poets. They must not regard the exigencies of painting as part of their own riches. Nor must they consider the means which painting has invented [*erfunden*] in order to keep pace with poetry, as perfections which they have any reason to envy her. When the artist adorns a figure with symbols, he exalts a mere figure to a higher being. But if the poet employs the same pictorial trimmings [*malerischen Ausstaffierungen*], he turns a higher being into a doll.

Just as this rule is confirmed by the practice of the ancients, so is its deliberate violation a favorite fault of modern poets. All their imaginary beings go masked, and those who best understand such masquerades generally understand least the main point of the work, that is, to let their beings act and, through their actions, reveal their character. (L: 68–69)

In adding "the moral beings" to the Muses, Spence rounds out his invidious comparison of the poets (who "say far less" than might be expected

about the goddesses' "attributes, their dress, and the rest of their figure") with the graphic artists ("much fuller on this head," even the medallists). In rebuttal, Lessing amplifies his own explanation as to why functionalizing and semioticizing the ground of comparison yields the opposite judgment. The figurative element duly reappears in the process but no longer infiltrates the counterargument via the rhetorician's metadiscourse of the ways to identifiable reference within art's mimesis. It now already arises, on every account, from the artistic systems of discourse under comparison. Lessing having granted, *inter alia*, Spence's claim that the poets often discourse about the Moralities "as persons," he twists round its normative implications for either side of the aesthetic fence. On a balance sheet more explicit and continuous than his, the redrawn antithesis would presumably run as follows.

On the one hand, if the literary artist "personifies [ethical] abstractions," then their troping into quasi-mimetic life need not (indeed, it will soon emerge, should not) exceed the requirements for telling them apart as such "by their name and the action[s] he has them perform"—just like the Muses adduced before as receivers of such minimal description, and with another iconic finesse. Extending the bare-bones treatment to the Moralities captures their intermediate ontological footing as personified abstracts, figures by grace of figuration. The sparsity of the discourse mirrors the status in the discourse universe.

This, I take it, would be the constructive rationale behind Lessing's elliptic "sufficiently indicates their character." So elliptic, that a Spence might accuse him of underrepresenting the poets as they themselves do the goddesses. His argument, rather, chiefly aims at negating overrepresentation—visual and *a fortiori*, because gratuitous, verbal. In due course he proceeds to explain on those other, comparative grounds (and with typically figurative aids) why anything over and above the "sufficient" would backfire on the poet. If you want to replace the carrot by the stick, however, just think of extra treatment, and the positives already brought out will show their negative face as well. The rationale works both ways in the literary frame itself.

Where existence in the represented world turns on a manner of poetic speaking—by the pictorialist's own avowal—any further individuation through "attributes . . . dress . . . and the rest" would upset the delicate ontological, hence also the functional, balance. Inartistic anyway, this superfluity defeats the very recognitive goal in courting type-misrecognition, as between the personified and the personal figure. Or to trope the trope of personification gone wrong, the "modern poets" who "unwisely" annex the "exigencies of painting" to "their own riches" incur the penalty

that “all their imaginary beings go masked.” As good as masked, that is, and the strong metaphor for this “favorite fault” dramatizes the paradoxicality of the outcome. The excess, picture-like trimmings obscure or veil the type (if not the token) of being that a duly selective poetic image would reveal at a glance. More amounts to less, overparticularity results in underdifferentiation.

By another boomerang effect, troped one paragraph earlier, it also incurs the object’s downgrading, with further recognitive loss threatened. Actually, the credits and debits attending the representation of the god-(desse)s as invisibles would now change sides between the arts. There, poetry’s verbal medium upgrades the Invisibles because it leaves their features (“size, strength, speed”) to the reader’s imagination, while the painter must either dwarf or denature them in rendering everything visible (chap. 12). Here, much the same logic cuts the other way. “When the artist adorns a figure with symbols, he exalts a mere figure into a higher being. But if the poet employs the same pictorial trimmings, he turns a higher being into a doll.” On canvas, Temperance might pass for an ordinary earthly female, were she not raised higher through the otherwise redundant bridle that symbolizes her tygal unearthliness along with her unique identity. She must become visible anyway, yet she will have gained as well as lost dignity in the visualizing process. But having once been styled the divine Temperance by the poet, any graphic extras and frills would only belittle her image: “dolling” her up with symbolisms is leveling her down.

