

## LITERARINESS IN PIERO BIGONGIARI'S CONCEPTUALIZATION OF VISUAL ARTS

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper determines textual and visual representational correspondences between the artistic domains of literature and visuality in the ekphrastic interpretation of writer Piero Bigongiari, through which are defined and illuminated various aspects of figurality in the resonance with his own poetics, in addition to outlining the philosophical vein permeating the discourse in its arborescent structuring. Since in the physiognomy of Bigongiari's writings is inscribed interartistic transposition forming its constant matrix, in this paper the focus is established on fruitful comparisons due to equivalences between two fields of art, together with exemplifying the resulting interdisciplinary convergences, which then become usable in various social contexts, bringing to innovative theoretical philological and cultural insights. In analyzing the modalities according to which takes place literalization as the transformation of pictorial fact into poetical stance, highlighted are the author's volumes in which the guiding threads are constituted by art criticism in relation to literature. Within the corpus of Bigongiari's texts, the double essayistic and journalistic register will therefore be explored, maintaining an elaborate literary expression, and having cultural allure. At the same time, derivational forms such as diaristic notes will be underscored, deducible from intrinsic discursive traits. Literary cognitions therein are characterized by going beyond interart suggestiveness and giving immediately a metaphoric reading of the paintings. In such light will be observed Bigongiari's illustration of salient iconographic trends, by taking into consideration also his observations on pictorial tendencies and aesthetic concepts imbued with personal reminiscences and remarks belonging to the sphere of science. Artworks as written paintings of the real will thus be elaborated, pointing to the character of art in its pluridisciplinary nature in Bigongiari's literary vision. Likewise, Bigongiari's interest in the symbology of the paintings will be traced to his poetry and correlated to his translational activities. From that perspective, the poeticity of Bigongiari's study of visual arts will be explicated. Concomitantly, the ways in which lyrical imagery and self-reflexivity get reconceptualized within his literary prosastic production will be discerned, inducing further literary typification, contributing modern art historical examples such as symbolist lyricism evocative of cubism or impressionism with artistic relays regarding abstract art and art informel.

***Keywords:** Piero Bigongiari, literary thematization, expressiveness, pictorial aspects, interartistic perspective*

## INTRODUCTION

The present paper aims to shed light on the modalities according to which the writer Piero Bigongiari conceptualizes inventive research in the figurative sphere, by delineating at the same time its interweaving with literary aspects. In Bigongiari's prosastic discourse and poetry there are numerous references to the realm of literature at the intersection with visual arts. In that sense, the urge to write is also literary, since the author searches for such composite analogies in analyzing the artworks. Furthermore, at the level of structural features there is a mixture with the essayistic genre, as well as the treatise component for what pertains to the history of art. His writing is also impregnated with personal reminiscences and divagations, inviting to consider certain discursive elements apt to develop a vision idoneous to that of the artists, as regards the nature of writing conceptually correlated with the description of the pictorial contents. In particular, concerning the style of diaristic nature, as will be deduced subsequently from Bigongiari's literary works.

## RESULT

As author of numerous critical essays he creates the editions dedicated to art matters, *Il Seicento fiorentino* (1975; *Florentine Seventeenth Century*) [2] [14], and *Dal Barocco all'Informale* (1980; *From Baroque to the Informal*) [3], in which he tackles productively the intricacy of verbal and visual, exploring its expressive modalities both in the literary and figurative sense.

The volume of literary criticism *La poesia pensa. Poesie e pensieri inediti. Leopardi e la lezione del testo* (1999; *Poetry Reflects. Unpublished Thoughts and Poems. Leopardi and the Lesson of the Text*) [5], partially also belongs to the intersected domains of visibility and literature since, among its prominent traits, it thematizes the equivalences between these two artistic fields, regarding the transformation of the pictorial fact into poetical stance.

It is also characteristic of these writings an ekphrastic reflection on the semantic value of the figuration that determines the narrative structure, as will be further highlighted. He furthers these ideas in his salient 1994 work *Taccuino pittorico* (*Pictorial Notebook*) [4], having visibility as the thread of the volume and structurally containing essays of figurative criticism. As will be explicated in the examples of the essays that will be analyzed in this paper, the author as the narrator gives an immediately ekphrastic interpretation of the paintings, as a meditation on the viewing and reception of art [7]. It sometimes creates the sensation as if the painter were writing the image.

