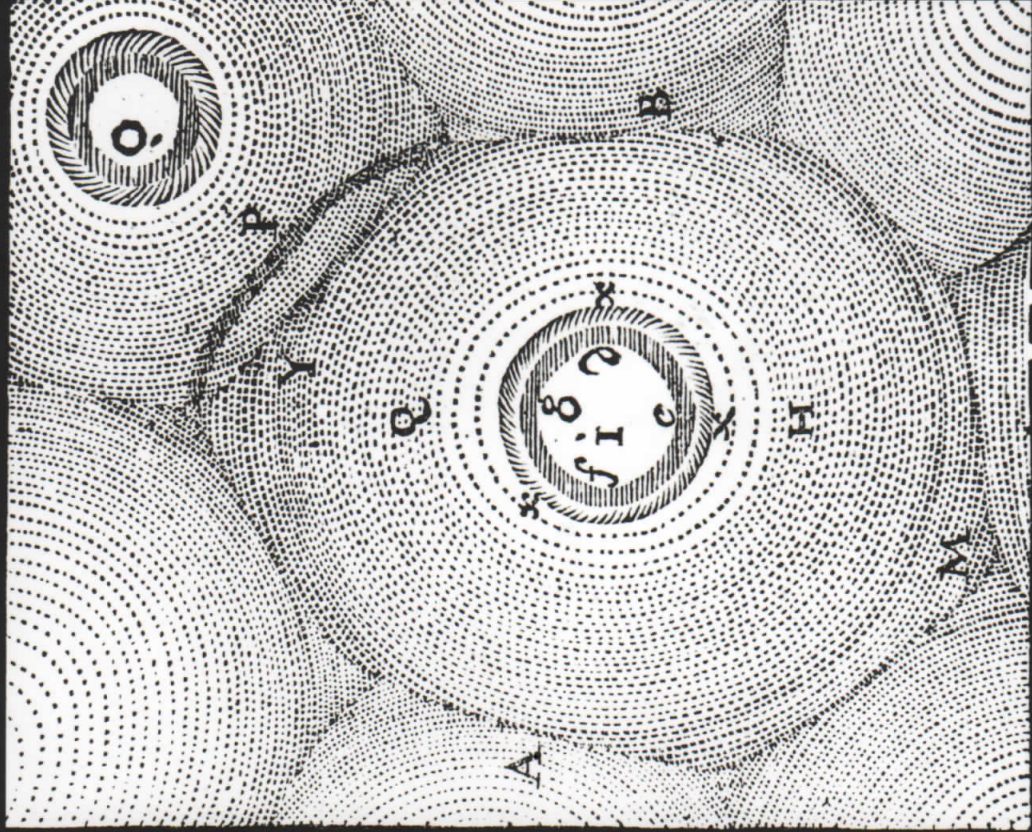
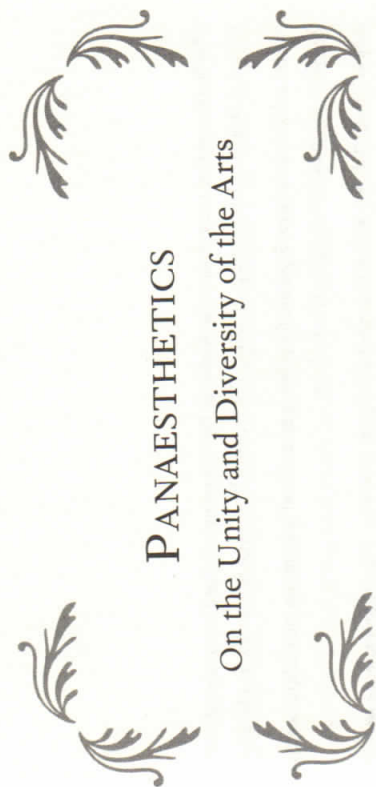


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Daniel ALbrig



Panæsthetics

On the Unity and Diversity of the Arts



PANAESTHETICS

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DANIEL ALBRIGHT

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INTRODUCTION

Mousike

MUSIC. MUSIK. MUSIQUE. MUSICA. MÚSICA. МУЗЫКА.

These words mean the same thing, and pretty well cover Europe and the Western hemisphere. All are derived from μουσική, *mousike*—but this Greek word doesn't mean "music." It is related to the word for Muse and means anything pertinent to the Muses; therefore it includes not only music but dance, mime, epic poetry, lyric poetry, history, comedy, tragedy, even astronomy. In Roman times the nine Muses were parceled out fairly neatly among these nine arts, one Muse to one art. But earlier, the boundaries of the areas overseen by each Muse were unclear and overlapping. Greek mythologizing tended to confuse and unify the arts: an artistic medium was not a distinct thing but a kind of proclivity within the general domain of Art.

