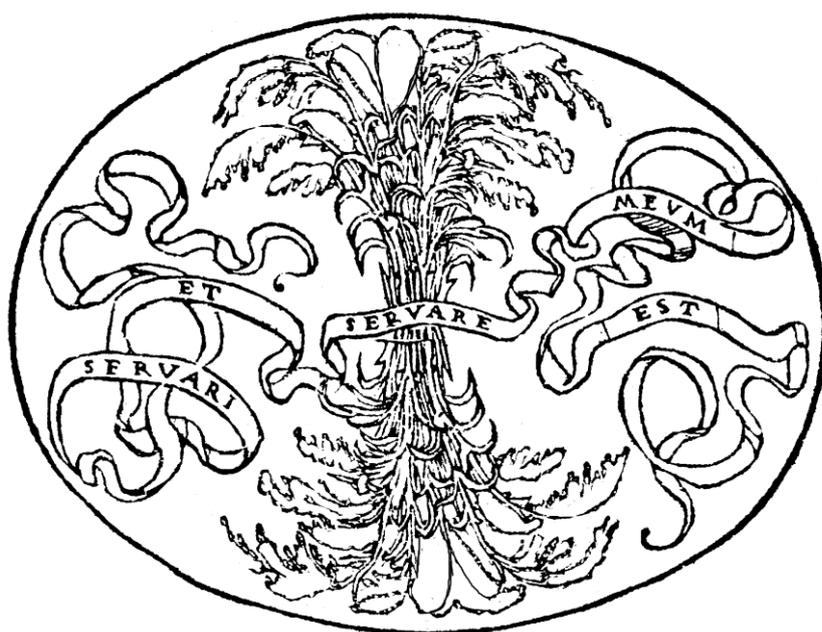


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## MANIFESTING DIONYSUS AT THE LOUVRE: BERENSON IN PARIS, CA. 1892

In 1892 Bernard Berenson and Mary Smith Costelloe arranged a visit to Paris with the poet-dramatists, Edith Cooper and Katharine Bradley. The episode reveals a remarkable facet of the Berenson story: the young aesthete's identification with Dionysus<sup>1</sup>. For Berenson, the Greek god represented a philosophy of pleasure that underpinned Berenson's religion of art, which he called «IT». «IT» was based on his own psychophysiological experiences of visual phenomena and his ability to inculcate these pleasurable experiences in others through his charismatic form of art interpretation. Edith Cooper (1862-1913) and Katharine Bradley (1846-1914) were chief among Berenson's early followers. They were enthralled by the young bohemian and were awakened to visual art by the experiences he led them through. The relationship between Berenson and the two poets began in Paris in 1890 and culminated in the 1892 visit there. The poets were to be offered «guidance to an understanding of recent art and Morellian help in the Louvre»<sup>2</sup> and the foursome would reside together in the borrowed apartment of Mary's brother, Logan Pearsall Smith (1865-1946).

For Anglo-Saxons generally, Paris was an imaginative space that offered freedom from the perceived narrowness, pragmatism, and duty associated with home. But more than simply providing culture and freedom, Paris, and in particular Paris Bohemia, offered the necessary atmosphere for creative personal reinvention. In contrast with London, the French capital gave Berenson a venue to develop the identity and practices that would delineate his remarkable career. For Cooper and Bradley, the 1892 trip was a sacred pilgrimage which they hoped would yield not only a greater understanding of visual art, but a greater sense of sacred purpose in their lives. This article will re-examine Berenson's identification with Dionysus and his relationship with Cooper and Bradley, relying principally on material from the poets' twenty-nine volume shared literary journal, «Works and Days»<sup>3</sup>. The poets and Berenson developed a curious, creative relationship out of which emerged the peculiar but vivid figure of Berenson's Dionysian persona. I will suggest that Berenson's identification with Dionysus was the result of a philosophical commitment: by the early 1890s he was reading Nietzsche closely. For Nietzsche, Dionysus represented the new god who ascended with modernity and embodied a gospel of intellectual freedom. This concept of Dionysus allowed Berenson to simultaneously delineate a philosophy of pleasure distinct from the aestheticism of Walter Pater (and Oscar Wilde) and to navigate his own understanding of modernity at a critical time of intellectual and professional formation.

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<sup>1</sup> Martha Vicinus has written compellingly about this topic, but primarily from the point of view of Michael Field's gender and sexual identity: VICINUS 2009.

<sup>2</sup> BL ADD MS 46780, 114.

<sup>3</sup> «Works and Days» (BL ADD MS 46776-46804) spans 1868-1914 and contains personal reflections, drafts of poems, travel itineraries, occasional daybook-style entries, lists of books read, and transcriptions of important correspondence. It was deposited at the British Library in 1942. The balance of Michael Field's literary remains are in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

*Michael Field and Berenson*

Cooper and Bradley were known pseudonymously as Michael Field and were romantic and creative partners (as well as relatives), who used their independent income to pursue their art of poetry and neo-Greek drama<sup>4</sup>. Their early works were well received, but when Michael Field was unmasked as two female co-authors in 1884 their critical reception suffered. In London, they travelled in the same aesthetic circles as Berenson, and shared with him a fervent commitment to the 'Greek' ideals of Victorian Hellenism<sup>5</sup> and a deep appreciation of Walter Pater and his tentative, if vivid philosophy of refined, aesthetic Epicureanism<sup>6</sup>. Inherent in Paterian aestheticism was an understanding of pleasure as «spiritually and philosophically enhancing»<sup>7</sup> and a commitment to intellectual freedom in the face of the perceived moralism and limited cultural inclinations of the mid-Victorians<sup>8</sup>.