Painting’s forced specificity, under the constraint of typecasting the object in question, thus reverses afresh (where imitated) into poetry’s counterproductive otiosity. And again, as apropos the Muses, only now with fanfare, the comparison develops along two lines. The variable of arbitrariness supposedly runs together with that of economy, semiotic heightens aesthetic difference, throughout the argument for the bipartition of the arts. Much of this development by concurrence hinges on the roles and spheres allotted to the newly introduced resources, “symbol” and “allegory” over against “personification.”

To disentangle the nomenclature first, what is a “symbol”? Not what careless translations and the accidents of posterior usage would indicate. For “symbol” is not an equivalent to “sign,” Lessing’s all-inclusive *Zeichen*, but a subcategory thereof; and a subcategory, again, other than its name-sake in C. S. Peirce’s semiotics, if only because originating, even manifestable outside language.

The German original, *Sinnbild* (i.e., picture of meaning, *sense-image*), helps to clarify the *Laokoon* usage. There it co-extends, at times interchanges with “emblem”—above all, the reality-item traditionally co-

occurrent with a figure (e.g., Temperance's bridle) that Lessing and his age also called "attribute" (*Attribut*). Into this threefold network, further, the very wording already pulls "allegory," too, for which *sinnbildliche Darstellung* may substitute. And it even enables Lessing to fasten the sign-type's association with graphic art, by realizing the sense-figure *-bild* dormant in the compound. Doesn't the very name (thus the implicit argument from co-derivation) testify to where the signifying mode properly belongs? Where else would you look for *Sinnbilder* if not in *bildende Kunst*? Here is another metadiscursive troping, which would project lexical onto artistic field, etymology onto typology and teleology. Yet the nexus of meaning between world-items (bridle → Temperance) holds independently of that forged in addition by wordplay: the property ("attribute") co-occurs with the person as a "symbolic" rule (of "attribution"), and can therefore identify him or her for us. The accessory "symbolizes" the figure without regard to language, the artist's any more than the art theorist's.

What is "allegory" or "allegorical being"? Not, as some other usages would define it, a "personified abstraction." The latter, though figured into quasi-figurehood among the *dramatis personae* on stage, yet reduces here to the characteristic entailed by the abstract idea or concept. So personifying an abstraction takes very little: just modulating its name from common to proper nounhood (e.g., "Temperance") and having the referent engage in the doing that suits the name (e.g., temperance). The best literature is indeed claimed to make do with the bare "sufficiency" uniquely afforded by the verbal medium. On the other hand, "allegorical beings" come on with the accessories designated as "symbols" or "attributes": Temperance with her bridle, Constancy with a pillar against which to rest. As label or activity is to the "personified" character, so is "symbol" to the "allegorical": marker to marked, signifier to signified.

To the economy-minded Lessing, therefore, the two figures (in either sense) divide between the arts, by a rational double correlation of trope/being with signifying/selective latitude. As poetry combines the advantages of naming and enactment, it will, if wise, use them to bring on recognizable personified abstractions with minimum ado, optimum illusionism. Denied either shorthand, the painter as such must go to the trouble of "allegorizing" those abstractions by way of visual "symbolism." Hence also the sharpness of the counterattack on Spence's fault-finding with ancient literature and on the "favorite fault" of "modern" writing, both allegedly testimonies, one analytical, the other artistic, to *ut-pictura unreason*. Why, unless bent on defeating as well as demeaning and denaturing itself, would literature replace or entangle its own freedom of choice by the sister art's

handicap: “riches” by “necessity” and “exigencies,” “perfections” by make-shifts, shortcuts by the long way around, transparencies by “masquerades,” personifying by allegorizing? (Lessing would also object to the converse switch, for reasons equally principled and antipictorialist but other than economy and inapplicable to the one-way transfer in question here.)

