

# L'ANALISI LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA

FACOLTÀ DI SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE  
UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

3

ANNO XXVIII 2020

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*AS PAINTING POETRY SHALL [NOT] BE:*  
 AN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY OF WORD AND IMAGE RIVALRY  
 IN BRITISH CULTURE

PAOLA SPINOZZI  
 UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI FERRARA

Word and image dialectics will be examined to develop a synthetic, diachronic view that interprets the hierarchy of the arts as the result of the interplay between individual creative talent and cultural paradigms in specific historical periods. The rivalry between painting and poetry will be reassessed to elucidate how and why the changing emphasis on subservience, independence, or interdependence has generated theories of verbocentrism, iconocentrism, and interart osmosis in Great Britain from the seventeenth century to the contemporary age.

*Keywords:* Word and Image, Great Britain, Interart Studies, verbocentrism, iconocentrism, interart osmosis

The unity and multiplicity of Art is an ancient dualism. It has been studied from a variety of perspectives and will continue to be debated because it pertains to the universal and everlasting quest for the origin of art. Selected word and image relationships will be examined to develop a synthetic, diachronic view that interprets the hierarchy of the arts as the result of the interplay between individual creative talent and cultural paradigms in specific historical periods. The rivalry between painting and poetry will be reassessed to elucidate how and why the changing emphasis on subservience, independence, or interdependence has generated theories of verbocentrism, iconocentrism, and interart osmosis in Great Britain from the seventeenth century to the contemporary age.

Written between 1482 and the next 25 years of Leonardo da Vinci's life, *Trattato della Pittura* (*Treatise on Painting*) serves as an introduction to the disparity between painting and poetry encapsulated by the paragone in the early modern age. The contrast between pictorialism and anti-pictorialism in the seventeenth and eighteenth century will be discussed to define the shift from Neoclassical notions of beauty to early Romantic aesthetics of the sublime. The dialectics between traditional and innovative ways of visually rendering a verbal text will be examined to explain why illustration came into the foreground in the nineteenth century. The first half of the twentieth century is marked by a search for correspondences and symbioses which will be analysed in relation to the theory of the mutual illumination of the arts. The focus on literature that characterises the comparative arts in the second half of the twentieth century will be explained as an expression of verbo-

centrism, thriving on the idea that words are entitled to speak for images. Iconocentrism in the contemporary age will be related to the popularity of visual expressions producing immediate appeal and impact on viewers. The overarching use of images as forms of communication, sources of information, and modes of persuasion requires an ingenious understanding of manifest as well as latent meanings. Ultimately the evolution of *ut pictura poësis* illuminates how, when, and why either word or image becomes the medium of choice.

### 1. *The Paragone*

The paragone of the arts informed the development of artistic theory in the sixteenth century. Writings about art and artworks in Italy and the Low Countries during the Renaissance enumerated the characteristics of the verbal and the visual arts as forms of creativity and established relationships of predominance and subservience. Leonardo meticulously illustrated the superior power of painting over poetry and the other arts in *Trattato della Pittura* (first published in France in 1631). Part I, dedicated to the paragone, is a superb enquiry into the peculiarities of each mode of representation:

#### 40. Della pittura e della poesia

Per fingere le parole la poesia supera la pittura, e per fingere fatti la pittura supera la poesia, e quella proporzione ch'è dai fatti alle parole, tal è dalla pittura ad essa poesia, perché i fatti sono subietto dell'occhio, e le parole subietto dell'orecchio, e così i sensi hanno la medesima proporzione infra loro, quale hanno i loro obietti infra sé medesimi, e per questo giudico la pittura essere superiore alla poesia. Ma per non sapere i suoi operatori dire la sua ragione, è restata lungo tempo senza avvocati, perché essa non parla, ma per sé si dimostra e termina né fatti; e la poesia finisce in parole, con le quali come briosa se stessa lauda<sup>1</sup>.

Leonardo revisits the topos of *ut pictura poësis* from Horace's *Ars Poetica* to clarify that painting is mute simply because painters do not possess the same rhetorical skills as poets. In declaring that poetry excels with words, painting with facts, he suggests that the former is more volatile, the latter is more real and concrete. The supremacy of painters resides in their power to appeal to the eye, which Leonardo implicitly considers pre-eminent among the senses, while poets appeal to the ear. While plunging the reader into a relentless comparative analysis, *Trattato della Pittura* anticipates contemporary arguments about the self-reflexivity and meta-discursivity of poetry, the only art that can speak for and about itself.

The vigour Leonardo displays in advocating the primacy of painting pursues a rhetorical purpose. In *Ut Pictura Poësis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting* (1940) Rensselaer W. Lee suggests that Leonardo exaggerates his derogatory opinions of poetry on purpose, as if he were engaged in a dispute with some defender of poetry at the court of the Sforza. Lee then

<sup>1</sup> L. da Vinci, *Trattato della pittura*, condotto sul cod. Vaticano Urbinate 1270, con prefazione di M. Tabarrini; preceduto dalla *Vita di Leonardo* scritta da G. Vasari; con nuove note e commentario di G. Milanese, Unione cooperativa editrice, Roma 1890, p. 31.

traces the evolution of the paragone between 1550 and 1650 in Europe, and particularly in Italy, and explains that the confrontation derives from theories established in antiquity around the categories of imitation, invention, and expression, which have defined the nature of each art, and instruction, delight, decorum, which have qualified their purposes. How writers and artists can represent the finest essence of humankind has been assessed based on reproduction, creativity, education, entertainment, decency and propriety, and has been incorporated into the humanistic doctrine of painting: “And the core of the new as of the ancient theory – that painting like poetry fulfils its highest function in a representative imitation of human life, not in its average but in its superior forms – is, notwithstanding its virtual eclipse at the present time, important and central to any final estimate of the painter’s art”<sup>2</sup>. Lee then analyses how the renowned story of love and sorcery between the Christian warrior Rinaldo and the Saracen sorceress Armida in Torquato Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581) inspired seventeenth-century painters: “In choosing subjects from an epic poem of high seriousness in which heroic history was mingled with the marvellous, they shared the poet’s great invention, and like him were imitators of human action of more than common interest and significance”<sup>3</sup>. Lee’s study is still fundamental for understanding the role of aesthetic and cultural parameters in re/defining which art possesses superior powers of representation and for acknowledging that subjects represented in a form of art may include the mediation of another art because they constantly peruse each other.