On the other hand, the founding text of academic study of the interrelations among the arts is Aristotle's *Poetics*, a book with a strong appetite for division. Aristotle isolates six distinct aspects of dramatic art: plot (*mythos*), character (*ethe*), thought (*dianoia*), diction (*lexis*), spectacle (*opsis*), and music (*melos*). Far from blurring these categories, Aristotle ranks them in value, with plot as the most important, music much less so, and spectacle least of all. For Aristotle, it seems that

verbal art takes precedence over all others—and indeed the visual arts seem so ancillary in Greek culture that neither painting nor sculpture is dignified with a Muse of its own.

And yet the *Poetics* does not exalt the literary as much as it seems to. Nowadays we hear the word *plot* and may think of a verbal summary of a story; but for Aristotle the plot is as much a matter of bodies moving on a stage as a matter of words. In Greek thought, verbal art spills out of the purely textual in all directions: into mime, into chant, into elocution. The very word *poetics* refers to *making*, not to any specifically verbal craft: we might speak of the poetics of a sonnet, and we might speak of the poetics of a sofa.

The purpose of this book is to provide an introduction to the study of the comparative arts. And the proper place to begin is with the fundamental question of comparative arts: Are the arts one, or are they many? This question vexed the Greeks, and continues to vex us today.¹ Ringing affirmations that the arts are one are easy to find throughout history: as a summary of classical thought (written in the seventeenth century by Franciscus Junius) put it: "All arts," sayth *Tullie* [Cicero] "that doe belong to humanitie, have a common band, and are ally'd one to another, as by a kind of parentage." *Tertullian* speaketh to the same effect, when he sayth; "there is no Art, but shee is the mother of another Art, or at least of a nigh kindred." And innumerable writers cite Horace's dictum *ut pictura poesis*: the poem should be like a picture. The Romantics were particularly attracted to the notion that there is a single Art that refracts itself into separate arts like light through a prism: "One man's tongue is set free, and he becomes a poet; in another's soul everything takes shape as colors and forms and he becomes a painter, the third involuntarily hears, as his soul's mood varies, melodies sounding deep inside him, sometimes cheerful, sometimes serious or melancholy, and he becomes a musician; in short, one might say that it is the same creative power that, as through a prism, refracts in different ways" (Wilhelm von Schadow).²

This German painter and novelist, himself extremely versatile, resolutely states an intuition common throughout the centuries.

Strong assertions of the essential *disunity* of the arts are hard to find before early modern times. But the discipline of comparative arts arises from the work of just such a divider, Gotthold Lessing, who argued in *Laokoon* (1766) that the temporal arts, such as music and literature, had protocols wholly distinct from those of the spatial arts, such as sculpture and painting. He began by asking himself a question that the great art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann had asked before him: In the famous Roman statue (excavated in Michelangelo's time), why isn't Laocoön screaming? Laocoön and his children are being squeezed to death by an enormous snake; but Laocoön's mouth is a tight stoic line. Lessing argued that artworks in a sequential medium pertain to action and should be loud, vigorous, expressive, so it's appropriate that in the *Aeneid* Virgil depicts Laocoön as raising a horrible clamor to the stars; but artworks in a spatial medium pertain to stasis and should be decorous, calm, poised, so it's right that a statue should strive for balance and beauty even if it depicts a man dying horribly. A work of visual art is an immobile noun, or a collection of immobile nouns; a poem, a novel, a piece of music is all verb. In this way the arts diversify, even show a certain hostility to one another. Others who agreed with Lessing include Irving Babbitt, Clement Greenberg, Theodor Adorno, and the Victorian critic W. J. Courthope, who defined decadence in art as a quest for originality achieved when one of the arts borrows some principle from another. A famous example of a medial separatist is Marshall McLuhan, who thought that the medium was the message; for an extreme unifier, such as Wassily Kandinsky, the medium, far from being the message, is pretty much irrelevant to it.

