Introduction

A few signposts with which to begin our journey:

Where can we find a more violent or elaborate attitude than that of the Discobolus of Myron? Yet the critic who disapproved of the figure because it was not upright, would merely show his utter failure to understand the sculptor’s art, in which the very novelty and difficulty of execution is what most deserves our praise. A similar impression of grace and charm is produced by rhetorical figures, whether they be figures of thought or figures of speech. For they involve a certain departure from the straight line and have the merit of variation from the ordinary usage.

— Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria, 2.13.8–10

[The story of Alexander and Roxana] is expressed so well [by Raphael] that one would be doubtful whether Raphael took it from Lucian’s books or Lucian from Ra-
phael's paintings, were it not that Lucian was born some centuries earlier. But who cares?

— Lodovico Dolce, *Aretino*

“I’ll wager,” said Sancho, “that before long there won’t be a tavern, an inn, a hostelry, or a barbershop where the history of our deeds isn’t painted. But I’d like it done by the hands of a painter better than the one who did these [of the Trojan war, on the wall of an inn in La Mancha].

“You are right, Sancho,” said Don Quixote, “because this painter is like Orbaneja, a painter in Ùbeda, who, when asked what he was painting, would respond: ‘Whatever comes out.’ And if he happened to be painting a rooster, he would write beneath it: ‘This is a rooster,’ so that no one would think it was a fox. And that, it seems to me, Sancho, is how the painter or writer—for it amounts to the same thing—must be who brought out the history of this new Don Quixote: he painted or wrote whatever came out.”

— Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, part 2, chapter 71

The incapacity of dreams to express [logical relations] must lie in the nature of the psychical material out of which dreams are made. The plastic arts of painting and sculpture labour, indeed, under a similar limitation as compared with poetry, which can make use of speech. . . . Before painting became acquainted with the laws of expression by which it is governed, it made attempts to get over this handicap. In ancient paintings small labels were hung from the mouths of the persons represented, containing in written characters the speeches which the artist despaired of representing pictorially. . . . But just as the art of painting eventually
found a way of expressing, by means other than the floating labels, at least the intention of the words of the personages represented—affection, threats, warnings, and so on—so too there is a possible means by which dreams can take account of some of the logical relations between their dream-thoughts.

—Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 4:312–14

In every one of these cases—and thousands of others besides—a writer summons up an artist, a text cannot explain itself without a picture, language momentarily cedes authority to image. Why should the exaggerated arc of the disk-thrower’s sculpted body, a property of seemingly pure visuality, be invoked to provide justification for practices of speech? What is at stake in fantasizing that the relation between a second-century writer and a sixteenth-century painter could defy the order of time itself and be freely reciprocal? How is it that the idea of spontaneous composition by accident, should seem plausible (if hardly praiseworthy) in the execution of a painting but turn into an accusation of the worst sort of amateurism when applied to literary narrative? And what precisely is the pay-off when Freud characterizes dreams as visual artifacts (the equation is more explicit in *On Dreams*: “the manifest content of dreams consists for the most part in pictorial situations” [5:659]) and thus casts his own analytic activity as, essentially, fitting texts to images? And, to reference a fifth quotation (this from Anon.), why exactly should one picture be worth a thousand times more than one word?

The reader may look in vain for explicit answers to these questions in the pages that follow, precisely because it is the indeterminate nature of the underlying relationship across the different media of expression that is the real subject of this book. All the above quotations repose atop some sort of syllo-
gistic reasoning—if $x$ is true of pictures, it follows that $x$, or, as it turns out more likely, $x'$ is true of text—but the moment one actually asks why it follows, one realizes that one is embroiled in slippery argumentation rather than in the steel trap of logic. Word-and-image, in short, comes down to us not as a subject of rational inquiry or a reliable taxonomic grid so much as a particularly shifty trope. My notion here is to address the life of this figure—the term *figure* itself being a word-and-image metaphor—in a manner that is simultaneously rhetorical and historical, theoretical and aesthetic. For me, word-and-image is a crux, a shell game, an act of evasion, an attempt to promote one discourse at the expense of another, a particularly persistent skirmish in long-running wars for cultural prestige among different aesthetic and intellectual enterprises. At the same time, to put the matter more positively, word-and-image is an empowering device that has been used to enable makers of text and makers of pictures both to theorize and to practice their craft. It is my hope that the several viewpoints on this matter that appear in the following chapters, concentrating on, but not limited to, European culture from antiquity to the Renaissance, will illuminate these fundamental paradoxes without pretending to resolve them.