## 2. Pictorialism and Anti-Pictorialism in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century

Empiricist philosophers theorised knowledge as experience gained through the senses. Empiricism was at the core of pictorialist and anti-pictorialist understandings of verbal and visual art in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. How Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and John Hume inspired pictorialism and Edmund Burke initiated anti-pictorialism can be understood by delving into their theories on the perception of images, the formation of impressions, and the function of language.

Part I of Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (1651) is a study of human nature from the perspective of sensorial abilities. In “Chapter One. Of Sense” he proclaims that “there is no conception in a man’s mind which hath not at first, totally, or by parts, been begotten upon the organs of sense”<sup>4</sup>, and in “Chapter Two. Of Imagination” he explains why imagination is genealogically connected to the senses: “imagination being only of those things which have been formerly perceived by sense, either all at once, or by parts at several times”<sup>5</sup>. Impressions perceived sensorially stimulate the imaginative act, which is then expressed through vivid

<sup>2</sup> R.L. Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting*, “The Art Bulletin”, 22, 1940, 4, p. 201. See also F. Ames-Lewis, *Image and Text: The Paragone*, in Ead., *The Intellectual Life of the Early Renaissance Artist*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2000.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>4</sup> T. Hobbes, “Chapter One, Of Sense” in Id., *Leviathan, or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil*, J.C.A. Gaskin ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford 1996, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.



verbal transposition. The primary function of language is to represent what first stimulates the senses and subsequently activates the imagination.

Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) delves into the difference between truth and perception in *Book IV. Of Knowledge and Opinion*. In "Chapter XIX. Of Enthusiasm" he examines why enthusiastic, excitable persons find it difficult to discern whether what they see and feel is objective or rather arises from their inclination: "once they are got into this way of immediate revelation, of illumination without search, and of certainty without proof, and without examination, it is a hard matter to get them out of it"<sup>6</sup>. Enthusiasm is categorized as a beguiling attitude that can alter human understanding because enthusiastic people are all too ready to define what they see and feel like the revelation of truth. Their inclination makes it arduous for them to acknowledge that what they describe may derive from their excited perception. Locke's enquiry into the formation of knowledge and opinion draws attention to objectivity and subjectivity, suggesting that excitement distracts from objective knowledge, generating fabrication.

The referential function of language is explored in "Section II. Of the Origin of Ideas" in John Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748). Hume believes that ideas are mental images based on impressions. Ideas, especially abstract ones, can be indistinct and obscure, and the mind fails to have a clear grasp on them. Impressions, generated by outward or inward sensations, are powerful, clear, and distinct. The nature of the impressions generating the idea is thus essential to the process of signification: "When we entertain [...] any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea [...], we need but inquire, from what impression is that supposed idea derived?". Hume posits that differences between impressions are more evident than between ideas, thus stressing the priority of empirical perception over-abstraction and speculation.

*Réflexions critiques sur la Poésie et sur la Peinture* (1719) by Jean-Baptiste Du Bos, *Three Treatises. The First Concerning Art. The Second Concerning Music, Painting and Poetry. The Third Concerning Happiness* (1744) by James Harris, *Les Beaux-Arts réduits à un même Principe* (1746) by Abbé Batteaux, and *Lettre sur les Sourds et Muets* (1751) by Diderot share the same quest for correspondences between the arts, which became paramount in eighteenth-century aesthetic taxonomies. A major outcome of these interart studies was the pictorialist theory of language, which revolves around the power of verbal images. Perception of natural images engenders impressions that painters and sculptors render through painted images, poets and writers through images in words. When writing pursues pictorialism, it can easily surpass painting, as the intangible visual effects created by descriptive language can outshine the material pictures produced by the brush and the pigments.

In *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, published in *The Spectator* in 1712, Joseph Addison defines various forms of art in terms of representational quality. Sculpture is the most

<sup>6</sup> J. Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, in Id., *The Works of John Locke*, with a New Introduction by J.W. Yolton, Routledge and Thoemmes Press, London 1997, p. 275.

<sup>7</sup> J. Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, C.W. Hendel ed., Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis 1955, p. 30.

mimetic, it produces visual and tactile effects playing with lines, contours, and volumes. Painting relies on similarity and analogy, using surfaces to generate visual resemblance to things. Description is made of words carefully selected to conjure up reality in its vividness. Music, the less mimetic among the arts, adopts more arbitrary parameters of representation. The most intense pleasures of the imagination are neither produced by the direct vision of things nor by the images that the painter's creativity renders as visual artworks. Addison believes that images evoked by pictorialist writing can overcome the vibrancy of natural images:

Words, when well chosen, have so great a Force in them, that a Description often gives us more lively Ideas than the Sight of Things themselves. The Reader finds a Scene drawn in Stronger Colours, and painted more to the Life in his Imagination, by the help of Words, than by an actual Survey of the Scene which they describe<sup>8</sup>.

Drawing inspiration from nature, the poets enhance its beauty and produce images so vivid, that the real ones appear dull in comparison. Descriptions can achieve magnificent pictorial qualities through verbal creativity.