My own view is that the arts themselves have no power to aggregate or to separate—they are neither one nor many but will gladly assume the poses of unity or diversity according to the desire of the

artist or the thinker. But the story of their comings together and splittings asunder is one of the great stories in the intellectual history of the West; and in this book I will tell it as best I can. I begin by looking at each artistic medium in isolation, always with reference to particular works, in order to see how artists' theories and practices reveal assumptions about the ultimate purpose of art. (I speak of artistic media in isolation, but this can never be strictly true since my only resource here is language: when I discourse on painting and music, I am already transforming them into writing. I can't really compare a painting and a symphony and a poem—I can only compare words-about-a-painting and words-about-a-symphony and words-about-a-poem.) Then we will look at the ways in which artistic media interact—sometimes cooperating genially, sometimes poaching on one another's territory, sometimes dissonating, clashing.

I open with four theses.

1. Anything is an artwork to the extent that it looks made. The Matterhorn is as much an artwork as the *Mona Lisa*, insofar as we understand it as something intended, an act of will. It may be the will of God; or, since we tend to ascribe a sort of impersonal will to irresistible forces, it may be the buckling of tectonic plates. I think that we are all animists to some degree, and when we perceive materializations of force (such as the rose that iron filings make around a magnet) or patterns generated by collisions of forces (the splat of a bug against a windshield, the whistling of wind, the impact crater of a meteorite), we feel the presence of an agent making a design—even the atheist who instantly dismisses the notion of a designer shivers faintly at the discredited teleology that seems to have brought the thing into being. As Friedrich Nietzsche says (repeatedly, in *The Birth of Tragedy*), the world justifies itself as an aesthetic phenomenon.

Meaning is not merely something that the spectator imports into an object, for meaning presupposes an intention to mean within the thing

itself: meaning is generated from the interaction of our minds with the intention that we imagine to have created the object we scrutinize. (By *meaning*, I mean a sense of the object's looming, its felt potential to become part of your mind's decor. Sometimes this impingement or import terminates in a message, paraphrasable in words, or in an emotion.) Any meaningful object given to the senses is an artwork, and meaning exists when we perceive or intuit or feign the constitutive processes that brought a thing into being, and therefore brought a thing into relation with us—for we meet the whole physical universe on the ground of our common origin, common originatedness. In Nabokov's *The Gift*, the hero thinks of revisiting the landscape of his childhood and rejoicing in the intimacy of the old landmarks because, as he says, "my eyes are, in the long run, made of the same stuff as the grayness, the clarity, the dampness of those sites."³ Our eyes are made of the same water that rains on us, the same water in which we swim. And the artwork flows easily or effortfully through our brain's soft labyrinth because it and our brains are part of a single hydrodynamic.

We are also free, by a focal adjustment of the mind's eye, to abandon the quest for meaning in either the Matterhorn or the *Mona Lisa*. This abandonment is always an unmaking. The unmade thing then sinks flat and vain into wherever it happens to be located, outside the domain of relation, dead to us, though full of phlogiston, of potential meanings that wait to burn. By contrast, overmeaningful things tend to feel somewhat drained of possibility—this exhaustion explains why a postmodernist painter like Robert Rauschenberg would regard a print of Botticelli's *Venus* as a wildly neutral element in a collage.

2. An artwork is a voodoo doll. In old Hollywood movies, the sorcerers of the voodoo religion of Haiti are shown, falsely, as making dolls containing locks of hair or fingernail clippings from people whom they wish to torment: if the doll is stabbed with a pin, the person it is modeled on will feel a sharp pain. An artwork, any artwork, exercises

influence on our minds and our bodies, whether we wish it to or not. If we allow this to happen, or if the artwork seizes us against our will, we will be deeply intimate with it.

Aestheticians have long asked themselves, Is the purpose of art to express emotion? Is the purpose of art to offer chill examples of craft, objects without emotional content? Is the purpose of art to represent the world around us? Is the purpose of art to transcend representation, transcend earthly things entirely? These don't seem to be the right questions: art is intrinsically neither expressive nor inexpressive, representational nor nonrepresentational, though any of these may be part of the artist's intention. It would be better to describe an artwork as an icon of a sensorium, a sensibility—as a manifesting of a time-shape, a space-shape, that grows meaningful to me because the processes that brought it into being seem congruent with the processes that brought me into being. When I perceive an artwork, I know it and it knows me because it springs from a mind that is my congener. The material medium of the artwork (pigment, stone, sound, written word) becomes transformed (James Joyce would say transubstantiated) into something that feels human, yours, mine, ours, because anything arrayed by will is an image of the will that arrays it. Neurologists speak of the sensory homunculus, the little man or woman drawn by mapping the areas of the cerebral cortex responsible for interpreting sensation from various parts of our body: it has huge lips and hands, and spindly little legs and torso. There is also a motor homunculus, drawn by mapping the areas responsible for sending messages to the motor nerves. I mean to understand any artwork as an occult version of a sensory/motor homunculus, working our whole selves from deep within. In most cases the homunculus is incomplete: I may see in the artwork nothing of me but a fingernail clipping or a lock of hair, but that is enough: I am altered as I behold it; its shape becomes, experimentally, my shape. *You must change your life*, announces Apollo's archaic torso according to

