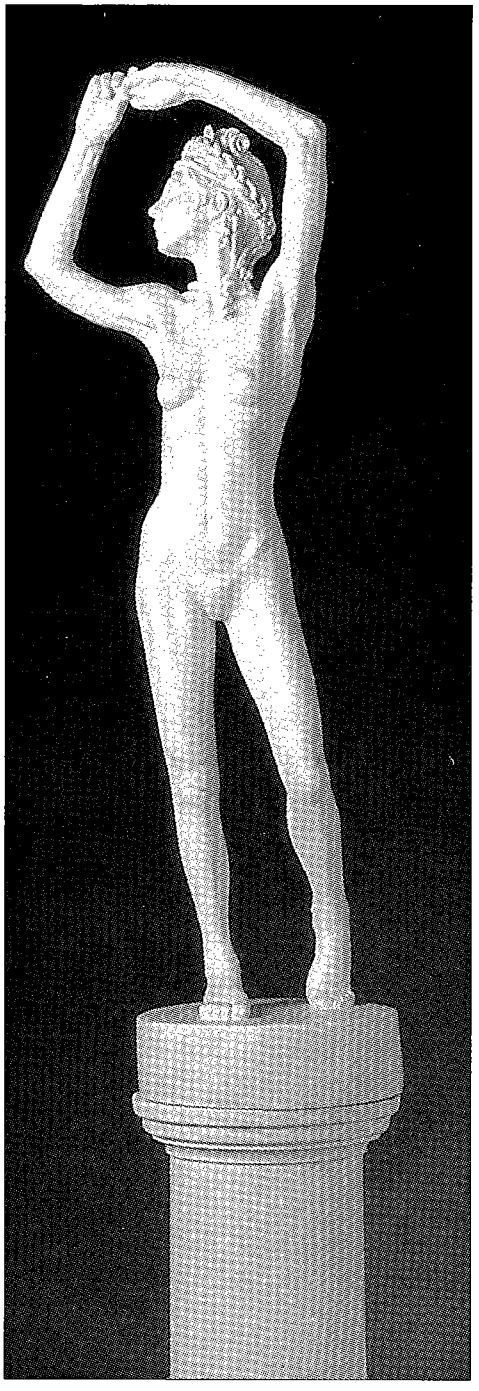
# The Birth of Natural Classicism

*by Frederick Turner*

The artists, poets, composers, and dramatists now reaching their maturity have lived through a time of crisis for the arts. Some of us are questioning the whole 200-year-old tradition of the avant-garde and rethinking our aesthetics from the ground up.

The moment we realized we had crossed the invisible boundary from one cultural era to another was surely different in each case; it was, especially at the beginning when we did not know that others were going through the same thing, an intensely individual and sometimes lonely experience. For some of us, it came when we first began asking the awkward questions; for others, it was when we saw with a shock that we had already been asking them for some time; for others, it was when we first recognized an alternative view of the world; and for yet others, it was when we met somebody else who shared the same heterodox opinions.

The late modernist inheritance we came into in the 1950s and '60s, despite its seductive surface of countercultural lifestyle and apocalyptic rhetoric, was even then hoary and stereotyped in its intellectual and spiritual provenance. There was little in its armory that did not derive ultimately from Romantic egoism, 19th-century political radicalism, and early-20th-century modernist movements such as Dada. Such indebtedness to the past would be harmless, indeed laudable, in an artistic movement whose theory and dynamic was one of the incorporation of the past into the present; but it was incon-



*The central figure in Audrey Flack's* Sky Gateway Introducing Diana *(1990)*

sistent in one that claimed the cachet of innovation, courageous nonconformity, and revolution.

In poetry, what we inherited was confessional free verse; in visual art, abstract expressionism and pop art; in music, 12-tone composition; in drama, the theater of the absurd, the theater of cruelty, and happenings. Avant-garde novels and films were plotless and autobiographical. The arts showed all the signs of decadence and exhaustion: the abandonment of technical discipline, the harking after unrealistic and potentially bloody schemes of social revolution, the extreme subjectivism, the studied ignorance of and hostility to scientific fact, the moral cynicism.

It seemed for a brief time that the emergence of postmodernism meant an end to the long, deadening twilight in the avant-garde arts. But in many ways it was a further descent. "Language poetry," visual and musical deconstructivism, political theater, and minimalist fiction seemed to have added little except a further element of self-congratulatory self-regard, while losing the late modernist emotionality that gave the avant-garde a semblance of life.

Instead of political utopianism, we got political correctness; instead of radical subjectivism, the deconstruction of the self. Instead of the subjective construction of reality, we ended up with the social construction of reality. Instead of scientific ignorance, we were given a wholesale attack on the possibility of any kind of knowledge at all. The cynicism remained.