Because the observer is always stimulated by something that exists and activates sensorial perception, Addison explores how personality affects reality. Writers first observe, then use fancy to retain the impression of images, and finally adopt judgement to choose the best expression<sup>9</sup>. The act of evoking the images observed is creative because it requires the ability to enhance their vividness, magnify their aesthetic quality, and elicit the readers' empathy.

Jean Hagstrum draws attention to the distinction Addison makes between the natural moment of observation, in which the artist wants to reproduce nature as faithfully as possible, and the psychological moment of perception, in which external reality is mediated<sup>10</sup>. By shifting the emphasis from the thing observed to the thing perceived, the Empiricists changed the notion of representation in the eighteenth century and initiated the psychology of perception. W.J.T. Mitchell explains that pictorialist views of language circulating in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries disregarded metaphors as unnecessary decorative elements belonging to an old-fashioned form of ornate language<sup>11</sup>. Figures of speech were criticised as artifices that fascinate and confuse the reader, while verbal images expressing clear sensorial reality were deemed suitable to capture original impressions elaborated into ideas.

How art generates empathy is Edmund Burke's major concern in *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756). Empiricist premises are at the core of Burke's anti-pictorialist theories. "In Introduction. On Taste" he explains that

<sup>8</sup> J. Addison, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, in J. Addison – R. Steele, and Others, *The Spectator* in Four Volumes, G. Smith ed., with an Introduction by P. Smithers, vol. 3, Dent & Sons Ltd., London 1945, p. 292.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 293.

<sup>10</sup> J.H. Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts. The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1958, pp. 129-150.

<sup>11</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, *What is an Image*, in Id., *Iconology. Image, Text, Ideology*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1986, pp. 23-24.

imagination does not produce anything new but acts on the disposition of the ideas perceived through the senses<sup>12</sup>. In “Part I, Section XVI, Imitation” he defines the fundamental human act of imitating as instrumental to learning, and enjoyable, but unable to elicit a strong emotional response<sup>13</sup>.

Description does not intensify the vivacity of nature, which in fact can only be partially conveyed. When writing pursues a description of the object in its entirety, it fails. Versatility is its power. Verbal language does not represent the whole thing; it renders the emotions arising from it. In “Part II, Section IV, Of the Difference between Clearness and Obscurity with regard to the Passions” he clarifies that writing can overcome its limits by choosing words that suggest, impress, and evoke:

the most lively and spirited verbal description I can give raises a very obscure and imperfect *idea* of such objects; but then it is in my power to raise a stronger *emotion* by the description than I could do by the best painting. This experience constantly evinces. The proper manner of conveying the *affections* of the mind from one to another is by words; there is a great insufficiency in all other methods of communication<sup>14</sup>.

Whereas Addison claims that images evoked through writing can be more vivid than the ones observed directly, Burke maintains that verbal images are characterised by approximation, vagueness, and imprecision. More significantly, Addison’s belief that verbal vividness generates a pleasure more intense than direct vision is overturned by Burke’s claim that clear imagery has but a limited influence on the arousal of passions. In “Section IV. The same subject continued” he explains that the very obscurity of perception that resists verbalization activates imaginative processes: description, when unable to represent thoughts and sentiments with precision, arouses intense emotions. Only verbal language renders “the affections of the mind”, and thanks to its obscurity and vagueness, poetry surpasses painting in the representation of passions:

It is our ignorance of things that [...] chiefly excites our passions. [...] The images raised by poetry are always of this obscure kind. [...] But painting [...] can only affect simply by the images it presents; and even in painting, a judicious obscurity in some things contributes to the effect of the picture, because the images in painting are exactly similar to those in nature; and in nature dark, confused uncertain images have a greater power on the fancy<sup>15</sup>.

Because painting excels in representing the world with clarity and vividness, it cannot give shape to whimsical and perplexing ideas. On the other hand, poetry is perfectly equipped

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<sup>12</sup> E. Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful: with an Introductory Discourse concerning Taste, and several other Additions*, in Id., *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, Introduction by W. Willis, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1906, vol. 1, p. 71.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 101-102.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 112-114.

to render apparitions, chimeras, harpies, and grand allegorical figures. Poetic images convey opaqueness and dimness, enabling the reader to experience the sublime. The aim of poetry is not to form a real picture, so the picturesque effect can be avoided, being superfluous and even inappropriate.

In “Part V, Section V, Examples that words may affect without raising images” Burke explains that exact description can be better achieved by painting aimed at imitation; on the other hand, poems and rhetoric require sympathy, their aim being “to display rather the effect of things on the mind of the speaker, or of others, than to present a clear idea of the things themselves”<sup>16</sup>. Real images and their visual rendition are linked by resemblance. Instead, verbal description is ontologically different from its object of representation. Incapable of capturing the real image through likeness, words are more apt to render perceptions and impressions that generate empathy and produce pathos. Introducing a bifurcation between mimetic painting and empathic poetry, Burke attributes the experience of beauty and the picturesque to the former, of the sublime to the latter. Visual and verbal modes of expression should thus be appreciated for the specific aesthetic experience each of them engenders.

Painting can placate the spirit because it discloses the object as it is made manifest in the world. Conversely, poetry, owing to its opaqueness and obscurity, arouses disquieting emotions. It is not pictorial and must not tend towards pictorialism if it wants to express the sublime. It appeals to the reader’s fascination for the indistinct. Because it cannot be mimetic, verbal language relies on its evocative power and fills in referential gaps with suggestive components, generating a sublime aesthetic experience. Burke’s definition of painting and poetry concerning the sublime marks the passage from the pictorialist tenets of Neoclassicism to the subjective poetics of Romanticism.

The paragone of the arts reached its magnitude in the eighteenth-century aesthetic debate. Pictorialist theories of language were based on the idea that writing should be moulded to produce pictorialist prose and poetry, in which verbal images can exceed the vividness of painting, and even of nature. Anti-pictorialist conceptions revolved around the belief that poetry must not, and cannot, imitate painting: poetic images generate pathos and affections, fuelled by the poet’s imagination and subjectivity. The development of pictorialism and anti-pictorialism has shaped how literature and the visual arts have confronted each other in the following centuries.

