

# ICONOGRAPHIC DEPICTION AND LITERARY PORTRAYING IN BERNARD BERENSON'S DIARY AND EPISTOLARY WRITING

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## ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the interlacement of literary and iconographic elements by displaying an innovatory philological and stylistic approach, from a comparative perspective, in thematizing multilingual translational and adaptive aspects, ranging across Bernard Berenson's diaristic and epistolary corpus, in conjunction with his works on Italian visual culture. This interweaving gives occasion to the elaboration of multilinguistic textual influences and their verbo-visual artistic representations deduced from his innovative interpretative readings in the domain of world literature in modern times. Such analysis of the discourse of theoretical and literary nature, and of the pictoricity, refers to Bernard Berenson's multilingual considerations about canonical authors in English, Italian, French, German language, belonging to the Neoclassical and Romantic period, as well as to the contemporary era, as conceptualized in his autobiographical works, in correlation with his writings on Italian figurative art. The scope of this presentation is to discern and articulate Berenson's aesthetic ideas evoking literary and artistic modernity, that are infused with crucial notions of translational theory and conveyed through the methodology of close reading and comprising at the same time, in an omnicomprehensive manner, a plurality of tendencies intrinsic to social paradigms of cultural studies. Unexplored premises reflecting Berenson's vision of Italian culture, most notably of a visual stamp, will be analyzed through author's understandings of such adaptive translations or volumes to be subsequently translated in Italian, and through their intertwined intertextual applications, significantly contributing to further critical and hermeneutic reception thereof. Particular attention is drawn to its instancing in the field of Romantic literary production (Emerson, Byron), originally underscoring the specificities of each literary genre and expressive mode, of the narrative, lyric or theatrical nature, as well as concomitantly involving parallel notions as adapted variants within visual arts, and in such a way expressing theoretical views pertaining to Italian artworks too. Other analogous elements relevant to literary expression in the most varied cultural sectors such as philosophy, music, civilisational history (Goethe, Hegel, Kant, Wagner, Chateaubriand, Rousseau, Mme de Staël, Taine) are furnished, as well as the examples of the resonances of non-western cultures, with the objective of exploring the effect among readership bringing also to the renewal of Italian tradition.

***Keywords:** Bernard Berenson, visual figurativity, diaries, epistolary writing, interdisciplinarity*

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout Bernard Berenson's personal writings of a diaristic and epistolary stamp, of thematically arborescent, interdisciplinary nature, emerges his perception and understanding of literary and interartistic modernity, in correlation with his practice of contemplation of the paintings and other artworks, as well as his consecutive writings on Italian figurative art, made a topic of this paper. So it will also be shown how his artistic critique is reminiscent of his literary and cultural readings emerging from his personal writings, parallel to art criticism, in a double movement.

The purpose of the present paper is therefore to furnish a critical argumentation and develop a theoretical articulation thereof, showing the modalities according to which the two arts, figurative and literary, remain intimately correlated in Berenson's interpretation of modernity. It is through the visual arts that he seeks to reach the essence of literature since he considers poetry to be the initial, underlying motivation for his studies in iconography [15].

Introductorily, let me observe that iconographic phenomena and authorial impressions are thus narrated with internal poeticity and such speculative and emotional resonance. Berenson's poetical instinct is maintained even when his style is predominantly expository, like in his artistic narrative texts wherein he recreates the atmosphere in which the artist moves and operates, by interlacing art-historical aspects with psychological elements, and establishing an essayistical verve.

## RESULT

Universal cognition of things becomes associated with conversational tendency and the writing aptitude [15]. To write for Berenson is an exercise similar to that of the trampoline, organizing and coordinating movements of individual thought [15], like can be read in *Colloqui con Berenson* (Talks with Berenson), that I am presenting you in my translation, "writing has this importance, that it makes ideas clear, ordinales them into words, into propositions" [15]. This is even more so for journal entries [5] [6] [11], and epistolary writing, allowing him to highlight his inner necessities, beliefs, and understandings that are correlated with artistry.

Berenson, whose writing is occasionally anecdotal, for the immediacy of the discourse, arrives to an orchestrated sound of his voice also in his personal writings, as a result of cultural considerations, and that involves the surrounding atmosphere. As an epistolographer, by giving attention to his interlocutors, he creates copious collections of letters, as documented for instance in the volumes *The Berenson Archive. An Inventory of Correspondence* [13], and *The Selected Letters of Bernard Berenson* [14].

