CHAPTER 1

Harnessing the Visual: From Illustration to Ekphrasis

If vision was the noblest of the senses from Plato to Descartes, as Martin Jay has suggested, the last century of its reign was troubled by a succession crisis.¹ In sixteenth-century England, debates over the value of visual experience produced an anxiety over the use of images that extended beyond religious prohibitions against idolatry to a broad range of representational practices. While of all the senses the eyes were routinely credited with offering the most direct access to the world, they were also considered most susceptible to misrecognition or illusion.² This paradox is important for the present study, as it offered a particularly rich reserve for literary artists to represent the vexed relationship between ethical action and perception. If the world observed with the eyes provides a trustworthy guide for the ethical subject, the quality of one’s moral reasoning is the basis on which one’s ethical character is best judged. On the other hand, if the world revealed to visual experience is less stable, the challenge to the ethical subject becomes much greater. It is not surprising, then, that we witness an attempt to separate the reasoned, stable, and implicitly verbal world of morality from the unstable, emotional realm of visual experience in sixteenth-century England. This effort to compartmentalize vision and cognition—associated with images and words, respectively—provides an important context for the literary interest in the ethics of responding to the visual. A central aim of this book is to explore the manner in which literary artists dramatized the impossibility of this separation in phenomenal experience, insisting that the ethical resides in the intertwining rather than the isolation of word and image. But before making that argument, it is instructive to see how this anxiety over the power of images manifested itself in English representational practice.
I. Word versus Image

The epistemological crisis that sparked the desire to separate visual and verbal representation in early modern England shares a great deal with crises in epistemology and representation that dominated twentieth-century art and philosophy. At the same time that philosophers beginning with Nietzsche assailed what Martin Jay has termed the “ocularcentrism” of modern thought, modernist visual artists struggled to free the visual field from the domination of language. In Stuart Clark’s account, over the course of the previous century, “the traditional hegemony of vision has been dismantled.” This hegemony relied, according to Clark (and Jay), on “a particular model of cognition designed to secure for vision a commanding place in science, in the field of political power, and in the construction of communal solidarity and personal identity in bourgeois societies.” But vision, in this sense, is a figure, a point made most forcefully by Richard Rorty who argues that it was the power of the figure rather than any attention to actual visual perception that allowed modern philosophy to claim a ground in the veracity of vision.

The philosophical objection to the “commanding place of vision” in so much modern thought—based on the argument that visual experience is mediated by language—resembles the objection on the part of modernist visual artists to the intrusion of language in visual art. The effort to emancipate the visual field from linguistic domination would reach its height in the work of abstract expressionist and minimalist artists, hoping to free the visual arts from a long association with iconographic and other literary content, where such content was seen to prefigure the visual field. Clement Greenberg, for instance, bemoaned the tyranny of literature over visual art, en route to his championing of an avant guard rooted in the concept of visual purity. For Greenberg, an abstract artist is a “purist [who] insists upon excluding ‘literature’ and subject matter from plastic art.” Greenberg’s desire for a pure visual art was a reaction against conceptual subject matter’s long cohabitation with ideology—witnessed in the uses of images for religious, political, and cultural propaganda. To emancipate the visual from any literary pretext would be to free the visual arts to become a radical alternative to Western ideological stagnation.

As W. J. T. Mitchell and others have pointed out, however, the success of abstraction in purifying the visual arts of verbal contamination was limited from the start. For as Mitchell notes, even the most “pure” abstraction begins with a concept, even if that concept is the denial of the conceptual itself; if stories provided the subject matter for earlier art, modern art too has stories: “[t]he only difference is that the stories are represented in a different way,