Rainer Maria Rilke; but all artworks, if we open ourselves to them, compel intimate transformation.

There may be some specific feeling (jealousy, rage, yearning) that the artwork rouses in us by means of sympathetic magic; but more important, the artwork rouses a sense of outthrust or indraw, balance or vertigo, deep breath or gasp, clarity or darkening, sharpness or blunting—all those deep humannesses that lie beneath our ideas and our feelings. In this special sense, all art, even the most abstract, is representational, anthropomorphic, terraformed. D. H. Lawrence believed that dreams were images of the sleeping body's inner workings—if we dream of narrow passages, it is simply the artery's way of calling attention to itself.⁴ An artwork is nothing but a reified dream, and it succeeds to the degree that it implicates the widest extent of our bodies and minds. It pricks, and I bleed.

3. Art is about art, and art history, and history. I might put this in Latin: *Ars est ostendere artem*. *Ars celare artem*—the art lies in the hiding of art—according to the old summarizing of a passage from Ovid; but even the best-concealed artifice is also a manifesting of artfulness. In every artistic medium, the artwork keeps reaching back to its coming-into-being, so that original myth is always an overt or occult aspect. Therefore, insofar as every artwork gestures at the uninflected surface (the blank page, the blank canvas, the field of silence or background noise) on which it takes shape, literature and painting and music have something strongly in common: a positive sense of the absence that prevailed before its presence. Further, the artwork folds into itself not only its own origin but also the deep origin of the entire body of work in its medium, and the deeper origin of the world itself. There is no painting, however abstract or random, that does not gesture toward the Lascaux caves and toward the creation of the universe. In this sense every artwork is a divine comedy.

Similarly, every artwork presupposes its own destruction and the general disarticulation of the cosmos. In this sense it is tragic. The

pathos of the artwork arises from the fact that its beauty in the present moment is identical to the beauty of its passing away. William Butler Yeats describes a stone carved into the shape of a mountain climbed by Chinese scholars:

Every discolouration of the stone,
Every accidental crack or dent
Seems a water-course or an avalanche,
Or lofty slope where it still snows. ["Lapis Lazuli"]

Would the Aphrodite of Milos move us as much if she still had her arms? The sculptor's plastic force at once consents to and resists the entropy that will reduce the sculpture to something shapeless. The intensity of Michelangelo's *Rondanini Pietà*, as much raw rock as finished statue, comes from the way that it seems complicit in its own undoing since it was never done in the first place.

4. Art is both a language and a not-language. If we ask an artwork to have meaning, it will obey us by manifesting itself as speech or writing, throwing itself open so that we can gaze into every secret corner. This is what makes the discipline of Comparative Arts possible: since the meaning (insofar as it can be conveyed to others) of the artwork is always linguistic, every artwork can be located in the domain of language, where everything is relatable to everything else. But every artwork, even a poem, also exists in a different space, where it has no meaning—indeed, where the concept of meaning has no meaning. Insofar as it inhabits this space, this valley of unmaking, the artwork is ineffable but not extraordinary. So: every artistic medium is a language, but I can say this only because language understands everything as a language.⁵

I know that this aesthetic philosophy has its contrarian aspects. Hegel is extremely skillful at showing how the artist's idea adjusts itself