Likewise, it is a volume whose reflective style represents an emblematic case in so far as Bigongiari's criticism on works of art herein possesses the diaristic character, as an ulterior complementary category which could be constituted from the writers' diary notes, set up as an exercise of literary type. Exemplarily, this

book bears resemblance to Elio Vittorini's *Diario in pubblico* (1957; *Public Diary*) [9] [13] [15], since it is structured in such a way as to include in the expository plan the episodes centered on figurative syntax. Bigongiari's inclination to the diaristic thought can furthermore be characterized as having herein the nature of a notebook, also of a travel notebook, once published in volume, as defined by the author [4], and containing intersubjectively: "reflections, emotions, discoveries or confirmations of historical thought" in the "great fresco of the human operating" [4]. It refers to the intent of his study to draw up a notebook with a continuous, unitary character, although composed of essays conceived on various occasions which in some cases contain an indication of the month and year, and in which he also addresses the reader directly, for instance in a passage as "friend reader" [4], or exemplarily, by inviting the reader, to visit an art exhibition: "may our reader not miss such unrepeatability" [4].

There are indeed numerous references to the exhibitions whose background and subject are described in detail. That goes to show how pertinent the diary aspect is. Furthermore, it can be deduced from an intrinsic characteristics of the text, regarding diaristic references in the paintings described, as when dealing with the High Renaissance artistic production of Lorenzo Lotto, he introduces an intertextual parallel, by becoming reminiscent of his account book and diary *Libro di spese diverse* (1538-1556; the first edition of the book dates back to 1895 when Adolfo Venturi, an Italian art critic, published the manuscript under the title *Il libro dei conti* or in English *The Book of Accounts*, subsequently the other editions bearing the first mentioned title were made) [11].

In such regard, the component of autoreferentiality should be mentioned as being part of Bigongiari's critical discourse. For example, in an essay dedicated to the visual imagery of the contemporary painter Ennio Morlotti, bearing the title *Le rose di Morlotti* (*Morlotti's Roses*), the author briefly self-reflexively connects this pictorial motif to his own book of verses *La figlia di Babilonia* (*The Daughter of Babylon*), the first he wrote, published in 1942. In this poetic title it ought to be noted the echo of Psalm 137, and the same idea reappears in a poem by the mystical poet St. John of the Cross. At the same time, Bigongiari draws inspiration from a quote by William Shakespeare accompanying one of his own translations of Pierre de Ronsard, as a literary correlative of a figurative nucleus by Morlotti. Showing interest in the pictorial atmosphere of his paintings also in another essay dedicated to the artist Ennio Morlotti, Bigongiari goes to the thematics of the informal art, of which he recounts in the following way: "[...] the form drew from the original chaos, that is from its origins in which it was something still united with all other things, all the other possible occurrences, its own impulse towards its own unknown meanings" [4].

Before analyzing more specifically Bigongiari's critical concepts dedicated to the topic of the informal, ought to be discerned central aspects which constitute its core in the figurative and also literary domain. It is a term whose provenance

is from figurative arts (painting, sculpture), and also architecture, and this matter subsequently enters the poetic field. Informal art movement is another example in the modern Italian cultural panorama, after metaphysical painting and the current of magical realism, to which can be attributed the importance also in the literary sense, or put otherwise, of a direct influence of visual arts absorbed on the literary ground, and resulting inextricably with a new phenomenon.

The informalist practice is a movement of abstract art from which is omitted an explicit logical content (or these logical associations are posterior and depend on individual sensitivity), while the imaginative and affective side of the artwork remains present. A non-formal, or not yet formalized, art is in question, remained implicit, in which the sense of form, central in every work of art, does not arise disjunct from reality. Differently than much of artistic production (and that concerns particularly the figurativism, or said otherwise, the figurative tendency within the visual arts) in which the form is created based on a specific pre-existent idea, and consequently the final result is a representation of the reality, in this case, the artist creates the sign set in motion and art becomes an action field. That is to say, the form is generated from the gesture and action during the painting, and this gesture can also be liberatory. In that regard, it ought to be observed that the attention to the matter (which is informous, deprived of the precise form) in the creation of a painting is also typical. Besides the spots of color, in some cases the material becomes the true protagonist of a work of art.