### 3. *The Art of Illustration in the Nineteenth Century*

The nineteenth century was the age of book illustration, widely practised and studied as a form of art. In 1857 Edward Moxon published Alfred Tennyson’s *Poems* with 54 woodcut illustrations. John Everett Millais, William Holman Hunt and Dante Gabriel Rossetti produced 30 designs known as Pre-Raphaelite; Thomas Creswick, J.C. Horsley, William Mulready and Clarkson Stanfield contributed 24 more traditional designs. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 213-215.

July 1857, John Ruskin wrote to Tennyson what he thought of the illustrations in the *Moxon Tennyson*, pinpointing the differences between the verbal sources and their visual renditions.

Many of the plates are very noble things, though not, it seems to me, illustrations of your poems. I believe, in fact, that good pictures never can be; they are always another poem, subordinate but wholly different, from the poet's conception, and serve chiefly to show the reader how variously the same verses may affect various minds. But these woodcuts will be of much use in making people think and puzzle a little<sup>17</sup>.

Ruskin, realizing that the art of book illustration was becoming formulaic, praises the illustrations of the Pre-Raphaelites for offering perceptive and original interpretations of Tennyson's poems. The artworks they produce a call for a dual assessment: the illustrated page possesses specific aesthetic qualities, yet it is also an artwork related to another artwork, which is its source of inspiration. Because illustrations encapsulate the thought of visual artists on verbal artworks, Ruskin suggests that assessing how they 'reproduce' their verbal source is much less relevant than understanding how, by creating images, they express unexpected thoughts on the text. The aesthetic value of the *Moxon Tennyson* consists in the very variety and peculiarity of each artist's style.

The relationships between the Pre-Raphaelite artists and Tennyson show that illustration in the mid-nineteenth century was already regarded as a form of art which could visually represent but also interpret and elude its verbal source. Millais, Hunt, and Rossetti fully address the dilemma of the illustrator: whether to adhere to the narrative components of the verbal work or to highlight more allusive aspects of textuality, which generate autonomous, even radical, acts of interpretation and creation. Transposition of verbal artworks by the Pre-Raphaelites reveals that illustrators can produce dissemination of meanings.

The evolution of engraving from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century shows how the innate human ability to develop multiple creative skills is instrumental in developing connections between word and image. Engraving as an art reached its peak between 1470 and 1530 and many early engravers were accomplished goldsmiths. Gradually replaced by etching, an easier technique, engraving was mainly used for commercial illustration and for the reproduction of paintings in the nineteenth century and until the early twentieth century, when it began to compete against photography, which was more expensive.

In *Ariadne Florentina. Six Lectures on Wood and Metal Engraving* (1872) Ruskin, endlessly intrigued by craftsmanship, examines the art of engraving in Florence, claiming that it is the foundation of style both in architecture and sculpture and an inseparable part of both. In "Lecture One. Definition of the Art of Engraving" he declares that "engraving means, primarily, making a permanent cut or furrow in something. The central syllable of the word has become a sorrowful one, meaning the most permanent of furrows"<sup>18</sup>. Etymol-

<sup>17</sup> J. Ruskin to A. Tennyson, 24 July 1857, in *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, E.T. Cook – A. Wedderburn ed., George Allen, London 1903-1912, vol. 36, pp. 264-265.

<sup>18</sup> J. Ruskin, "Lecture One. Definition of the Art of Engraving", in Id., *Ariadne Florentina. Six Lectures on Wood and Metal Engraving; With Appendix. Given Before the University of Oxford in Michaelmas Term, 1872*, George Allen, London 1873-1875, p. 8.

ogy, which stimulated Ruskin's analytical mind, offers evidence that words are motivated signs: to engrave means to make an incision, the ultimate one in the ground to lay a grave.

As Joseph Hillis Miller clarifies in *Illustration* (1992), "Ruskin makes the distinction [between writing and painting] problematic by relating both words and pictures to the primordial material act of scratching a surface to make it sign"<sup>19</sup>. Writing and painting characterize humans as makers and fulfil their desire to leave imprints. Writing includes an element of painting, while creating images can be defined as a form of writing with a tool other than the pen. Ruskin illuminates the common origin of man-made signs, all of which require a choice of utensils and knowledge of materials. Julia Thomas has connected verbal and visual cultures to popular taste and techniques in her systematic archival research on Victorian book illustrators and narrative painters, culminating in the valuable *Nineteenth-century Illustration and the Digital: Studies in Word and Image* (2017)<sup>20</sup>.

Ruskin's interest in verbal and visual reciprocities was shared by painter, illustrator, and art critic Walter Crane. *Of the Decorative Illustration of Books Old and New* (1896) does not only present a rich diachronic selection of illustrations from the Middle Ages to the end of the nineteenth century, but it also stands out as a late Romantic defence of organic art. Books are defined as forms of graphic expression in which the letters were once pictures, symbols, or abstract signs of entities and actions, like the hieroglyphics of ancient Egypt, pictography, and prehistoric engraving. All of them share the dual act of writing and painting, reading, and seeing. Letters formed words; words inspired more and more complex relationships with ideas, losing their iconic component and becoming abstract and arbitrary signs. Gradually, the iconicity of the alphabet faded until it was no longer recognisable, while the nexus between words and things have become increasingly mediated.

Crane praises illustration and decoration because they can be understood immediately and enjoyed aesthetically as a form of picture-writing which relieves the reader from the repetitiveness of endless columns on the printed page:

In a journey through a book it is pleasant to reach the oasis of a picture or an ornament, to sit awhile under the palms, to let our thoughts unburdened stray, to drink of other intellectual waters, and to see the ideas we have been pursuing, perchance, reflected in them. Thus we end as we begin, with images<sup>21</sup>.