delicately, continually, to the physical medium in which it will be realized, but I require no idea preliminary to the object itself, only an intention to make that may have no precision whatever. The shape generated by the blind furious whittling of a stick is art; in fact the stick itself is art if we are sensitive to whatever process made it grow into its particular shape. Hegel, like most of the older philosophers, believed that only entities produced by human endeavor could be called art; and even more recent, open-hearted, open-arted philosophers balk at the notion that anything and everything might be understood as art. Arthur Danto is almost as latitudinarian as I am, since he is happy to allow Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol to call art certain mass-produced items bought in stores, but Danto still insists that "works of art constitute a restricted set of objects." Or, as he puts it elsewhere, "with qualification, anything goes."⁶ Danto regards this *everything is permitted* attitude as the final chapter in the history of art. But there is a still later chapter, if even more than everything can be permitted—if we can remove the qualifications and restrictions he speaks of. One of Danto's books is called *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, but I see no reason why the commonplace needs to be transfigured, though trans is a fine place for a figure to go. The aesthetic is simply a mode of all sensible reality, conceived under the rubric of the made. The world becomes friendlier when it is seen as art. In *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, Goethe says that art is art because it is not nature; I would say that nature is nature (in Spinoza's sense of *natura naturans*, nature understood as a making-itself-come-into-being) because it is art.

possibilities for narratives, all of which are somewhat contrived. I will mention three. (1) The hero, Albano, at one point attends a prince's funeral and hears muffled drums reverberating as if through catacombs—this can be linked to certain musical effects at the movement's beginning. (2) Jean Paul considered titling the novel *Anti-Titan*, and a certain convergence of opposites can be heard in Mahler's music: turning the cheerful "Bruder Martin" round into a dirge is one of many. (3) Bruno Walter thought that Mahler intended the funeral march on the "Bruder Martin" theme to "bury" Roquirol, the scoffer—the spirit of self-mockery, the internal critic that prevented a gifted man from attaining mastery of his art.³⁴

But I believe that there are elements that *every* plausible narrative of Mahler's movement would have in common: perhaps the pain that arises out of the inevitable conflict of sacred and profane perspectives; irony's choking on itself. When Nattiez writes that "music is not a narrative, but an incitement to make a narrative," he is in a sense right; but it could also be said that a written narrative is nothing but an incitement to make a narrative, since written stories (as Wolfgang Iser and others have shown) become significant to us only insofar as we fill in their blanks, as we remap them onto private grids of thought and feeling. Music and word narrative are equally true and equally fictitious: we give music too much credit (or not enough) if we say that music cannot lie. Indeed the funeral march in Mahler's First Symphony pronounces itself a kind of lie, insofar as it constructs itself out of melodic material chosen precisely because it is unsatisfactory for a funeral march. Musical discourse is just as fallen, impure, thickly human, as written discourse. Our music is no better or worse than we are.

Part Two

Art Rampant

❧ *Nine Definitions* ❧

1. *Multimedial* A multimedial artwork comprises elements of two or more media. An opera is strongly multimedial since it comprises music, text, and decor, and often dance as well; a painting in which a few stray musical notes are depicted is weakly multimedial.

2. *Intermedial* An intermedial artwork is the imaginary artwork generated by the spectator through the interplay of two or more media—the transient, complex thing that is assembled in each spectator's mind through attention to the elements in different media. An opera is intermedial because it is conceived not solely as its music or its text or its decor, but rather as some virtual entity brought into being by the superposition of these three components. The creator, or creators, of the artwork may use various procedures to guide the spectator toward a desired synthesis, but these procedures are heuristic and often ineffective.

In some sense every visitor to the Louvre sees the same *Mona Lisa*, even though every interpretation and judgment and point of view and seizure of detail can and will differ. A painting can be fully quantified according to size, pigment substance, gradation of saturation and hue,

direction and pressure of brushstroke, and so forth. But each member of the audience at a performance of *Tosca* experiences a different opera because the opera exists only as an airy shimmer generated from components each one of which bulges and recedes in a space uniquely defined by, and for, a particular spectator. Each component is quantifiable, but the interaction of the various components is chaotic because governed by innumerable variables, including shifts and losses of attention, adjustments of focus, and sudden reprioritizations of the components. A work in a single medium may have a limited there-ness, but it is still much more *there* than any intermedial work can hope to be.

3. *Figures of Consonance and Dissonance* Intermedial figments in which the spectator feels that the components of a multimedial artwork glide together in a mutually reinforcing way, thereby creating a single potent effect, are known as figures of consonance. These are opposed to *figures of dissonance*, intermedial figments in which the spectator feels that the component artworks fail to fuse, remain in a state of discord.

Richard Wagner's music dramas offer spectacular examples in which the music, the text, and the stage action all come together to produce an oceanic experience, as at the end of *Götterdämmerung* (1876), where Brünnhilde rides into her funeral pyre and the Rhine overflows its banks to delirious music that modulates like swelling waves and flickers like flames. Bertolt Brecht noted that he and Kurt Weill wrote music dramas specifically intended to produce in the audience a critical, canny, anti-Wagnerian, anti-narcotic response—as in *Die Dreigroschenoper* (1928), where Mack the Knife and Jenny reminiscence about their bygone days as pimp and whore to a swoony romantic tune. Here the music and the text undercut one another.