Taking the word as a form of life, explicating emotionality, makes his own understanding of the role of the critic as such as to illuminate [15]. The study of epistolary production is conducted in the present research with the methodology and aims similar to those set up for a series of his diary manuscripts, the latter texts ranging from 1881 to 1958, with the aim of elucidating their contentistic and formal characteristics, also analyzing the typical schemes and common traits, as well as the procedures that lead to the assumption of the literary tone. In such a light, my detailed study of Berenson's non-fiction which directly has literature as its object, highlighting and elaborating the parallels with the domain of figurative arts drawn by the author, has the aim to considerably deepen the knowledge about it.

The multiple facets and aspects will be addressed by referring immediately not only to the materials of the Berenson Library but also to the documentation available in the archive of the Fund "Bernard and Mary Berenson. The Writings", which can be found at I Tatti, Florence, Italy – Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies.

Concomitantly, in the present paper, the attention is placed on a multitude of Berenson's publicistic texts, applying a methodological approach similar to that used for diaristic and epistolary literature, in order to also draw generalizing conclusions valid for all of his writings on literature, besides arriving to philological insights specific to a particular genre, as well as to express views concerning the intertextual interpretations of others of his work. In those genres of literature directly intrinsic to the aspects of reality, Berenson further comments in a literary vein on artistic creations. He deliberately undertakes therein interart studies of literature and visuality, because certain pieces of literature are considered most idoneous for explications of descriptive characteristics of artworks, as well as aesthetic and spiritual emotionality implied by them, but also his own intentionality in that regard.

Symbolic tropology of poetry, predilected by the author among literary genres, is therefore particularly significant [15]. It is through a suggestion of the written word, with the means of poetic transfiguration and comparativism, that visual arts can be most thoroughly explained, according to Berenson. Since it is most complexly articulated, literary expression can be of utmost help in understanding intelligibly, as well as emotionally, the phenomenal universe, in connection with works of art, also because the sensitive aspect is for Berenson connected with knowledge. Exemplarily, such intent is displayed in the title of his book *Seeing and Knowing* [7].

In Berenson's optics, artcritical assertions find therefore their completeness in the literary field. While commenting on painters' artistic genius and attitudes implied therein, especially in figure-painting, instead of formal characteristics he uses the expression 'feeling for tactile values': "I prefer to the word 'form' to use the expression 'tactile values', for form in the figure arts gives us pleasure because

it has extracted and presented to us the corporeal and structural significance of objects more quickly and more completely than we – unless, indeed, we also be great artists, or see as they see – could have grasped them by ourselves" [4].

At the same time, tactile values, considered essential qualities in the figurative arts, are conveyed through stories, which is to say that they are rendered in such a way because they consist in narrative patterns, just like literary values of stylistic, but also speculative nature, include a worldview: "[...] and no figure-painting is real, – has a value of its own apart from the story it has to tell, the ideal it has to present, – unless it conveys ideated sensations of touch and movement" [4]. And that is also a reason through which can be explained Berenson's predilection for representational visual arts. In an analogue spirit he notes in the same volume: "Instead of painting indiscriminately everything that appeals to him, the great artist, as if with deliberate intention, selects from among the mass of visual impressions only those elements that combine to produce a picture in which each part of the design conveys tactile values, communicates movement, and uplifts with space composition. Not every figure is suited for conveying tactile values, not every attitude is fitted for communicating movement, and not every space is uplifting" [3].

Berenson, who in his connoisseurship also dealt with the arts of drawing and sculpture, expanding areas of his interest in a global perspective to resonances of non-western cultures such as the oriental context [15], takes as a theoretical premise, connecting two artistic fields of visuality and literature, the fact that they contain within their syntax an idea of narrativity, which is due to their representational nature. Such representations, respectively of iconographic and literary nature, can be interpreted as a narrative because they are based on the figural aspect.

The aesthetic principle is laid as a foundation in Berenson's account. His depiction in artistic manner reflects at times modernistic epistemological standpoints also due to the fact that he expresses aestheticized views governing his approach [12], wherein he remains more romantically oriented. Noticeable aestheticism can therefore also be perceived as a modernist view.

