IV. Мова і культура

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Renaissance representational aesthetics and the verbal icon: An example from Shakespeare

ABSTRACT

In theatre semiotics, theatrical signs are divided into icons, indexes and symbols[1]. When we apply this division to historical contexts, we see how each sign is foregrounded upon the others depending on the artistic tendencies of the moment. According to this, the icon is the Renaissance sign *par excelence*: the time when man becomes a seeing subject, a spectator that looks at his/her own world as it is represented by means of the laws of similarity.

Renaissance artistic iconicity is reflected primarily in painting. But theatre, being also a visual spectacle, takes on the same kind of techniques. And here comes Shakespeare's theatre *on stage*: relying on this new status of man as the looking subject and of the visual sign as a close representation of reality, he incorporates in his dramatic discourse the verbal icon[2], that is, a rhetorical use that consists of painting with words what is usually rendered visually: descriptions that observe Leonardo's concept of perspective, intricate landscapes visualised merely by verbal virtuosity, vivid descriptions of paintings... it is the joint work of both techniques, verbal and visual, that makes such procedure an invaluable example of linguistic iconicity. Through concrete examples taken from Shakespeare's plays, this article will attempt to show the workings

of such strategy in the context of Renaissance representational aesthetics.

1. Foreword

The present paper is grounded on a historical moment, the English Renaissance, in which we can precisely start to see the first clear signs of language detachment from the philosophy of the icon. Medieval Christian thought, which had stated human language as a sign of divinity, kept a sacred, unalterable relation between res et verba (*nomina sint numina*). Renaissance linguists and theoreticians introduce a conscious denial of the divine origin of language, letting in the hands of man the faculty of playing with the newly discovered gap between words and things[3], indispensable for the spectacular flourishing of all the vernacular languages and literatures around Europe. In contrast, Renaissance visual codes, as we will see, make of resemblance with reality the basic principle of their action.

The central position of theatre as equally sharing visual and linguistic codes obliges us to take the semiotic definition of iconicity into a larger scope in which the uttered word establishes, on the stage, complex relationships with the shown (or, in theatrical terms, *ostended*) object. Bearing in mind this slight modification of our point of discussion in the theatrical context, and in the larger context of the Renaissance artistic precepts, we will see how Shakespeare leads us back to the mythical state of a perfect iconic confluence between discourse and reality, tracing in this way a return to the point of departure.

2. The verbal icon

Theatre is probably the literary genre that most explicitly shows the constant relation, as it is expressed by the term 'iconicity' considered in the general context of the Renaissance, between visual and linguistic modes of signification. Obviously, when I make this statement, I am thinking of the traditional division of literary genres in poetry, narrative and drama, and not in new artistic visual modes of expression like the cinema. During the following pages I would like to trace the way that will lead us, starting from semiotic theory, to the Renaissance use of the

rhetorical device of the verbal icon as it is found in Shakespeare's theatre. Thus, we will prove not only Shakespeare's skill when confronted with the Renaissance commonplace *ut pictura poesis* (another way of rendering the practice of iconicity in his time), but also, and more important, we will see the shaping, on the stage, of a whole aesthetic code primarily based on that very same concept of iconicity.

The theory of theatrical semiotics, anticipated in Saussure's definition of *sign* and thoroughly explained by Charles Sanders Peirce (1974), distinguishes three main kinds of theatrical signs, both visual and linguistic: icons, indexes, and symbols. Briefly summarised, we can recall that the icon establishes a relation of similarity with the referred object, as it happens, for example, in figurative art; it is, therefore, a motivated sign, being the motivation the similarity between the signifier and the referent. The index is also a motivated sign, although the link between signifier and referent is established by contiguity (smoke is an index of fire). The symbol, on the other hand, is an arbitrary sign, like the significance of colours. It is the user who establishes a non-motivated relation.