As with the Muses, Lessing’s counterargument from the Moralities would make sense—enough to highlight a key issue still relatively neglected—if he were content to pursue his own leading insight: to open and answer the question of successful reference in terms that differentiate the arts yet universalize art. How to achieve such reference, that is, by picking from among the available and code-specific referring markers those that best suit the higher end of them all, the imperative of parsimony?²⁶ The very distinction between reference and identifiable reference, I have already emphasized, breaks new theoretical ground in interrelating representation with communication; the more so in balancing the forces against each other at a strategic, unavoidable juncture where the difference, or the interlinkage, or the quest for the best equilibrium, most tells. The analysis in a wide semiotic perspective doubles the issue’s novelty value, salience, range, dynamism, comparability. So does now its extension from (divine) invisibles to weak presences, and its bracketing with the aesthetics of economy, as a major communicative norm (in art, supposedly a law) amenable to assorted representational fulfillments.

Even the disputable interart contrast would gain strength if redrawn without the prescription against mixing repertoires—that is, by appeal to the *differentia specifica* of the two arts, not to the finished artistic, often cross-artistic products. For example, the line between (verbal, specifically vocal) “signs” and (visual) “symbols”—“Temperance” versus a bridle-holding female—would then remain in force: complete with its bearings on reference, uptake, and outlay, yet minus the ban on transfer and mixture. The rage for autonomy (“purity”) once turned into a quest for medium-specificity, any study of the shifts between repertoire-division and repertoire-crossing in artistic practice will benefit from Lessing’s functional approach, often down to testable parameters, measures, insights, even judgments. A visual work preferring (or adding) the inscription “Temperance” to the bridle may attest language’s superiority of identifying reference; a poem that inverts that choice may signal thereby a design other

26. Even the apology for Spence, in Siebert 1971: 79, numbers this among Lessing’s “direct hits.”

or larger than who's-who recognition, or else betray its overexpenditure; and so forth.

As earlier, however, Lessing would make doubly sure of the interart gulf by widening it from the economy to the typology-cum-terminology of the respective signs—their location between the “natural” and the “arbitrary” extremes. Now the maximalist perceptibly overreaches himself, with boomerang effects that in turn outreach his antipictorialist case and rhetoric. For the holes exposed lie at the core of his system as a whole, especially as a semiotic whole, though not indeed of his system only. Little wonder they have no more been picked by opponents than plugged by followers.

Concerning the Muses, we have already diagnosed on this front the appeal to a rhetoric in excess of reason—thus the charges of pictorial or picture-like arbitrariness by dubious analogy. Urania's wand and globe-pointing are correlated with the letters rather than the sounds that make up her name in order to increase their distance from the referent signified. Of the two verbal analogues, if the written form shares the painting's visibility, doesn't the word's unbroken *and* first-order continuum of sound offer a nearer operative equivalent to that of the painting's visual world? But then, an analogous first-orderness would upgrade the painterly makeshift and its literary imitability. Next the harem figure also deconventionalizes (de-codifies) the same accessories by analogizing them to the signs that the mutes “invented among themselves.” Another false impression is liable to arise, because the Muse's attributes enjoy a traditionality comparable to her name in spoken or poetic language.

But even one swept along by Lessing's figurative rhetoric may withhold assent when such imbalances come to the fore. Failing the license of specifying the Moralities by their name and what they do, the painter

must therefore give to his personified abstractions certain symbols [Sinnbilder] by which they may be recognized. These symbols, *because they are something else and mean something else* [weil sie etwas anders sind, und etwas anders bedeuten], constitute them allegorical figures. (emphasis mine)

This recasts and fastens the symbol/allegory nexus in terms of a commonality in signifying logic. Allegory, by its very etymology, *speaks other* than it manifests on the level of the represented world. And so does the symbol embodied in the attribute. A bridle is and means a bridle, yet comes to symbolize Temperance, hence to allegorize her. All symbolic/allegorical items, “because they are something else and mean something else,” therefore count with Lessing as arbitrary signs. The items are even implied to signify more arbitrarily than the itemized existent's name and behavior, including those that relate to a different mode of figuration: they would

simply personify it as, for example, Temperance. Apart from all other deterrents, then, the poet who switches or combines figurative modes would allegedly gravitate toward the arbitrary semiosis forced on the painter at identification.