4. *Concinnity* What I call concinnity is the limit-point of consonance in figures of consonance, in which the spectator feels that the

component artworks are perfectly congruent to one another. I intend this word as a pun on the word *consign*, but with a meaning different from its usual one: as a co-sign, a signing-together, the state in which the signifiers of the component artworks all point to an identical signified. (If I were Derrida I would speak of *consignity*.)

Concinnity is always somewhat illusory because no sign in one medium can mean exactly the same thing when translated into a different medium. The image of a woman with many babies clinging to her body is a Renaissance icon of charity, and an engraving of such a woman captioned *Charity* is a simple and strong figure of consonance. The correlation between the engraving and the one-word text may possess great conventional force, but the word *charity* is not the same thing as an image of a woman with many babies, which may be simply a photograph of a new mother of sextuplets who has been given a year's supply of diapers as a publicity stunt by the Pampers company.

5. *Abrasion* As concinnity is the limit-point of figures of consonance, abrasion is the limit-point of figures of dissonance, in which the component artworks seem to clash incoherently, attack, erode, and possibly destroy one another's effects. Lacking any sense that the component artworks add up to a satisfactory whole, the spectator may be disappointed, teased, or exhilarated.

When Francis Ford Coppola used Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* in *Apocalypse Now* (1979) to accompany helicopters strafing a Vietnamese village, that was a plausible concinnity—possibly a more impressive intermedial consonance than Wagner himself achieved; when Federico Fellini used the same music in *8½* (1963) to accompany feeble old folks stumbling around a spa, that was a plausible abrasion.

6. *Counterpoint* In certain figures of dissonance the component artworks seem to form interesting patterns from their friction against

one another, without agreeing on a single effect, making what is known as counterpoint. An example can be found in the aria "Le calme rentre dans mon coeur," from Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* (1779), where Orestes sings that he has at last become calm again, while nervous figures in the orchestra tell us that he's deceiving himself.

7. *Pseudomorphic* Pseudomorphosis occurs when, in a work in a single artistic medium, the medium is asked to ape, or do the work of, some alien medium. This typically involves a certain wrenching or scraping against the grain of the original medium. This word was introduced into musicology by Theodor Adorno to describe the way Stravinsky's music is constructed according to collage principles stolen from visual art, and therefore, at bottom, remains static just as a painting is static.

I don't like this word, because the prefix *pseudo-* expresses Adorno's contempt for the whole notion of pseudomorphosis. But I will use it, because the word exists and means what I want it to mean, even though I have no prejudice against pseudomorphic art. I might also note that Adorno took the word from Oswald Spengler, who used it in *The Decline of the West* to describe certain structural elements retained from an older culture, elements that had lost any relevance or meaning in the new culture: decadence reified. (Spengler, in turn, borrowed the term from geology, where it refers to a crystal structure in one mineral that is more characteristic of some other mineral, a sort of mineral disguise.)

8. *Pseudomorph* A spectator confronted with a pseudomorphic work of art may construct a pseudomorph: an image of what the pseudomorphic artwork would be if it were actually in the medium that it seems to aspire to be in. In 1902, Gustav Klimt painted a frieze in which he tried to imagine Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in visual terms. When you

enter the exhibition space, you do not actually hear Beethoven's Ninth, but you do conjure up auditory images of the symphony as you study the frieze. This pseudomorph-symphony does not play consecutively in your head from the first bar to the last; instead your mind summons up passages that seem relevant to the Klimt image. All spectators who know Beethoven will listen to an inner Ninth Symphony as they view Klimt's frieze, but none will create the same pseudomorph, because there is no determinate correspondence between a passage of the frieze and a passage of the symphony, though there are places where the image gestures toward a specific event in the symphony.

In another example, we have Stravinsky's *Circus Polka* (1942). Any listener who knows that the subtitle is "For a Young Elephant" will visualize a pseudomorph of an elephant moving to polka rhythm, probably with its forelegs in the air. But the dance will never be the same for two auditors (except, perhaps, those who have seen photographs of the fifty elephants in the Ringling Brothers circus who danced to it in George Balanchine's choreography of the polka—and for those listeners, *Circus Polka* is not pseudomorphic but multimedial).