Compared to the Middle Ages, a time dominated by the indexical sign in the sense that every artistic manifestation was a sort of *pointing* towards divinity, European Renaissance reveals itself as primarily iconic: writers follow the examples of their classical predecessors (Erasmus defines poetic *mimesis* as a mixture of emulation and challenge), and painters and sculptors abandon God's figure for the sake of man's figure, according to the humanistic creed[4]. The key concept of this new aesthetics is not simply, however, the search for resemblance to objective reality: rather, it is the discovery of man as the seeing subject, the gaze outside the picture which, as if looking at his reflected image in a mirror[5], turns art into a representation of what he takes for reality:

> The Elizabethan world-picture thus depends upon what we might term a spectator consciousness, an epistemological model based upon an observer who stands outside of what he sees and in a position of mastery over it.[6]

Obviously, Renaissance iconic art reaches the stage, which abandons, in all Europe, the religious and allegoric tone of the

mystery and morality cycles in favour of a more professional theatre, made for and about man, and carefully conscious of the separation between the scene and the spectator's place. But in spite of the powerful visual transformations, this new theatre remains essentially linguistic, that is, amazingly conscious of the use and effect of words, sometimes joining word and image in the same metaphor, sometimes consciously giving up the latter (as it is very often the case in Elizabethan theatre, performed in a completely empty space), with the consequent reinforcement of the former as a creator of landscapes and images. It is precisely this second option, clearly recommended in contemporary treatises on rhetoric as "the pictorial use of words", and currently defined in semiotic circles as "the verbal icon", one of the most prolific, challenging and sophisticated examples of Shakespeare's discursive mastery.

But what exactly do we understand by verbal icon? According to Elizabethan rhetoricians, it was a device "much recommended for its efficacy as a locutionary *coup* upon the ear and the mind's eye"[7], and it consisted of a "mode of vivid description (also known as *enargeia* or *raepresentatio*) whereby discourse is enlivened and the auditor's imagination stimulated to reproduce an image (*counterfait*) of the described object"[8]. The desired effect, therefore, is the appeal to the mind's eye, that is, the stimulation of the spectator's ability to picture himself images created primarily by discourse.

Of clear linguistic origin, Shakespeare's use of the verbal icon nevertheless does not provide a substitution of the visual sign by any means: in the selected examples we will see how sometimes this figure of speech creates an image by itself, some others it works in accordance with an already present image, and in some cases it utterly contradicts what is being simultaneously visualised. In Shakespeare's hands, therefore, this device "acquires particular weight just *because* of its cooperation with literal visual signs. Indeed, the more 'visual' it becomes, the more it betrays its linguistic constitution"[9].

3. The verbal icon in Shakespeare

The particular use that Shakespeare does of the verbal icon in his plays shows us that "he is fond of a metaphor that in effect sums

up the relationship of the eye and the ear in his plays, whereby the audience is compelled to listen to what it sees and see what it only hears."[10]. The results of this procedure, as we will see, are surprisingly varied and always brilliant.

Let's start with physical descriptions (*prosopopeia*). The lavishness of costumes on the Elizabethan stage (an icon, on the other hand, of the importance of costume as a sign of distinction in the whole of society), counteracts the absolute absence of decoration, and it provides many comic turns in the discourse. A classical example is that of Petruchio's bizarre wedding gown in *The Taming of the Shrew*:

> Why, Petruchio is coming in a new hat and an old jerkin; a pair of breeches twice turned; a pair of boots that have been candle-cases, one buckled, another laced; and old rusty sword tan out of the town armoury, with a broken hilt and chapeless; with two broken points; his horse hipped...
> (III, 2, 41-45).

The linguistic description takes place immediately before visual appearance of the character, therefore heightening the comic expectations of the public to the point of exhilaration.

In contrast, another famous comic description, that of the cook Nell made by Dromio of Syracuse in *The Comedy of Errors*, is not supported by any visual counterpart. The hyperbolic allusions to Nell's fatness, therefore, will set her forever as a character only existing through the discourse:

> Syr. Antipholus. What complexion is she of?
> Syr. Dromio. Swart like my shoe, but her face nothing like so clean kept; for why? She sweats, and a man may go over-shoes in the grime of it.
>   (...)
> Syr. Antipholus. Then she bears some breadth?
> Syr. Dromio. No longer from head to foot than from hip to hip; she is spherical, like a globe; I could find out countries in her. (III, 2, 99-103).