The bracketing of such other-speaking with arbitrariness in any sense is, however, indefensible. Of the two senses, Lessing himself would presumably disclaim—or withdraw, if challenged—the rhetorical imputation of unconventionality (“invented . . . invented”) to the “attribute” or “symbol”: the examples cited are all familiar from the pictorial, iconographic repertoire. This would by itself make a large concession, because the more conventional a sign, the more readily identifiable and so the more economical vis-à-vis both parties to the communicative affair. The artist would then have to invest less work in encoding, the audience in decoding, for recognition. Unlimited to “symbolism,” further, the principle cuts across all sign types. The economy of reference, which we have already discovered to hinge on the variables of expense and multifunctionality, now turns out to vary afresh between the addressor and the addressee: as between the one’s expense of means, or their production, and the other’s expense of mental energy in uptake. With the conventional sign, the two expenditures remain at their lowest, whatever the cost in multifunctionality.

The charge of arbitrariness as alterity or divorce—the symbol being other than the thing symbolized—is more seriously pressed, maybe truer-looking. Yet it will not bear inspection, either. Its plausibility largely derives from the special case adduced, that of the Moralities. How can their lesson in this regard “be prescribed as a law to poets”? It never quite applies even to the companion exemplar of the Muses, where the same literary individuation, via “name and doings” as against “attributes,” ostensibly occurs.

With regard to naming, the Moralities fall between two extreme views, so as to disprove both the accepted wisdom on the topic in linguistic circles and Lessing’s special pleading. In general, names are considered paradigmatic of the arbitrary signifier/signified relation. Semanticists and philosophers of language deny them meaning, truth, and everything beyond the power to single out the name-bearer intended. Having reference but no sense—unlike ordinary common nouns or noun phrases—the name is the merest empty label, working by pure formal differentiability. To this armchair theorizing, the Moralities offer a telling counterexample. With them, as personified abstracts, personification hinges on matching for meaning: the name truly describes the thing by, and only by, its quintessential trait. (Contrast “Temperance” with “Urania,” a fortiori with “Athene” or “Iphigenia.”) Obviously, theory mistakes one option, Western, latter-day, and decontextualized at that, for the principle and gamut of naming, exploited

to the full in literature.²⁷ Even so, regarding the counterexample itself, we must guard against jumping to the conclusions implied by Lessing. Here are the main non sequiturs:

1. It does not follow—despite the apparent matching, as I called it—that the nominal signifier bears anything like an iconic, or otherwise intrinsic, relation to the signified Morality. In a finer-grained terminology, the personifying speaker matches the name's (dictionary) sense to its (world-bound) reference, instead of its form to its meaning, icon style. The linkage of the quality of temperance to the word *temperance* remains in the first place arbitrary as ever in language; and only after it has been encoded does the use of the common noun as a proper name ("Temperance") recommend and disguise itself as a natural way of embodying the abstraction.

2. Nor does it follow that "name and doings" are two of a semiotic kind, any more than they belong to the same discourse level. However they cooperate to characterize a Temperance or a Urania—and as already indicated, they need not co-occur with either—their *modus operandi* diverges on various axes. For one thing, the doing-to-character signification entails a reality-tie between the terms, not essentially linguistic and still less nominal, though expressible via language. (The harem's mutes could enact it by dumb show in a silent morality play.) This also means that the signifying nexus breaks with the arbitrariness of nomination in that it rests on the way of the world, the characters' and ours, as well as on communicative usage by fiat. Knowing people by what they do, however variable (e.g. genre- or culture-dependent) the routes to knowledge, is an existence-based semiotic universal.

For another thing, this tie of signification is not nearly so fixed (predetermined, conventional) as that between word and world, let alone between nominal personifier and personified. Various doings, of various degrees of pregivenness, can be used to express one and the same characteristic. How would you set a limit to the acts whereby temperance is manifestable, Temperance encodable? If doing expresses character by a many-to-many correspondence, then type-doing type-characterizes (e.g., a female as Temperance) by a many-to-one correspondence. The act's selectional range widens in proportion, over against the name's, to make the selected item less automatic, less earmarked, less instantly decodable and projectible into the target figure.

Even then, for yet another thing, the signifier no more personifies than it iconizes (reflects) the signified but exemplifies it in outward dramatic terms, by themselves insufficient to nail down the identification. However

27. For a recent book-length demonstration, see Sternberg 1998.

often those acts recur, and however obviously tokens of one type, they could yet signal just a flat (e.g., temperate) character, instead of a Morality (e.g., Temperance), were it not for pointers of a different semiotic order—especially the personifying name as clincher. These birds flock together without being of a feather; quite the opposite, if anything.