Images offer a distraction and produce visual pleasure, but also invite readers to appreciate how ideas conveyed through words can be expressed in visual form.

The interplay of imitation and imagination is constitutive of the sixteenth-century emblem, a genre which for Crane proves that both allegory and symbolism can be expressed in a dual work of art. Drawing attention to the amalgamation of didactic and symbolic components in the arts of the Renaissance, he argues that language is a system in which natural

<sup>19</sup> J.H. Miller, *Part Two. Word and Image*, in Id., *Illustration*, Harvard University Press, Harvard 1992, p. 75.

<sup>20</sup> J. Thomas, *Nineteenth-century Illustration and the Digital: Studies in Word and Image*, Palgrave Macmillan and Springer, Cham 2017.

<sup>21</sup> W. Crane, *Of the Decorative Illustration of Books Old and New*, Bell & Sons, London 1896, p. 17.

and mimetic signs exist along with conventional and arbitrary ones. In oral language there are sounds that produce meaning per se; in written language there are relationships between signifier and signified that are not arbitrary. He also examines the specificity of the media and encourages illustrators to acquire a thorough knowledge of the technical processes. Illustrators must possess “a sense of necessary relationship between design, material, and method of production – of art and craft, in fact – which cannot be lost, and has had its effect in many ways”<sup>22</sup>. While examining book illustration, Crane makes a significant contribution to the study of language evolution, by upholding the idea that verbal representation used to be based on motivated signs which gradually became conventional. On the one hand, he still believed that illustration possessed the power of elucidating a text, on the other, he anticipated the twentieth-century debate on the arbitrariness of words.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the topos of the Sister Arts incorporated opposite conceptions. Crane’s interart work is a tribute to the pursuit of a vital organic art encouraged by Ruskin and William Morris in the mid-nineteenth century and developed by the Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau in the following decades. Crane’s work is also an exploration of the specificity and autonomy of each art, which reveals dialectic and even conflicting interactions between verbal and visual media. He is a fine interpreter of the shift from realism to symbolism at the turn of the century when mimesis still reflected the belief that the arts could capture reality, and abstraction signalled the growing awareness that reproduction was no longer what words and images should seek.

#### 4. *The Mutual Illumination of the Arts in the Early Twentieth Century*

The definition of the difference between rendition and reproduction was Crane’s strongest contribution to the study of illustration, which gained resonance in the twentieth century.

The publisher and historian Edmund J. Sullivan expressed his principles through teaching, critical writing, and his own work as a practitioner. *The Art of Illustration* (1921), dedicated to methods of graphic design and book illustration, defined representation as interpretation: the verbal medium renders the object, not as it is, but as it is perceived. He realized that “Words do not ‘reproduce’ things, but ‘represent’ ideas of them – and to represent or reproduce implies first production and presentation. Words are symbols, and not things or ideas – in a sense that sounds alone are not – and so are forms”<sup>23</sup>. His argument is an anticipation of the semiotic debate on language as a system of representation which pursues referentiality, but also constructs and disseminates meaning.

David Bland, who studied illuminated manuscripts and illustrated texts, wrote *The Illustration of Books* (1951) to explain the connection between the act of seeing words and the process of comprehending them mentally. He emphasises the importance of shape, size, and appearance in the construction of meaning, including overtones and associations<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>23</sup> E.J. Sullivan, *The Art of Illustration*, Chapman and Hall Ltd., London 1921, p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> D. Bland, *The Illustration of Books*, Faber and Faber, London 1962, p. 13.

Bland redefines the scope of description by claiming that the pursuit of exactness is counterproductive, as it confines the mental processes of the reader and thwarts the knowledge of the thing described. His perspective on illustration is dual, aimed at assessing proximity with and difference from verbal expression. He highlights primeval connections between the arts in prehistoric sources like cave inscriptions and emphasises the inter-changeability of the term ‘illustration’ in verbal and visual art:

And so it is necessary to draw *and* to describe. [...] Drawing and writing have in fact developed simultaneously from a common origin. Even today we can use the word ‘illustration’ indiscriminately of a graphic or of a verbal description. Each began as a means of communication and by degree alphabets were built up of certain images. The process may be studied in the Palaeolithic where the artist, wishing to show a herd of reindeer would draw only the first and the last animals, indicating the rest by a few lines. So stylization came and with it the ideogram<sup>25</sup>.

Bland identifies the nexus between drawing and writing by explaining the gradual transition from the primitive act of drawing images to stylising and finally writing the alphabet. However, he points out that although writers and illustrators share aspects of each other’s art, their relationship is characterised by inequality and competition. Maintaining one’s own artistic identity is a mutual desire, but the illustrator must face a choice: “Either he may strive to efface himself behind his author or else he may assert himself at the expense of the author”<sup>26</sup>.

He insists on the iconic component of words, stating that, like images, written words must be seen to be decoded. Since language still retains elements of iconicity, illustration is not only an interart genre but also an expressive mode that encompasses all the arts: “all art is illustrative and in that sense illustration preceded literature”<sup>27</sup>.

Sullivan and Bland indicate the transition from the belief that illustration can ‘illuminate’ all that words can signify to the awareness that visual transposition of verbal art magnifies signification. How the peculiarities of the media define artistic creation and what forms and levels of representability each medium can achieve fuelled the debate on the mutual illumination of the arts in the early twentieth century.

Between the 1910s and 1930s, the comparative arts became an academic discipline. Comparatists proposed theories and methods based on the *Geistesgeschichte*. The history of culture as a history of the spirit, of every people and over time permeated the formal lectures delivered by Oskar Walzel and Kurt Wais, the first academics to achieve academic recognition as interart comparatists.