We can also find both linguistic and visual simultaneity supporting each other, as it is the case in Falstaff's self description of the unbearable pains of his sweating bulkiness hidden inside a basket in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*:

> I suffered the pangs of three deaths. First, an intolerable fright, to be detected with a jealous rotten bell-wether; next, to be compassed like a good bilbo in the circumference of a peck, hilt to point, heel to head; and then to be stopped in like a strong distillation with stinking clothes that fretted in their own grease – think of that – a man of my kidney – think of that – that am as subject to head as butter; a man of continual dissolution and thaw... (III, 5, 99-108)

The event that Falstaff is putting vividly upon the spectators' eyes for the second time (they had a chance to see it in a previous scene), works not only as a comic tale, but also, and mainly, as a foregrounding (talking in theatrical terms), both visual and linguistic, of Falstaff's body as a pure sign: far from structural, psychological or other theories applied to theatrical characters, what counts here is the power of the physical as it is watched, smelled, felt, and put in words.

A double-way contradiction between physical description and visual appearance is best enacted in the scenes where female characters adopt a boy's disguise. In spite of their success in deceiving the rest of the characters, the latent sense of an ambiguous sexual status remains in the speech, as it happens, for instance, in Malvolio's description of Viola (Cesario in her male identity) in *Twefth Night:*

> [He is] not yet old enough for a man, nor young enough for a boy: as a squash is before 'tis a pescod, or a codling when 'tis almost an apple: 'tis with him in standing water, between boy and man. He is very well-favour'd, and he speaks very shrewishly. One would think his mother's milk were scarce out of him. (I, 5, 169-175).

The question is even more complicated when we consider the impact of these words upon the Elizabethan stage, where women's roles were played by young actors with shrill voices and delicate features and, in many cases effeminate behaviour[11]. Sexual ambiguity, therefore, trespasses the fictional stage and reaches the audience's world by the mere effect of Malvolio's discourse. Far from simply offering a casual description, what Shakespeare does is to confront both worlds (the dramatic and the real) through a current

though problematic issue in Elizabethan society (that of homo-sexuality and/or bisexuality).

All these comic examples of physical description, however illustrative of the different uses of the verbal icon, do not explicitly appeal to the Renaissance visual aesthetics, of which Shakespeare proves an equal master. And it is precisely in those instances in which the understanding of the Renaissance spectator's gaze is more accurately at stake, where the verbal icon abandons all attachment to real images and sets off in motion on its own, creating objects and landscapes by the sheer use of the word uttered upon an empty stage. Critics are unanimous, for instance, when they see, in Edgar's description of the Dover hills for his blind father Gloucester in *King Lear* (*topographia*), an astonishing regard for Leonardo and Alberti's laws of optical perspective[12], that is, the capacity of the human eye to see things in relative distance and size:

> Come on, sir; here's the place: stand still. How fearful
> And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low!
> The crows and choughs that wing the midway air
> Show scarce so gross as beetles; half way down
> Hangs one that gathers sampire, dreadful trade!
> Methinks he seems no bigger than his head.
> The fishermen that walk upon the beach
> Appear like mice, and yond tall anchoring bark
> Diminish'd to her cock, her cock a buoy
> Almost too small for sight. (IV, 6, 11-20)

The effect of words, in this case, is doubly in debt with pictorial practices, as neither the spectators, from their seats, nor Edgar, from his place in fiction (let's not forget that he is making up this description to avoid his father's suicide), are really visualising what the lines depict with so much accuracy.