In the wording of Bigongiari, referring here in particular to the critical essay dedicated to the visual arts, *Ut poesis pictura*, in the volume *La poesia pensa (Poetry Reflects)*, which implies a reversal of the Horatian saying 'ut pictura poesis', indicating the pictorial expression as a counterpart of poetry, the semantic range of the term informal suggests it is a painting "of sign, that is, no longer arising from the drawing but from the transfused impulse of the hand, thus overturning the compositional priorities" in which is privileged "conceptually meaningful over the meaning" [5]. The text continues with the hint to the materiality of this figurative approach. Whereas in the work of art was traditionally always the tendency "to hide its elaboration [...] in the *ne variatur* of the meaning reached, in the current conceptuality of art it is indeed the material variation that prevails over its absence of meaning, once the 'reason' of the form was refused in the performance" [5].

Bigongiari connotes the informal art in his diary notes contained in *Pictorial Notebook*, regarding the energy moving the informal, by defining the formless matter as what comes before the form, or put in other words, as a necessary and primordial aspect of the form, as what precedes it. This pictorial idiom is close to the American current of abstract art called *Action Painting*. Bigongiari comments on an exhibit by Jackson Pollock, as its representative, in an essay centered on his figurative oeuvre, whose role he considers to be of primary importance, expressing the idea of an organic space which at the same time reflects the archetypes. In the poetic sense, in the realm of literature, the informal

would mean that the accent is not put so much on the meaning as on the use of the word; while in his diaristic notations Bigongiari also analyzes conceptual art, and mention is made of abstractionism of Wassily Kandinsky.

Concomitantly, lyricism is exemplified in the passages of this book in which, elaborating on the details of the iconographic compositions, which represent a specificity of his critical approach to figurality, and thus seeking to define certain poetic-aesthetic aspects that he considers important in regard to the pictorial representation, in the interest he has for the symbology of the paintings, Bigongiari brings as illustration those artworks directly correlatable to lyric register. For example, when Bigongiari elaborates on the impressionism of Claude Monet, he introduces the category of poetic symbolism, making recourse, among other, to lyrical symbolicity of Stéphane Mallarmé, or to Guillaume Apollinaire whose art in the domain of the poetical word is permeated with elements of cubism. Moreover, he considers that Monet's painting could have at least partially influenced Kandinsky's abstraction and the art informel. This is due to the fact that Monet's sign is perceived as an "autonomous creative substrate of vision" [4].

The impressionism that the author considers in some way in syntony with the discoveries of quantum physics (in such regard, thoughts from the sphere of the sciences are treated), on the grounds that he considers it is a search for the sign itself as an atom in motion, or put otherwise, it seeks to capture the luminous essence, as a perceptual lightning: "It is that the vision moves, the vision 'occurs', revealing the interaction of space-time" [4]. So, in physics time begins to be considered as the fourth dimension of space. It is an invention then applied to the pictorial vision of the cubists, such as the simultaneous perception of the objects in its various parts.

Similarly, such pictorial search is contradistinctive of the palette of Paul Cézanne, like in his figurative representations of Mont Sainte-Victoire, in depicting chromatically the spots and the luminous component, that is, the pictorial expression of light. So remarks Bigongiari with reference to Cézanne: "And it is that Cézanne passes, from reality as a metaphor to be realized, to a metaphor to be realized as a reality" [4].

Furthermore, Bigongiari conceptually refers to the category of realism (persistent in both the figurative and literary fields), which again represents a direct literary graft through which an aspect of figurativism is defined. He also portrays the modern figurative oeuvre of Giorgio Morandi.