In the seminal lecture *Die wechselseitige Erhellung der Künste: ein Beitrag zur Würdigung kunstgeschichtlicher Begriff* (*The Mutual Illumination of the Arts: A Contribution to the*

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.



*Appreciation of the Concept of Art History*)<sup>28</sup>, published in 1917, Walzel used five pairs of opposites: Linear / Pictorial, Closed / Open, Surface / Depth, Multiplicity / Unity, Light / Dark. These principles, based on antithesis and complementarity, were borrowed from Heinrich Wölfflin, who adopted them in *Kunstgeschichtlicher Grundbegriffe (Principles of Art History)*<sup>29</sup> (1915) to assess figurative art in the Renaissance and Baroque. The mutual illumination of the arts was founded on the theory that every art form is an expression of art in the world, and mutual comparisons unveil a common matrix made manifest in forms and structures, even though artists choose different expressive means. This concept supports the idea that categories used in the history of art can be extended to all the arts.

Walzel historicized the circulation of interart concepts by explaining that the definitions of 'edle Einfach' (noble simplicity) and 'stille Größe' (composed measure) were first adopted by Winckelmann for Greek figurative art, gained momentum in Classicism, influencing Schiller's poetics, then resonated in Wackenroeder's writings on painting and music, which had a European circulation and were reworked by Romantic artists, and finally contributed to the evolution of pictorial aesthetics both in Impressionism and Expressionism. Walzel focuses on the work of Goethe, whose poetic vein, enhanced by his inclination for the figurative arts, constitutes an emblematic example of *Doppelbegabung*.

In *Symbiose der Künste, Forschungsgrundlagen zur Wechselberührung zwischen Dichtung, Bild- und Tonkunst*<sup>30</sup> (1937), published in English as *The Symbiosis of the Arts*<sup>31</sup> (1982), Kurt Wais declared that artists aspire to create a total work of art but can never achieve their goal because their talents and skills are incomplete. The quest for wholeness clashes with the limits of creativity and the primeval unity of the arts can never be attained by a single artist:

The primary and most difficult act of creation is the decision to shatter the original symbiosis of all arts, the (often unconscious) choice to paint (malen, make a mark, fix), to write (dichten, dictare, set down), or to compose (put together). Some never find the strength for this decision, but, like the young Hoffmann, consume themselves with crippling uncertainty, wondering whether they are meant to be painters or composers. A certain memory of the original unity affects nearly all of them<sup>32</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> O. Walzel, *Die wechselseitige Erhellung der Künste: ein Beitrag zur Würdigung kunstgeschichtlicher Begriffe*, Reuther & Richard, Berlin 1917. See also O. Walzel, *Gehalt und Gestalt im Kunstwerk des Dichters*, Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft Athenaion, Wildpark-Postdam 1923.

<sup>29</sup> H. Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe: das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst*, Bruckmann, München 1915; *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Early Modern Art*, Getty Trust Publications, Los Angeles 2015.

<sup>30</sup> K. Wais, *Symbiose der Künste, Forschungsgrundlagen zur Wechselberührung zwischen Dichtung, Bild- und Tonkunst*. Schriften und Vorträge der Württembergischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften: Geisteswissenschaftliche Abteilung, 1, Kohlhammer 1936; K. Wais, *Vom Gleichlauf der Künste*, *Bulletin of the International Committee of the Historical Sciences*, 37, 1937, pp. 295-304.

<sup>31</sup> K. Wais, *The Symbiosis of the Arts*, Translated by G.A. Richardson, "Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature", 31, 1982, pp. 78-95.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

Nowadays Wais' argument about the artist's doomed desire to re-create an imagined totality still sounds fascinating, yet also affected by a mystical view of the arts. One of his merits is that he thoroughly addressed the issue of un/equal mastery in double talent, which Crane had touched upon in *The Decorative Illustration of Books*. In the chapter dedicated to the modern revival of decorative feeling in book design he defined William Blake as a poet and painter whose originality showed in both text and image: "In writing with his own hand and with his own character the text of his poems, he gained the great advantage [...] of harmony between text and illustration. They become a harmonious whole, in complete relation."<sup>33</sup> Crane himself constantly sought to achieve balance in his own expressions of multiple creativity as a painter, illustrator, and writer, knowing that transposition generates proliferation of forms and contents<sup>34</sup>.

In *Literature and the Other Arts* (1942), René Wellek and Austin Warren made a compelling argument about imbalance in creativity. The gift of double talent is almost always uneven, in fact, one of the arts must prevail. In contrast with Crane's view, they believe that Blake is a far greater poet than he is a painter:

A grotesque little animal is supposed to illustrate [Blake's] 'Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright'. Thackeray illustrated *Vanity Fair* himself, but his smirky caricature of Becky Sharp has hardly anything to do with the complex character in the novel. In structure and quality there is little comparison between Michelangelo's *Sonnets* and his sculpture and paintings, though we can find the same Neo-Platonic ideas in all and may discover some psychological similarities<sup>35</sup>.

Wellek and Warren suggest that the medium of a work of art does not only require technical expertise but also entails a specific history that artists must learn so they can find their original way of expression. Intrinsic peculiarities and historical evolution distinguish a medium from any other medium. They also define the role of comparative criticism: because artists gifted with double or multiple talents usually achieve different standards in each medium, diverse interpretive methods are required.

### 5. *The Claims of Verbocentrism in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century*

In the 1960s, literature and textuality became the undiscussed focus of comparative studies. In *Literature and the Other Arts: Some Remarks* (1963) H.P.H. Teesing declared with-

<sup>33</sup> W. Crane, *Of the Decorative Illustration*, p. 113.

<sup>34</sup> P. Spinozzi, *Accurate Reproduction, Ingenious Representation: Lucy and Walter Crane's Household Stories, from the Collection of the Bros. Grimm (1882)*, "WORD & IMAGE. A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry", 30, 2014, 4, pp. 261-272.