The artistic origin of social construction can be found in modernism, in what at first was a glorious and defiant assertion of artistic freedom. The artist is free only if he (and "he" it usually was, for this was an intensely young male view of the world) can make up his own world and kick himself loose from nature. Painters broke the shackles of representation, fiction writers broke the shackles of naturalistic narrative, composers broke the shackles of melody and harmony, poets broke the shackles of meter. By fiat, they made up their own worlds. Artists were supported in this view by the philosopher J. L. Austin's theory of speech acts and "performatives," whereby the very statement of something, such as a promise or the stipulation of a rule in an agreed context, could create a new reality without need for empirical verification. This, of course, meant that a world was something that could be made up, a point not lost on political interpreters, who, constitutionally suspicious, immediately began to ask: who gets to make up the world?

But the political correctness that resulted from asking this question was not the only problem that came out of the definition of art as freedom from nature. Another was the problem of critical judgment. How could one distinguish good from bad art? If nature was abandoned as a constraint, craftsmanship—which is a working with natural constraints—must disappear, and with it the virtuosity that is the excellence of craft.

Social construction became the perfect excuse for artistic incompetence. Any flaw could be pointed to in triumph as a subtle tour de force of deconstruction, a performative enactment of subversive delegitimation, or similar jabberwocky. Finally, the idea of artistic freedom as freedom from natural constraint had begun to come up against a tragically opposed principle: the desperate need, in this ecologically threatened world, to find ways of life for human beings that are not lethal to the ecosystem around us and to our own animal bodies. The heroic transcendence of nature can result in inhuman Bauhaus architecture, designer-drug addiction, AIDS suicide performance art, and bloated nuclear arsenals.

A countermovement of artists and poets, of whom I was one, began to seek ways to repair the damage we saw in our culture as the Cold War drew to an end and the great socialist ideals were shown either to be empty and destructive or disappointingly achieved and incorporated into the status quo. The problems bequeathed to us, as we saw them, were these:

§ The human person had been denatured; we had been taught to reject our animal nature, our sex, our genetic lineage.

§ As artists we were expected to dismiss the constraints of nature itself—this at a time when the planet urgently required human beings to accept their ecological responsibilities as part of a larger ecosystem not created by social fiat.

§ We had lost the great forms and disciplines of the arts, the biopsychic technologies of meter, representation, and melody, and were thus alienated from our own shamanic tradition.

§ The political separatism and cultural fragmentation that had been encouraged had dangerously attenuated that sense of human fellowship that is the womb of artistic creativity.

§ In a time of staggering and marvelous scientific discovery, when nonlinear dynamics and chaos theory were suggesting a vital rapprochement between the two cultures, avant-garde art and criticism were assailing science with a remarkable combination of malice and ignorance.

§ Hope, and all the other positive emotions that inspire the arts, were sneered at and dismissed; snideness and rage were the dominant signs of the artist.

Not surprisingly, the contemporary arts had lost contact with the general public; in some fields, such as poetry, publishers would no longer take the risk of producing collections of poems—and for good reason. The general reader, thrice burnt by boring, incomprehensible, and graceless verbal assaults, wisely avoided such collections. Worst of all, we found that as artists we were virtually expected to violate all standards of personal morality, as a sort of backhanded proof of our political morality.

It was not that all art and cultural criticism had succumbed to these tendencies; science fiction, for instance, and the biopsychological and sociobiological sciences, had continued to hold out visions of the human role in the world that might form the basis for true art. But these were enclaves of genuine nonconformity, marginalized by the official avant-garde.

It is hard, perhaps, for people who did not grow up within the milieu of the academic and artistic intelligentsia, to understand what an iron grip the tenets of avant-garde modernism (and later, postmodernism) could have on the mind of an artist or writer. My own moment of revelation was more painless than most. It was less a revulsion against the shoddiness and intellectual bankruptcy of the avant-garde than a blessed and amazing gift of happiness, an outpouring of creative energy, a sudden remembering of the whole human heritage, that made much of what I had been taught seem to be a dark dream from which I had awoken.

It was 1977, the year I became a citizen of the United States. My wife was pregnant with our second child, and I was building an energy-efficient house in rural central Ohio. I had decided to renounce any ambitions I might have had as a public literary figure and to devote myself to my teaching at Kenyon College, to the happiness of those around me, and to a deeper and deeper meditation upon nature, science, philosophy, and the spiritual dimension of life. The critic George Steiner, whom I came to know later, wondered why I had, as he said, buried myself there. I didn't feel buried, except occasionally when I toiled in the garden that I had designed.