Besides Berenson's theoretical articulation and critical-publicistic discourse nowadays associable with modernist studies and ascribable to such ideational aesthetic aura, emerges his strong penchant for Romanticism. Berenson holds a particular interest towards the horizon of Romantic poeticity, admiring the great British and American poets of the early nineteenth century in a series of his writings, such as John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Wordsworth, George Gordon Byron, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Among them he considers the authors of German provenance to be anticipatory in regard to English Romanticism, as interpreted in a diary remark [10]. Displaying a knowledgeable attitude on these topics, he comments on interartistic climate of Neoclassicism and Pre-Romanticism: "the glorious galaxy of poets, philosophers, musicians, men of

learning, men of science, men of creative enterprise that Germany has produced" (Schiller, Hölderlin, Hegel, Mozart, Haydn, Wagner etc.) [6].

In such a sense, he considers Keats' ode *To Autumn* (1820) to be maybe the most beautiful poem of all time, and a marvelous example of 'significant detail'. In more general terms, the latter poetical tool makes part most recurrently of his critical usage too. It is a value that is no longer auditory and semantic, but linear, chromatic in the sense of tactile, and speculative-emotional [15]. While analyzing the poetic language of Romantic lyricism and its figurative reverberations, he finds that these reflections are rarely asynchronously transmitted in time. Keats' poems and atmosphere of the Romanticism are considered synecdochal particularly to the figurative painting of Jacopo Tintoretto from the previous Renaissance-Mannerist period [15].

Berenson here alludes to intervisual and intertextual polysemic context instated by Tintoretto's allegorical artistic cycle dedicated to four meteorological Seasons (ca. 1575-1585), and more specifically to the artwork in which the motif of Autumn is personified, on the traces of Giorgio Vasari who depicted alike, at such intersection. In such a way Berenson re-elaborates also in the literary light his preference for Venetian painters, considering Tintoretto's inventiveness and pictorial ingenuity to be "poetically interpretative", and adding about him to be, again in his own words, "not only as the most pictorial but as the most classical" in the article published under the title *From "A Venetian Diary"* [8].

From Berenson's perspective, the literature serves as a mediator consecrating values. On this resemblance he further writes, for example, the following: "It happens that the English poets afford striking parallels to the Italian painters. [...] But centuries had to elapse before emotions so intense as those Correggio felt found expression in literature – in Shelley when he is at his best, and in Keats when he is perfect" [2].

Concomitantly, hermeneutic ontological element permeates Berenson's aesthetic considerations. A reader of Kant and Nietzsche in his autobiographical writings, Berenson however not rarely remains personal, subjective in his thoughts, considering there is an additional, supplementary element in knowledge or interpretation with respect to objectivity, like can be noted in his reflections in the text *From "A Roman Diary"* [9].

Berenson is guided by the aim to better understand as well, as the epitome of French Pre-Romanticist and Romanticist spirit but also of its dichotomous Positivist current, the works of François-René de Chateaubriand, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Mme de Staël, Hippolyte Taine and others.

Constant cross-cultural comparison is present within Berenson's reflection on the arts of visual representation. From a theoretical-critical perspective, he also

expresses himself on the translations that, according to his belief, can sometimes manage to surpass the original [6].

## CONCLUSION

Two types of artistic expression, that of visual and that of literary nature are initially united at the structural level by the evocative power of mythical elements as understood by Berenson. Literature instaures mythical components since the figures transcend into myth, whereas these mythical structures are narratively represented more plastically in the realm of visual arts, with figurations transformed into images, which might have constituted originally the reason of his interest. He also goes on to claim on the analogue premises that literary and humanistic studies can therefore prepare for an understanding of painting. And through the study of mythical in the paintings can also be perceived the essence of the poetry, the first aim he aspired to. Mythology understood in an aesthetic and historical sense constitute as well a commonplace of English Romanticism.

To conclude, Berenson's interest to thematize art is a civilization making and producing act. According to the author, the vital value of the art consists in its life-enhancing character, in an intellectual pursuit that prior to him occupied, exemplarily, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe [1]. He thus considers his own methodology to be also psychological and empirical, as thematized in a diary note of his volume *Rumor and Reflection* [6]. Through autobiographical diaristic stance, guided by his narrative instinct and stylistic know-how, Berenson frequently expresses transtemporal ideas. Diaristic production and collections of letters as a form of experimental literature that allows, due to the factional component, openness, and major permeability to reality, is, therefore, a fundamental literary aspect constituting modernity of Berenson's writings and viewpoints.

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