3. Nor does it follow, conversely, that the “symbol” is a semiotic law to itself. On the contrary, it now exhibits a strong family likeness to the second of poetry’s alleged twins-cum-monopolies, nomination and action, in all the respects just shown to divide them. If a bridle “is and means something else” than Temperance, so is and means in principle any doing enacted to betoken Temperance. Action no more equates with type-character (let alone with character in general) than any immobile, descriptive item on the scene.

But then, such equation never holds between any signifier and its signified—or the very dualism that constitutes the sign would vanish and nothing could signify anything beyond itself, indeed not so much as itself. (For me to stand for myself, there have to be two I-entities that differ at least in semiotic aspect and role.) Far from peculiar to the symbol as attribute, “being and meaning something else” is a tolerable definition of the sign at large as a two-in-one, including the rest of the kinds mentioned by Lessing: name, doing, icon.²⁸ The question is therefore not if but how signification by something else draws lines and alignments on the semiotic map.

Precisely here the bridle/doing family resemblance strengthens all the way to twinhood (clean against Lessing and his false name/doing pair). Their shared other-speaking entails not a common semiotic arbitrariness—far less an unbridgeable gulf in this respect—but quite the opposite. A common rationale (“motivation”) links either signifier to the signified amid otherness, whereby both sign varieties oppose the personifying name, a fortiori the ordinary proper name. A bridle, as a curb on will, signifies temperance, and eventually Temperance, by the same reality-based logic and inference that self-restrained behavior does. (Which is to say, conversely, by the same token that a pillar or a recurrent act normally doesn’t and “Temperance” wouldn’t: the former because its lifelike nexus with the characteristic remains too weak for projection onto the character—it suggests constancy, or Constancy, instead—and the latter because the nexus

28. On the common failure to apply the principle of dualism to the icon and its unhappy results in narrative theory, see Sternberg 1990b: esp. 918ff. Although generally antithetical to the Lessing-type aesthetics of signifier/signified harmony, or indeed because of its antithesis, such theory merely changes the victims of conflation in overlooking the fact that the narrative chronology is and means something else than the narrated event-line it reflects: other-meaning amid iconic miming.

excludes all lifelike grounding in favor of sheer arbitrariness of signification.) Either reality-item, bridle or bridled doing, is indeed “something else” than Temperance, yet can well “mean” it by the logic of reality—naturally, you might say, and some would.

Lessing himself, reserving the term *natural* for iconicity, would never call bridle or bridled doing so. But, terminological fiat aside, why not? Why should a character’s portrait qualify for “natural” meaning and its stage properties or performance suffer disqualification—especially given their joint polarity to the arbitrariness (“unnaturalness”) of designating the character by name? Come to that, the relative frequencies *in* nature would give pride of place (or, if not the better, then certainly not the worse claim) to the disqualified. Again, if for some mysterious reason “arbitrariness” overtakes the bridle as other-meaning “symbol,” why draw the line at the co-signifying deed? Why indeed exempt the icon itself, which is just otherwise other and other-meaning than the signified object? And how to interrelate, let alone correlate, the arbitrary/natural with the symbol/name-and-doing dichotomy? The entire taxonomic system would appear to break down, even from within.

My questions therefore do not so much quarrel with the terminology as bring out its conceptual inadequacy to semiotic typology. Nor is this inadequacy betrayed in Lessing alone or even in the Plato-old tradition that he and his contemporaries inherited. Across all terminological variants, Saussure and numberless followers since equally show it, with much the same results. To cut a very long story short, the bipolar “arbitrary/natural” division of signs must give way to a trichotomy of the Peircian “symbol, icon, index” kind. The missing term in Lessing, Saussure, and others is of course the index. But Peirce’s own definition of it is unstable and problematic; it has indeed misled and split his disciples no less than its absence had earlier typologists. (The yoking with “indexicality” in the sense of deixis, for example, would be enough to compound perplexities. Just compare the wavering between iconic and indexical “naturalness” throughout Rollin 1976 with that between all-semiotic and deictic “indexicality” in Sebeok 1991: 128–43, explicitly attempting to improve on Peirce. In either study, the conflation arises from a fortuitous, name-deep likeness.) Let me therefore briefly redefine the third semiotic type by generalizing the foregoing argument.