<sup>35</sup> R. Wellek – A. Warren, *Literature and the Other Arts*, in Id., *Theory of Literature*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1963 (1942), p. 128.

out hesitation that “by comparing the arts we shall learn much about the characteristics of what concerns us most: the art of literature”<sup>36</sup>.

Historically, words have been defined as perfectly suited to render emotions and states of mind, while figurative painting has been praised for its ability to visualise objects that exist in the world: it is a truism, of course, but one with deeply rooted implications. Assumptions about the specific ways through which literature and the visual arts can achieve their highest degree of verisimilitude have been used to expose their diversity and establish a hierarchical relationship. The verbal medium has been credited with a greater ability to render the multifaceted variety of interior life; the visual medium has been defined as better suited to evoke the world in all its exterior manifestations. Writers reach the depths of the human mind and spirit; painters reproduce the realms of the visible: this is the presumption of verbocentrism.

The primacy of words has been reinforced by the consideration that visual art is less good at explaining itself than verbal art. In *Les Mots dans la Peinture* (1969) Michel Butor argued that the meaning of painting has been made more accessible through “pictorial pedagogy,” which has become so pervasive and overwhelming as to determine the aesthetic experience:

Toute notre expérience de la peinture comporte en fait une considération partie verbale. Nous ne voyons jamais les tableaux seuls, notre vision n'est jamais pure vision. Nous entendons parler des œuvres, nous lisons de la critique d'art, notre regard est tout entouré, tout préparé par un halo de commentaires [...]. De tels procédés de pédagogie picturale se répandent de plus en plus, et aucun musée aujourd'hui ne peut se considérer comme moderne, s'il ne propose à ses clients des audio-guides<sup>37</sup>.

Reading visual artefacts has become a cultural practice informed by verbocentrism: the habit of attributing verbal meaning to visual art is validated by the bias that images cannot be entirely comprehended without verbal aid. Interpretation of figurative artefacts demands linguistic mediation.

Elaborating on Edmund Burke's distinction between the suggestive vagueness of poetry and the clarity of painting, J.D. Merriman wrote *The Parallel of the Arts* (1972 and 1973) to explain that literature, painting, and sculpture possess specific mimetic abilities through which they achieve different forms of illusionism. Painting and sculpture capture the texture of the flesh, the brilliance of silk, the curve of a thigh, the sense of depth. Literature presents dialogues as if they were living speech and registers the rapid shifts of real thought. It can never generate the illusion of something that materially exists, as painting does: “Birds may have pecked Zeuxi's picture of grapes to bits, but no literary description can ever run a similar risk”<sup>38</sup>. Conversely, painting is less efficient in terms of narrative and requires non-pictorial verbal assistance, such as titles, epigraphs, and any extra-diegetic element<sup>39</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> H.P.H. Teasing, *Literature and the Other Arts: Some Remarks*, “Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature”, 12, 1963, p. 34.

<sup>37</sup> M. Butor, *Les Mots dans la Peinture*, Skira, Genève 1969, pp. 8, 9.

<sup>38</sup> J.D. Merriman, *The Parallel of the Arts (Part One)*, “New Literary History”, 31, Winter 1972, 2, p. 162.

<sup>39</sup> J.D. Merriman, *The Parallel of the Arts: Some Misgivings and a Faint Affirmation (Part Two)*, “New Literary History”, 31, Spring 1973, 3, p. 310.

The claim that the power of words is enhanced by their enormous meta-medial potentialities was reasserted throughout the second half of the twentieth century. The verbal code can speak of itself through itself and is the only one which can also speak of and for other codes. Unlike visual language, verbal language is vehicular, indispensable to communication. Interart dynamics, even when they are generated by nonverbal arts, presuppose that we speak and write of them.

Verbocentric notions have permeated comparative criticism, affecting the distinctions between a visual and a verbal work of art, suggesting that the former unfolds one, and one only, representation and requires that the observer apprehends it within the boundaries of a surface – canvas, screen, photographic print –, while reception of the latter evades strict spatial confinement. Furthermore, the assumption that literature is a system of representation more cerebral and layered than painting has supported the bias that visual expression may be appealing *per se* but becomes even more so when it is a source of creativity for writing and nourishes verbal expression.

Literature stood out as the pre-eminent discipline in the first conference on *Literature and the Other Arts*, held by the International Comparative Literature Association in 1979. Ulrich Weisstein showed a preference for the verbal code in his ground-breaking article *Comparing Literature and Art: Current Trends and Prospects in Critical Theory and Methodology*. His study of the interactions between word and image was founded on the belief that “Literature must be at the heart of what we do, whether it be as an equal partner and shareholder in a multimedia Verbund or whether it be the emittent or receiver of influences involving one or several of its siblings”<sup>40</sup>.

For Weisstein literature is at the top of a hierarchal system of the arts that encompasses eight verbal/visual typologies. Visual representations of verbal representations are of secondary interest, as transpires from his choice of including only illustration and the emblem, respectively defined as “1. Works of art which depict and interpret a story, rather than merely illustrating a text; [...] 7. Synoptic genres (emblem)”<sup>41</sup>.

The definition of illustration invites a closer inspection: it seems represented in the first typology and yet sounds ambiguous, because it refers to artworks that interpret a story, instead of simply illustrating it. It is difficult to think of an illustration that does not involve interpretation: the images that are supposed to ‘illustrate’ a literary text also create their own meaning.

In *Literature and the Arts* (1982), Weisstein thoroughly revised the definition of visual artworks inspired by verbal artworks and provided further specifications for illustration.