Out of these conditions of self-imposed exile, poems suddenly began to pour forth—poems of praise and love and celebration, mingled with aphorisms and little discourses that contained in embryo much of my subsequent thinking. The verse was increasingly shaped to the demands of rhyme and meter, until it sprouted a wild plumage of formal invention. Lyrics were superseded by a series of narrative poems, two of them of epic length, *The New World* (1985) and *Genesis* (1988). Without intending to, I had completely violated all the then-current rules of poetry, which stipulated the short free verse non-narra-

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Disparity Among the Children–I *(1975) by Ruth Weisberg*

tive existentialist confessional lyric in contemporary vocabulary as the paradigm for the publishable poem.

It was just as well that I had renounced my desire for fame and publication. The periodicals and publishers of record would have turned down my new poetry, even though I knew it was my best work. Though I had published several books of poetry earlier, including one in the prestigious Wesleyan Poetry Series, I was not sending my poems out anymore. The people I was writing for were no longer the official avant-garde literary/poetic establishment. I circulated my poems in typescript, though, and a growing circle of people began to make copies of them and send them to others.

One of these was a small press publisher, a classicist, who insisted on meeting me, and after months of argument by correspondence, persuaded me to start publishing again. He printed *The Garden* (1985) in a small edition. Meanwhile a few writers and publishers here and there who were prepared to go out on a limb were beginning to publish the poetry of others who had had the same experience, of the scales falling from one's eyes, that I had. Among these various and talented voices were Robert McDowell, Richard Moore, Dick Allen, Jack Butler, John Gery, R. S. Gwynn, Charles Martin, Frederick Feirstein, Dana Gioia, Jane Greer, Timothy Steele, and Annie Finch. Julia Budenz's enormous poem, *The Gardens of Flora Baum*, a meditation on the great cultural tree of Rome, exemplifies the scope of the new poetry.

I became convinced of the civic duty of the artist to society, and with my colleague Ronald Sharp revived the *Kenyon Review* as a voice for the new movement. Miraculously I found presses, mostly mavericks that were not afraid to defy the consensus, that would print my own new work.

As soon as the "New Formalism" and the "New Narrative," as they were dubbed by their opponents, emerged into public view, they were attacked by some of the major publications of the avant-garde, including *Contemporary Literature Studies* and the *American Poetry Review*. Then, when it was realized that even negative

A Vision of the Virgin and Child *(1972) by Peter Rogers*

critical attention was drawing new converts to the movement, there was a studied and icy silence. But we survived. By now the Expansive Movement, as it has been called, is a large and vital force in American poetry, though still a distinctly minority one, and still disapproved of by the avant-garde establishment.

A similar transformation has been taking place in the other arts. The openings made in the modernist orthodoxy by such composers as George Crumb and Philip Glass have been exploited by the "holy minimalists" Arvo Part and Henryk Gorecki; more radically classicist still are less known composers such as Stefania de Kenessey and Claudia Annis. Visual artists have formed artists' groups, galleries, and periodicals to defy the party line. Classical realist painters such as David Ligare and Bruno Civitico illuminate a contemporary consciousness with ancient light. A remarkable school of Los Angeles realist painters and sculptors has emerged, including Wes Christensen, John Frame, Jim Doolin, and Ruth Weisberg, and the old art of landscape painting is being put to new use by artists such as Cynthia Krieble. Religious and civic sculpture is showing new vitality in the work of Frederick Hart, whose *Creation* group graces the façade of the National Cathedral and whose *Three Soldiers* adds resonance to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the Mall. Figurative allegorical sculpture has been revived by Audrey Flack, and the bronze bas-relief by Athos Ongaro. And the power of myth and psychospiritual symbolism still runs strong in the paintings of Peter Rogers, Lani Irwin, and Alan Feltus, and in the sculpture of Michael Osbaldeston.

As these and other questioners have come together, often in the virtual world of the Internet, a sort of manifesto for

the new art of the 21st century has emerged. This program calls for an art that recognizes the infrangible bonds between human beings and the rest of nature, bonds that become evident in the creative capacities of our own bodies and nervous systems that we inherited from our evolutionary past as animals. Exponents of what I call natural classicism informally support the following broad principles:

§ Art should direct itself to the general public, and should grow from and speak to the common roots and universal principles of human nature in all cultures. Those members of the public who do not have the time, training, or inclination to craft and express their higher yearnings and intuitions rightly demand an artistic elite to be the culture's prophetic mouthpiece and mirror.

§ Art should deny the simplifications of the political Left and Right, and should refine and deepen the radical Center.

§ The use of art, and of cheap praise, to create self-esteem is a cynical betrayal of all human cultures. Excellence and standards are as real and universal in the arts as in competitive sports, even if they take more time and refined judgment to appreciate.