Listeners who have no knowledge of the subtitle or compositional history of the polka might have no visual impression beyond a general sense of a picture of galumph. Stravinsky may have loved circuses, but Adorno did not: he accused Stravinsky of debasing the art of music by making his compositions into picture circuses: "The trick that defines all of Stravinsky's organizations of form: to let time stand in, as in a circus tableau, and to present time complexes as if spatial—this trick wears off. It loses its power over the consciousness of duration."¹

9. *Eidolon* A more general term for the phantoms generated by the transposition of a work in one artistic medium into an alien one is *eidolon*. A pseudomorph exists where there is some specific cue on how

to perform the transposition (such as calling a work *Beethoven-Frieze*). An eidolon may be a more vagrant phenomenon, generated by (idle or intent) speculation about what an artwork in one medium might look like if translated to another. Synesthetes often find this easy, but anyone can play.

I was once standing in the Musée de l'Orangerie, half-drowning in the depths beneath Monet's water lilies, when my companion asked me what sort of music would be the right accompaniment to this experience. I thought for a moment and said Brahms's *Intermezzo*, op. 118, no. 6—the subdued elation, the dark haunt, seemed right for Monet. But Monet's water lilies are in no obvious way pseudomorphic, so there is no particular reason, besides contiguity of title or theme (I might have thought of Saint-Saëns's *Aquarium* or Rachmaninov's *Lilies*) or similarity of mood, to choose one musical analogue rather than another.

A final note: *pseudomorphosis* is a word I will often use to refer to an invention by an artist, *eidolon* to a fancy of a spectator; but an artist (while attempting to translate an existing work in medium A into a new work in medium B) will have to have recourse to *eidola* in all circumstances where the original work in medium A has no specific cues on how such a translation should be performed.

These definitions should prove useful. There is, however, a false assumption built into this whole parsing-out of the field of the comparative arts: that there is such a thing as an artwork that exists in one medium and one medium alone. There are those who insist that every artwork is, or should be, confined to the medium in which it was created—that an artwork that tries to wriggle free from the enclosure of its subsistence is inherently flawed, incapacitated. G. E. Lessing, Theodor Adorno, and Irving Babbitt make this argument, but its strongest statement comes from the art historian Clement Greenberg:

Shelley . . . exalted poetry above the other arts because its medium came closest . . . to being no medium at all. In practice this aesthetic encouraged that particular widespread form of artistic dishonesty which consists in the attempt to escape from the problems of the medium of one art by taking refuge in the effects of another. Painting is the most susceptible to evasions of this sort . . .

Painting and sculpture in the hands of the lesser talents . . . become nothing more than ghosts and "stooges" of literature.

To restore the identity of an art the opacity of its medium must be emphasized.

The history of avant-garde painting is that of a progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium; which resistance consists chiefly in the flat picture plane's denial of efforts to "hole through" it for realistic perspectival space.²

But I believe that Greenberg's argument is untenable.

An artwork has little power of resistance to description or interpretation. A flat picture plane is in a poor position to deny anything whatsoever, including efforts to hole through it. If I ask a sculpture to be a ghost or stooge of literature, it has no choice but to comply. I will go farther and propose that an artwork is an artwork precisely because it is especially susceptible to translation into an alien medium, and because those translations have a certain captivating aspect. If Greenberg had been correct, he would have had to abandon his career as a sculpture critic and become a specialist in metallurgy. Every act of art criticism is a hauling of the criticized thing into the field of the verbal, where, according to Greenberg, it has no home.

A urinal (to take a famous example) is not normally considered an artwork, an adventure in ceramic. If someone asks me to describe or

interpret a urinal, not that this request comes up every day, I can speak of its half-cylindrical aspect, its glazed white surface, the fragrant hockey puck often thrown into it, its happy usefulness at catching and disposing of urine. I have taken a material object and made a parallel to it in another medium, language. I could even make a narrative: I could speak of what little I know of the history of the urinal, from the vespasienne to the present; I could speak of memorable urinals I've used, from Tibet to Peru to New York. These are brief and boring stories. But if I think of a urinal promoted into an art object, as in Duchamp's bold ploy in New York in 1917, suddenly I can say a great deal more, indeed I can gabble about it for hours. Insofar as I see it as art, a urinal becomes a figure of power. It compels me to think and speak.