Further in this line, we find an example of Shakespeare's knowledge of Italian Renaissance painting rules; in the Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew*, the description of imaginary pictures (*ekphrasis*) to Sly, the stunned beggar turned into a lord for a few hours, runs as follows:

> 2nd Servant. Dost thou love pictures? We will fetch thee straight
> Adonis painted by a running brook,

> And Cytherea all in sedges hid,
> Which seem to move and wanton with her breath
> Even as the waving sedges play wi'th'wind.
> Lord. We'll show thee Io as she was a maid.
> And how she was beguiled and surprised,
> As lively painted as the deed was done. (Induction II, 45-52)

In this description we find typical Renaissance precepts[13]: painting must consist of the representation of an action performed by real or imaginary characters, mostly taken (as this is the case) from mythology, that move around a delimited, concrete space, and play their roles in a determined event (Adonis running across a brook, Cytherea hidden among the sedges, Io being kidnapped by Jove in the midst). This superb example of pictorial technique rendered exclusively in words sets off from a principle of observation opposed to Medieval stillness: objects and characters relate with the environment as if they were upon a hypothetical stage. We don't know if Shakespeare was bearing in mind real pictures or simply transcribing stories from his very dear Ovid, but he was certainly showing an unusual awareness of continental artistic codes.

The step from simple physical description, supported or not by visual models, to more elaborate discursive translations of imaginary objects and landscapes meets a further challenge in a play like *Midsummer Night's Dream*. The contrast between the settings of Athens and the enchanted forest conveys something else than physical displacement. On abandoning the civilised spot, spectators are magically transported, by a sort of rhyming, alliterative spell ("Over hill, over dale, / Thorough bush, thorough briar", the fairies whisper) into the realm of pure language. We can see it through a scene in which Titania, the queen of fairies, scolds her husband Oberon, who has accused her of having flirted with Theseus. The domesticity of the argument certainly sounds quite different from what could be expected in her speech:

> And never, since the middle summer's spring,
> Met we on hill, in dale, forest or mead,
> By paved fountain, or by rushy brook,
> Or in the beached margent of the sea,
> To dance our ringlets to the whistling wind,

> But with thy brawls thou hast disturb'd our sport.
> (...)
> Therefore the moon, the governess of floods,
> Pale in her anger, washes all the air,
> That rheumatic diseases do abound.
> And thorough this distemperature we see
> The seasons alter: hoary headed-frosts
> Fall in the lap of the crimson rose;
> And on old Hiems' thin and icy crown,
> An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds
> Is, as in mockery, set...
> (...)
> An this same progeny of evils comes
> From our debate, from our dissension;
> We are their parents and original. (II, 1, 81-117).

Titania does not even try to deny her relation with Theseus, but rather, she evokes it through the natural elements that kept them both in happiness (the forest, the fountains, the wind...) Nature, formerly an ally, has been artificially altered, she argues, by the effect of their constant fight (a biblical and literary argument that could be traced back to Adam and Eve's expelling from the paradise). The moon, a cultural icon *per se* in the literary tradition (always associated with water), presides this displacement of the seasonal cycles.

Apart from the mythical traces of this issue, what the queen's speech expresses is such a close relation with the natural world, that for an instant, it creates the illusion of having overcome the gap traditionally acknowledged between the words and their referents: "Here it is uncorrupted nature herself putatively speaking, the forest presenting itself, as it were, through the discourse of what in effect are its secret parts."[14].

Indeed, the way in which Titania expresses herself in these lines reveals the quality of a language that we could describe as natural, or rather, *immediate*, that is, free from mediators. In her depiction of nature, Titania, as a speaking character, shows a perfect symbiosis between the discourse and the external world, starting from the mere form in which it is uttered. Thus the stanza, despite the occasional enjambment, keeps a rhythmic scheme made of iambic beats, like an enchanting song. Alliterations present

onomatopoeic qualities, like the sound of flowing water ("rushy brook"), the wind ("whistling wind"), the disruptive effect upon harmony ("brawls / disturb'd"), or the sinestesic serenity of a gentle image ("sweet summer buds"). Natural agents, besides, acquire human qualities (the moon is pale with anger, ice falls upon the rose lap, the old winter is mockfully crowned). Every line, every beat, every image invites the spectator not simply to picture for himself the forest disarray but, above all, to abandon himself to this world of fantasy.