14. *Book illustration proper.*

15. *Paintings, drawings, and so on, that hark back to literary antecedents or exist in a literary context without being outright illustrations.* Here the literary critic or his-

<sup>40</sup> U. Weisstein, *Comparing Literature and Art: Current Trends and Prospects in Critical Theory and Methodology*, in *Literature and the Other Arts. Proceedings of the IXth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association*, Z. Konstantinovic – U. Weisstein – S.P. Scher – G. Grasl ed., 1981, pp. 20-21.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

torian, using the iconological method outlined by Panofsky, may benefit from the pictorial evidence of one or several literary texts.

16. A rather special case is that constituted by the multiple talent (*Doppelbegabung*)<sup>42</sup>.

A clear distinction is drawn between illustrations that appear in books and visual artworks connected to specific literary sources. Weisstein's remarkable taxonomy overcomes the limits of the *Geistesgeschichte*, which produced repertoires of analogies and differences between word and image too easily associated with certain historical periods. He goes beyond the search for sources known as *Quellenforschung* and the identification of themes defined as *Stoffgeschichte* or *Thématologie*, showing that the occurrence and circulation of a certain topos or motif in the verbal and visual arts must be explained in terms of the evolution of aesthetics. His classification of interart typologies is the most valuable outcome of the quest for all-encompassing systems of the arts, which arose from the theoretical work by scholars such as Walzel and Weis and gained momentum in the first half of the twentieth century. Times were not yet ripe for investigations focusing on both art theory and practice. Precise as they are, Weisstein's typologies show a reductive schematic aspect and indicate that any classification must be flexible to incorporate further elaborations. Moreover, although metamorphoses of literature are his main concern, the inclusion of only two forms of visual art connected with verbal art has generated the need for specific studies of illustration.

Over the last few decades, the comparative arts have moved away from literary-oriented approaches. While exploring how verbal and visual artists challenge and elude representation, Word and Image Studies have interrogated verbocentrism and examined the interplay of subservience and originality.

In *Iconology. Image, Text, Ideology* (1986) W.J.T. Mitchell has drawn attention to issues other than aesthetics. The ways in which verbal works of art are re-figured as paintings or illustrations have strong ideological implications. Any artwork that illustrates a text does interpret it, which means that the complex status of illustrations should be fully acknowledged. Dependence on, or escape from, the verbal source, connection with, or disconnection from, words, point to the existence of two forms of art and raise questions of autonomy. While being derivative, illustration can capture components of literariness that can be visually highlighted, enhanced, and metamorphosed. While being stimulated by another medium, illustration pursues specific goals.

Mitchell has investigated *ut pictura poësis* from the perspective of both words and images. In "Ekphrasis and the Other" (1994) he argued that "visual representation cannot represent itself; it must be represented by discourse"<sup>43</sup>. It is a very strong statement in favour of the meta-discursive ability exclusively possessed by language. To counterbalance the advantage of one medium over the other, in *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of*

<sup>42</sup> U. Weisstein, *Literature and the Arts*, in *Interrelations of Literature*, J.-P. Barricelli – J. Gibaldi ed., Modern Language Association of America, New York 1982, pp. 259-261.

<sup>43</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other", in Id., *Picture Theory*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1994, p. 157.

*Images*<sup>44</sup> (2004) Mitchell interrogates images: what they are, how they are conveyed and why they are represented can never be plain and neutral. Visual objects are not simply seen, they incorporate biases and can become iconic carriers of ideologies.

Ultimately Mitchell reframes in contemporary terms the question as to whether it is possible to reconcile the pictorialist tradition, according to which, as Addison claimed, writing should aim at pictorial effects in order to render the vividness of reality, and anti-pictorialist theories pursued by the Burke and the Romantics, according to whom verbal creativity should cultivate vagueness and ambiguity to arouse intense emotional responses.

Ekphrasis has been the object of James A.W. Heffernan's enquiry for years. *Museum of Words. The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*<sup>45</sup> (1993) offers some of the most illuminating insights into verbal representations of visual representations. Ekphrastic poetry claims to empower silent images, speaking for and with them, but in so doing binds them to verbal interpretation. By defining ekphrasis as the expression of an irreconcilable antagonism between the visual and the verbal systems of representation, Heffernan reinforces the idea that forms of interart creativity are destined to cause ever new rivalries between the Sister Arts. More recently in *Cultivating Picturacy. Visual Art and Verbal Interventions*<sup>46</sup> (2006), he presents a broad diachronic array of interart champions, from Leon Battista Alberti to contemporary abstract artists. While exploring verbal/visual creative minds, he proposes to build up a new critical vocabulary for visual studies: picturacy. Clearly modelled on literacy, picturacy highlights the critical capacity to interpret pictures as a necessary counterpart to the ability to read words. Further elaborating Heffernan's proposition, one could argue that nowadays being image savvy can be counted as a core rather than a complementary skill and may prove more valuable than being literate.

Iconocentrism, verbocentrism, and interart osmosis indicate that both word and image have won the paragone numerous times throughout the centuries. Whether poetry shall [not] be as painting remains a vital question<sup>47</sup>. One way of answering is to observe how they have been pitted against each other in the name of autonomy as opposed to reciprocity, of uniqueness as opposed to synergy throughout the Western history of literature and the arts. Can the paragone still exist, when South Korean digital comics known as webtoons are turned into TV series, reaching wide audiences across the globe? Retracing the intellectual history of *ut pictura poësis* in the present multimedia era reveals a continuum, in which the confrontation between pictures seeking to narrate stories and stories seeking to become iconic acquires ever new facets, showing that each art is in pursuit of singular expression and of other arts.

<sup>44</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2005.

<sup>45</sup> J.A.W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words. The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1993.

<sup>46</sup> J.A.W. Heffernan, *Cultivating Picturacy. Visual Art and Verbal Interventions*, Baylor University Press, Waco (Texas) 2006.

<sup>47</sup> *Picturing the Language of Images*, N. Pedri – L. Petit ed., Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge 2014.



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