An index is a sign whose signifier points to its signified by virtue of their contiguity (spatial, temporal, causal, or psychological linkage) within some reality model where both form items: as a house *indicates* its owner; smoke, fire; an effect, its cause; one stereotyped trait, its concomitant mate(s); action and expression, character; and in principle vice versa. The index’s

signifier and signified are mutually inferrable on a lifelike ground, and the stronger their contiguity, the smoother the inference.²⁹

As fellow indexical signifiers of Temperance, then, the bridle attribute and the bridle-like doing—or, with Constancy, resting against the pillar and resisting change—no more diverge in the motivation than in the conventionality of the signifying bond. By either purely semiotic yardstick, they can exchange and join indexical forces ad lib without compromising their distinctiveness vis-à-vis the name or the icon. Where those equivalents may part ways is at the intersection of semiotic with aesthetic values, of taxonomy with teleology. And what is this but the initial crossroads argued by Lessing, where signifying devices (and the arts using them) forked according to their “Sparsamkeit”? Unhappily, the fork is by itself not categorical enough, in his view, to ensure the bipartition of the devices, hence of the sister arts. So, instead of refining and generalizing the operative point of divergence, he went on to con-fuse it for good measure with others of a taxonomic nature—and then those among themselves—yet still retrievably. We can now untangle the matter by drawing on the cumulative findings of our analysis.

It is hard to fault the judgment of overtreatment (overkill, underselectiveness) passed on the poet (whether or not imitating the painter) who superadds attribute to name in the interests of sheer recognition. But why depreciate, and in literature deprecate, the substitution of the attribute *for* the name? This may arguably follow from their well-established relative scaling, whereby the painter’s constrained “attribution” ill becomes the uncoerced poet. If so, however, why recommend to the poet not just the co-indexical doing but its juncture with the name? Is it on grounds outside “Sparsamkeit” altogether, from tenets of artistic purity or autonomy to errors in semiotic typology?

Yes, if you take the forked argument as it stands, or rather strays; but not necessarily if you take it up at the first crossroads and proceed instead on the initial premises. Nothing like purism then comes into the matter, as it would if visual art’s breaking out of its “muteness” into speech (e.g., “naming” in title form) were at issue. The chapter focuses on the transfer of identity-signs the other way, and there all the choices discussed, negative or positive, lend themselves to reexplanation in terms of a richer and higher means-end calculus than supplied.

Reconsider the substitution of an attribute for a name. Even if equally

29. On contiguity in this sense—its range, its varieties, its inferential workings, and its metonymic connection—I have extensively written elsewhere: e.g., Sternberg 1978: 203–35; 1981; 1985: 322–64; 1998: 171ff.

conventional, the accessory will demand an extra investment from the poet in verbalizing the signifier and a greater effort from the reader in uniquely associating it with the signified. So will a co-indexical doing relative to the same verbal tag; but, whether substituted or even superadded, it will also yield for once an operative dividend by moving the action forward in and through the marking of the agent. At the same cost in parsimony, the range of functionality now distinctively widens, the plot thickens.

This balance of loss and gain is all the more important to realize, since the difference between the vetoed and the approved index in Lessing may otherwise seem traceable to dogmas of purity, now bearing on the combinatory axis. After all, is the former (e.g., bridle) not an item in space and the latter (e.g., bridle-like deed) not an affair in time, and are they not accordingly judged eligible for the respective arts? No doubt, and the polarity in harmonious arrangement may have been at the back of Lessing's mind. Even so, it coincides with one in function: the space-index merely outspends the name, while the temporal equivalent offsets the expense on another coordinate and reckoning of economy. The *Laokoon* text articulates neither antithesis, but if suspected of the weaker grounding, notoriously disputed by antipurists, it must also be credited with at least enabling the stronger one, indisputable and independent.