Apparently, we may be fostering a contradiction: we are defining as natural language a kind of discourse that does not even remotely try to imitate real (or everyday) speech, but that follows conventionally stylised verse and rhyming patterns. The point, already defended by a number of scholars, is that Shakespeare, in this attempt to depict the natural world through literary sophistication, is fulfilling a double function: he is partly reviving the orphic myth, (as it is found, once more, in Ovid, and recreated in the Renaissance through neoplatonism) of the creation of nature by the mere invocation of it through the chosen word, the spell, the sacred rhyme; and partly carrying the possibilities of the discourse to the boundaries of the dream, where everything is newly created, unaware of the referential world. A quality shared by other plays with natural landscapes like *As You Like It*, this discursive practice, surpassing even representational modes,

> aspires not only to the vivid evocation of the Arcadian scene, but also and above all to some approximation of a pristine *lingua adamica*, marking off speech in the edenic golden world from the post-Babelian decadence of our own verbal commerce. And of course, the language of Eden is necessarily iconic, springing as it does fresh and direct from newly moulded nature[15].

This idea of returning to the primeval time, to make a single piece of word and represented reality ("instead of re-creating, or re-presenting the world, the world is brought into being"[16], probably constitutes the most elaborate form of the verbal icon, which has not only abandoned all links with a present visual image, but also with an imaginary one to which the spectator's mind's eye could have recourse, in order to create a new one through the mere action of the original word.

4. Conclusion

In the introduction to this exposition it was stated that the Renaissance is the time in which the gap between signifiers and referents, or words and things, becomes fully acknowledged. This acknowledgement, however, is far from conveying any shreds of the pessimism which, from the seventeenth century onwards, has constantly questioned the trustworthiness of language. Quite the contrary, the possibility of playing with the signifiers, of using the rhetorical tools to take language to unknown limits, and of picturing in words every single feature of a real or imaginary object allows poets and playwrights to mould language into a faithful reflection of their own world.

In the case of Shakespeare, as we have seen, the rhetorical use of the verbal icon proves a resourceful device, both visual and linguistic. But if his contribution to the employment of iconicity in theatre has gone any steps further than in his contemporaries, it is very likely to be found in *Midsummer Night's Dream.* When the play removes the spectators from Athens to the forest, language loses, to a large extent, its links with the referential world, that is, it stops being forced to represent reality, or at least to settle it within a fixed system of recognisable setting, time and space. Abandoned to its own criterion, then, language becomes able to create its own reality, with the consequent feeling of discursive vividness that is conveyed to the public. The dream of the forest, therefore, by denying referentiality, turns into the most perfect example of the iconic use of the word, as it must have been in its origin. Thus, the more Puck the goblin insists to the spectators, in the epilogue, "That you have but slumber'd here / While these visions did appear", the further they are rapt in a powerful, mesmerising linguistic enchantment.

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[1]*Peirce C. S.* La ciencia de la semiótica. – Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión ,1974.
[2]*Elam K.* Shakespeare's Universe of Discourse: Language Games in the Comedies. – Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
[3]*Trousdale M.* Shakespeare and the Rhetoricians. – London: Scholar Press, 1982. – P.31.
[4]*Hulse C.* The Rule of Art: Literature and Painting in the Renaissance. – Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

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[6]*Freedman B*. Staging the Gaze: Postmodernism, Psychoanalysis, and Shakespearean Comedy. – Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991. – P.10.

[7]*Elam K*. – Op.cit. – P.61.

[8]Ibid. – P.58.

[9]Ibid. – P.64.

[10]*Dundas J. H.* Pencils Rhetorique: Renaissance Poets and the Art of Painting. – Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1993. – P.54.

[11]*Traub V.* Desire and Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama. – London: Routledge,1992.

[12]*Goldberg J.* "Perspectives: Dover Cliff and the Conditions of Representation". In *Shakespeare and Deconstruction*, D.G.Atkins and D.M.Bergeron (eds). – N.Y.: American University Press, 1988. P.245-265.

[13]*Gombrich E.H*. La imagen y el ojo. – Madrid: Alianza, 1987.

[14]*Elam K.* Ibid. – P.140.

[15]Ibid. – P.139.

[16]*Kiernan P.* Shakespeare's Theory of Drama. – Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. – P.14.

All the references to Shakespeare's works are taken from *The Arden Editions of the Works of William Shakespeare*. – London: Routledge.