§ The function of art is to create beauty, and beauty is incomplete without moral beauty. True beauty is the condition of civilized society. We should restore reverence for the grace and beauty of human beings and of the rest of nature. There should be a renewal of the moral foundations of art as an instrument to civilize, ennoble, and inspire. Art recognizes the tragic and terrible costs of human civilization but does not abandon hope and faith in the civilizing process. Art must recover its connection with religion and ethics without becoming the propagandist of any dogmatic system. Beauty is the opposite of coercive political power: thus art should lead but not follow political morality.

§ High and low art, the avant-garde and the popular and commercial imagination, have been alienated from each other too long. In a healthy culture, popular and commercial art forms are the soil in which high art grows. Theory describes art; art does not illustrate theory. Art is how a whole culture speaks to itself, and how cultures communicate with and marry each other.

§ High standards of craftsmanship and mastery of the instrument should be restored, hostility to virtuosity abandoned. Certain forms, genres, and techniques of art are culturally universal, natural, and classical. They are innate but require a cultural tradition to awaken them. They include such skills as visual representation, melody, storytelling, poetic meter, and dramatic mimesis. These forms, genres, and techniques are not limitations or constraints but enfranchising instruments and infinitely generative feedback systems.

§ The long enmity between emotion and intellectual depth needs to be ended. We do not need to abandon reason in the pursuit of artistic power; insanity is not a qualification for artistic validity. Art should come from and speak to what is whole in human beings. It is the product of passionate imaginative intelligence, not of psychological sickness and damage. Even when it deals, as it often should and must, with the terrifying, tragic, and grotesque, art should help heal the lesions within the self and the rifts in the self's relation to the world. The symbols of art are connected to the embodiment of the human person in a physical and social environment—thus, the human figure should not be avoided by visual artists, and the grand stories of birth, marriage, and death should not be avoided in literature or drama.

§ Art must be reunited with science. As the natural ally, interpreter, and guide of the sciences, art extends the creative evolution of nature on this planet and in the universe. The experience of truth is beautiful; thus, the artist's experience and the scientist's are at bottom profoundly akin. The recent deepening of our ecological understanding, which shows that radical change is just as natural as harmony and homeostasis, and that the human place in nature is as one of several species that accelerate natural change, suggests that art is the missing element in environmentalism. If aesthetics is recognized for what it is, an essential element of scientific understanding, we will be

able to redefine our environmental goals for a healthier planet.

§ Art can be reunited with physical science through such ideas as evolution and chaos theory; the reflectiveness of art can be partly understood through the study of nonlinear dynamical systems and their strange attractors in nature and mathematics. The human species itself emerged from the dynamical system generated by the mutual interaction of biological and cultural evolution: thus, our bodies and brains are adapted to and demand artistic performance and creation. Cultural evolution was partly driven by inventive play in artistic handicrafts and performance. We have a nature; that nature is cultural; that culture is classical, in the sense of the natural excellence striven after by all human cultures past and present.

§ The order of the universe is neither deterministic nor on the road to irreversible decay; instead, the universe is self-renewing, self-ordering, unpredictable, creative, and free. Thus, human beings do not need to labor miserably to despoil the world of its diminishing stockpile of order, and struggle with one another for possession of it, only to find that they have bound themselves into a mechanical and deterministic way of life. Instead, they can cooperate with nature's own artistic process and with each other in a free and open-ended play of value creation. Art looks with hope to the future: it seeks a closer union with the true progress of technology.

§ Art evokes the shared past of all human beings, that past which is the moral foundation of civilization. Sometimes the present creates the future by breaking the shackles of the past, but sometimes the past creates the future by breaking the shackles of the present. The Enlightenment and modernism are examples of the former; the Renaissance, and perhaps our time, are examples of the latter. But in either case, no artist has completed his or her artistic journey until he or she has sojourned with and learned the wisdom of the dead artists who came before. The future will be more, not less, aware of and indebted to the past than we are, just as we are more aware of and indebted to the past than were our ancestors. The immortality of art goes both ways in time; it is only if we renew the lives of former artists and poets in our own lives that we will be renewed and remembered when we are dead.

These ideas, and others like them, have inspired a new generation of artists. We believe that we are the successors to postmodernism, and we can point to a growing body of exciting new artistic work. This work is not widely known, for the existing postmodern paradigm still dominates most venues of publication, performance, and exhibition. But it includes a renewal of the great tradition of landscape painting; science fiction composed in strict classical epic form; a new genre of heroic religious statuary; an outpouring of richly musical poetry in strict form; a new awakening in choral, operatic, and symphonic music; CD-ROM and Internet art and literature; a rebirth of mystical and allegorical painting; and remarkable collaborations among artists, poets, composers, and natural scientists.

The tradition of Homer, Dante, Leonardo, Shakespeare, Beethoven, and Goethe is not dead. It is growing up in the cracks of the postmodern concrete. Though it does not dominate the cultural landscape, it is there for the general public to find.