Franco Francese, a contemporary painter whose work can also be reframed from a literary perspective due to his *Diario intimo* (2002; *Intimate Diary*) [10], shows thematic proximity to the topics treated essayistically by Bigongiari. In his diaristic notations, F. Francese thematizes the informal painting which interests him because it represents the historical connections between situations, events and consciences, and there is inherent, as he suggests, the emotional-subjective side

together with the idea of the art as a testimony of truth. Within his pictorial poetics, the artist also absorbs some expressive impulses coming from the area of informalism (also defined as the "autonomy of the form"), as well as from American abstract expressionism, by giving, for instance, an interpretation of Pollock's pictorial approach. Likewise, he reflects on abstract painting as the development of plastic fantasy, making reference in another context to Kandinsky. He also introduces a reference to Cézanne and his figural construction through geometricity, and many other artists whose names were evoked (Morlotti, Morandi). As afore-explained, in the poetics of the informal the pictorial expression begins to be perceived as a sign, now having all of its autonomy of signification, as stated also by F. Francese, which also means that it involves a value which is its own making, constructing itself. It is significant in such sense the attention that Monet brings towards the registration of the slightest infractions, changes of light, phenomenal attitudes, and how they modify the impression given by the painted object or depicted figure.

In his critical essay on the pictorial approach of Man Ray, Bigongiari analyzes, also in this case, an expressive device concerning figurative disposition which concomitantly represents the application of a literary procedure deriving from modern poetry, or otherwise put, that of unusual combinations through which the poeticity is obtained. More specifically, Man Ray takes as the initial point in his artistic construction the idea of Lautréamont's metaphoric randomness (contained in his humorous remark on casual bringing closer of the raincover and the sewing machine potentially creating the poetic effect), which means that the figurative conception is lyricized. Analogous ideas are deducible from the interpretation of Renato Birolli, painter of figurative artistic expression, whose pictorial opus is in part also constituted by the paintings of an abstract signification. In his volume *Taccuini* (1960; *Notebooks*), Birolli thematizes Lucio Fontana and Kandinsky, considering the latter as immersed in a moral reality, "that which suggests the invisible to appear" [1] [6] [8].

As noted above, within Bigongiari's lyric production there are aspects evocative of the so-called informal in poetic sense, which are conveyed through his verses, envisioned with a tendency towards expressive experimentation. It will have compositional resonances in the tangled, complex way of conceptualizing the content in Bigongiari's verses, as well as in the focus placed on the relationship meaning-signifier, also on the basis of the structuralistic and semiological contributions of the period.

In those same years, literary procedures show linkage to the notions acquired with semiology, anthropology, sociology or structuralism. Observing closely, as for poetry, reaching back to 1939 the well-known critic Oreste Macrí wrote about the "non-formal reasons for poetry" anticipating future developments [12]. No differently than painting, here the informal refers to the conviction of the insufficiency of a solely one well-defined form. Here too the figuration is elusive and this translates into the problematization of the relationship, or into the

tendency to probe the chaos (what is tangled, complex). In the case of Bigongiari's poetics of the informal, he puts "into action" many signs. On the other hand, this term in Italy is also used by neo-avant-garde poets. In this context the exemplary text is *Laborintus* by Edoardo Sanguineti (1956), which represents a certain type of informal writing. However, unlike the authors of the informal such as Bigongiari who try to overcome chaos, the attitude of the exponents of the neo-avant-garde is different. Desamantization is typical, that is, the sign doesn't allude to any referent. The poet thus renounces the referential relationship, and from this arises a labyrinthine sensation. It is not a question of nihilism though, but rather of a search for plurisemantic value.

## CONCLUSION

Bigongiari comments on the figurative aspects such as pictorial tendencies and aesthetic concepts, as well as the central ideas within the iconographic production of the painters he writes about. On the ground of figurative-literary correspondences in Bigongiari's discursive style, regarding iconographical details in his ekphrastic characterizations, the sensation is created as if the visual artists were writing, explicating themselves with the depicted words or the written paintings of the real. It points to the character of art as the 'scriptura picta', where the text of reality becomes the pretext for painting. The reference to the literary component is thus constant, and in the analogous context should be evoked the philosophical vein permeating the discourse.

Besides creating prose literature, Bigongiari is also a prolific poet. Together with the unfolding of the narrative in the interdisciplinary intertextual sense, due to the transformational character of Bigongiari's understandings of polyvalent nature, is therefore comprised in the present research paper particularly the informal dimension of his poetry.

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