By decontextualizing it from the single context it once occupied, a lavatory, Duchamp liberated the urinal to be recontextualized in a thousand different contexts. It is now sculpture: and precisely because it is sculpture it becomes the ghost or stooge of literature. Its title *Fountain* permits, even demands, comparison with the fountain of Arethusa or other classical fountains; the fact that a urinal is a kind of upside-down fountain, spraying into the earth, makes for speculation on the ways art is a reversal of nature, a mirror image in which everything is backward. The signature on the sculpture, "R. Mutt," opens up vistas: not only the urinal's status as a mutt, a mongrel of high art and humble call of nature, but also the German word *Armut*, "poverty," and, still further, the comic strip *Mutt and Jeff*, begun in 1907 and first titled *A. Mutt*—Mutt was a gambler on horse races and Jeff a former inmate of an insane asylum. These are only some of the more obvious stories that can be scooped out of the urinal: stories concerning destitution, insanity, games of chance, ironic cooptation, suddenly spurt out—just as, in Heidegger's essay on the origin of the work of art, a whole world emerges from the splayed-open boots in van Gogh's painting.

One defining characteristic of the artwork is this ease of intermedial manipulation. (This is, of course, the exact opposite of Greenberg's definition.) This transit can go in any direction: music can open itself to visual expression, as in Klimt's *Beethoven-Frierte*, and a sculpture can open itself to musical expression, as in Liszt's *Il penseroso*, and and. Creative work manifests its creativeness by inspiring creativity in others. An artwork from which no story or other homologue/analogue/metologue could be educed would not be an artwork, indeed would have only the feeblest hold on existence.

By far the most common destination of intermedial thrust is language. We are used to mapping artworks of every medium onto language—indeed a sensuous object is an aesthetic object to the degree that it demands to be interpreted, that is, talked about. A newly made thing is only potentially an artwork; it realizes itself as art, not in the act of its being painted or being composed, but in the act of submitting itself as a subject for discoursing. It needs to find word-threads that tie it to other works in its genre, to its possible use (even if its use consists only of display in some appropriate venue), to the culture-scape of the objects the artist intends to represent (if it is representational in character)—these threads reach to the most distant and tenuous regions of the universe of discourse. The best art often has the most intricate network of such strands; one might fear that a superlative artwork might become buried under its own quotedness, but that seems not to happen, even to Shakespeare. In *The Painted Word*, Tom Wolfe mocks the mid-twentieth-century New York art scene as a set of meek and tasteful illustrations to mightily self-important art-historical texts written by Hilton Kramer, Clement Greenberg, and others; but painting and interpretation are in fact so deeply intertwined that a robust criticism is a blessing to art.

Duchamp and Cage were right: every thing is art; every sound is music. Even natural phenomena, such as shells or ravines, are aesthetic

objects to the degree that they invite a play of contexts. The Grand Canyon is aesthetic to me because the muscles around the small of my back grow tense as I imagine falling into it; the banks of the Mississippi are aesthetic to me because they hold the memory of Huck Finn drifting at night. A conch shell is aesthetic to me in part because I can imagine the brilliant blare that a conch shell trumpet would make. A cowrie shell is aesthetic too, but in a different way, because I remember that cowries were once used as money; and I remember that cowrie shells are smooth because the mantle, the shell-making organ, is outside the shell instead of inside, so that a cowrie is a sort of everted gastropod; and I remember Yeats's idea that God toils more in making a little shell than in making a thunderclap; and I toy with the notion that shells might be readable because certain designs look like letters in some unknown alphabet.

CHAPTER FIVE

Wonder and the Sublime

ANYTHING CAN BE lifted (lowered?) into the domain of art simply by the effort of imagination—we live in a world where every object compels imagining and reimagining, because nothing exists entirely where it happens to be. Much of this wonder is preverbal; but wonder is a little scary, and we need to relieve ourselves of wonder by verbalizing it, whether in formal criticism or in subvocal comings to term.

Still, those who try to eliminate stories and other forms of intermedial translation from the universe of discourse have a point. The effort of New Criticism to eliminate biography, parallel texts, and everything else not contained in the poem itself could not go far, but it was an homage to something real and important about poetry. In the original artwork (any artwork, not just a poem) a residue of the untranslatable is left behind after every act of translation. The translation is a falsification—but a falsification without which art could not exist. By *residue* I mean the *x* that critics and intermedial artists keep trying to elucidate, to bring into the field of the comprehended, but that will always remain untouched, or touched only glancingly, obliquely. We can think of the history of the criticism of an artwork as a sort of dialectics that reduces this residue to the least possible size; but the residue