A yet closer inspection of the variables in play further complicates the scaling within indexicality, dynamizes the balance against Lessing's will to fixture. Thus, the bridle's unfunctionality emphasizes its reading as an indicator of personified character—its univocality, in short. Conversely, the action's very multifunctionality always threatens to obscure that characterization in and in favor of the emplotment, even by overdoing and de-flattening it toward personhood in the emplotting process. As if it were not enough to vie for the limelight on unequal terms—with a more salient contender, all at once immediately present, eye-catching by kinesis, and specific—the intended abstract character would then gather unwanted, misleading detail from its embroilment in the actions set up, inter alia, to indexicalize it. (The threat lessens, but never vanishes, with determinate personal figures.)

Or take the parsimonious recognitive force of conventionality. *Mutatis mutandis*, an act provides by this yardstick a less forceful character-index than a comparable attribute, in that its encoding as such belongs to a higher level, to a far more inclusive and open-ended set of alternatives, all plot-tokens of one personality type. An example would be the range of acts associated or possibly associable by "natural" convention with temperance, hence personifiable (i.e., depersonalizable) into Temperance, as against the singularity or restricted class-membership of the iterated bridle. It so

happens that the bridle of Temperance does find role equivalents in the yoke or in the jug-cum-glass that betokens her habit of diluting her wine with water. (See, for instance, their “redundant” collocation in Johannes Torrentius’s *Still-Life: Allegory of Temperance* [1614].)³⁰ Yet that equivalence in accessory status remains a contingency that need not arise, and elsewhere doesn’t. What’s more, the plurality there remains in effect as closed a set as the one-attribute club, and not much bigger at that, because demands of memory and efficiency (including group or generic economy) jointly impose a severe practical limit on the number of, say, Temperance accessories encodable into indexicality for the purpose.

Unlike accessories, acts freely extend in range, given that they form by nature (i.e., by model after world model) a closer and more versatile indexical nexus with character. But then, the freer the extension, the looser (hence less pinpoint, parsimonious, specialized, recognizable) the convention; as also vice versa, to the attribute’s unifunctional gain. Not only does the inverse ratio work either way, and with it the type/token disparity amid shared indexicality. They also go back to the earlier complication we deduced. However character-typifying, an act must needs vary from one plot to another, on the dramatic surface at least, whereas an accessory may stay relatively constant among arenas and backgrounds.

Finally, dead against the apriorism and fixity of Lessing’s aesthetic value-frame, themselves inconsistent with his goal-directed reasoning, such dynamism is extendible from means to end. The teleological spirit behind the calculus of parsimonious reference outreaches and, historically, outlives (if necessary, overturns) the official dogmatic letter. Set free, the choice among the referential forms available will turn, like everything else, on the operative function or scale alone: on role-governed rules that contextualize, historicize, relativize, even oppose art’s very supposed universals of transparency and economy. So much so that the variable balance of identification is co-applicable to latter-day theory and practice, notorious for their poetics or aesthetics of anti-illusionism, enigmaticness, disharmony, opacity, and difficult beauty, all countervalues that have got misuniversalized (“reified”) in turn.

A few hints will do. Among the repertoire of indexes, for example, an art of ambiguity, literary or visual, will select and join those items that have the lowest identifying power in (medial, generic, diachronic, sociocultural) context. Or the negative way around, an art of what the Russian Formalists called “making strange” would rule out traditional markers wholesale, except as a contrastive background to the shocks of novelty. Once dyna-

30. Conveniently reproduced in Gombrich 1985: fig. 126.

mized, then, the law of parsimony always remains in force, qua semiotic calculus geared, inter alia, to identification. As ultimate end, though, it and the corresponding hierarchy of means work under a higher, artistic calculus, where nothing is predictable but change of values and priorities to the limit of reversibility.

This accords with the many-to-many correspondence between form and function that I call the Proteus Principle. Lessing himself would certainly reject the modern values per se, as he did their earlier variants. He would find it harder to explain away their interplay with his own rule and repertoire of economy. Given a countereffect or counterend, however unpalatable, the countermeans must follow by (teleo)logic. But his response to either challenge concerns us today less than our response to his bid for maneuvering between the universal and the differential in art. Here the remarkable thing is the extent to which Lessing's insights, departures, quarrels, limitations, even mistakes still bear fruitfully on aesthetic platforms and theoretical projects so removed from his own, after the *Laokoon*.

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