Though Cooper and Bradley were both older than Berenson, and he at times played the role of protégé, they believed him to be an intellectual trailblazer. They came to refer to him as «The Doctrine» in honor of the new understanding they felt he was ushering into the world. Berenson and Cooper had a visceral attraction to each other that frequently threatened to overwhelm the limited confines of their social interactions. They also had a great spiritual sympathy: later in life he referred to her touchingly as his «sister soul»<sup>9</sup> and once openly lamented she had not «given up [her] life and followed him»<sup>10</sup>. In his biography of Berenson, Samuels's treatment of Berenson's professional development rightly follows the history of the art critic's collaboration with Costelloe<sup>11</sup>. However, in the early 1890s, Cooper was Costelloe's apparent rival as Berenson's chief intellectual collaborator. Cooper was temperamentally more attuned to Berenson's art-religion and the visceral art experiences that animated it. Once, Cooper proudly recalled how Berenson referred to her as his St. John while referring to Costelloe as his St. Luke<sup>12</sup>: a comparison favorable to Cooper as the prophetic Revelator compared to Costelloe, the more prosaic record-keeper. Cooper's devotion to Berenson is evident in her recitation of Berenson's spiritual journey, by which he revealed his true identity as a prophet of Hellenism.

Once he was a Methodist, – he was born a Jew – he has defended Mahomet, he has practiced Buddhism – last spring he entered a monastery as if he were in retreat, and endured the full Lenten rigours: but he is ever Greek and Olympus is real to him as Christ to others<sup>13</sup>.

After the 1892 trip to Paris, Cooper nearly broke with Bradley, but in the end decided to remain in part to preserve the art they created together<sup>14</sup>. By the mid-1890s, the poets' relations with Berenson had become strained, due in part to Costelloe's antagonism towards Michael Field. After 1895, they continued to correspond but would only see each other again after Costelloe and Berenson had married in 1901.

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<sup>4</sup> For a recent review of bibliography on Michael Field, see BRISTOW 2010.

<sup>5</sup> OLVERSON 2009.

<sup>6</sup> For Berenson and Pater, see BAROLSKY 1984 and COLBY 2014. For Michael Field and Pater see PAREJO VADILLO 2000.

<sup>7</sup> OLVERSON 2009, p. 773.

<sup>8</sup> DOWLING 1994.

<sup>9</sup> Berenson to Edith Cooper, 19 December, 1909, The Bernard and Mary Berenson Papers, Biblioteca Berenson, Villa I Tatti. The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies (from now on B.B.M.B.).

<sup>10</sup> BL ADD MS 46782, 93.

<sup>11</sup> SAMUELS 1979.

<sup>12</sup> BL ADD MS 46782, 93.

<sup>13</sup> BL ADD MS 46779, 47.

<sup>14</sup> BL ADD MS 46780, 134.

As Martha Vicinus has shown, Cooper and Bradley believed that Berenson was a manifestation of Dionysus in a more than merely figurative sense<sup>15</sup>. Genteel neo-pagans, the poets held a fervent, creative devotion to the Dionysian ideology of *eros* and enthusiasm. In their neo-Greek dramas, they explored the effects of the passions the god inspired and the tragic consequences of their evasion. References to Berenson as Dionysus are liberally scattered throughout Cooper and Bradley's diary and correspondence in the early and mid-1890s. The pair saw themselves as Bacchantes. Vicinus explains this tendency:

Drawing from classical mythology, [Cooper and Bradley] defined themselves as Maenads or Bacchantes, the female followers of Dionysus. The worship of Dionysus was an artistically freeing fantasy, enabling the poets to celebrate women's bodies without sentimentality. They created a shrine to Bacchus in their garden, and no higher praise could be given to a friend or animal than to call him Bacchic<sup>16</sup>.

In Berenson, Cooper and Bradley believed they had found an idol worthy of their devotion. The fantastical idea of Berenson as Dionysus was rooted in the trio's shared aesthetic culture. The forces of *eros* and enthusiasm that defined the Dionysian cult were also the forces that animated aestheticism in general, even if strained through the fine mesh of Paterian Epicureanism. Along with other Paterians such as Oscar Wilde and Arthur Symonds, Michael Field and Berenson were members of the same fin-de-siècle circles where performance lent literary gatherings the quality of spectacle. Cooper once compared Berenson's style of discourse to that of a tragic actor: «his eyes, as he spoke, had something in them, like an actor's realization of a sublime "part"»<sup>17</sup>. Berenson's discursive performances were animated by his inner psychophysiological apparatus. His visceral enthusiasm was telegraphed outward as powerful charisma that, to Michael Field, suggested the alluring comparison with Dionysus. Paris, more so than London, appears to have been a propitious venue for their idol, as if his powers were stronger there.

### *Paris*

Paris had been the first stop on Berenson's 1887 post-graduate tour of Europe. He settled in the *Quartier Latin* where the American expatriate colony gathered<sup>18</sup>. The presence of Harvard colleagues and Bostonian connections in the French capital allowed Berenson to begin establishing the social networks that would eventually help him launch his career as an art expert<sup>19</sup>. But until 1890, Berenson still aspired to be a writer and, like Henry James, to publish literary criticism and fiction in order to support himself abroad. A linguist by training, Berenson quickly improved his French and began devouring French literature by 19<sup>th</sup> century authors: Flaubert, Zola, Baudelaire, Huysmans, Mallarmé and Verlaine<sup>20</sup>. These authors were also markers of cultural affiliation for the young bohemian. In 1888, he contemplated a translation of Baudelaire's *Poèmes en Prose* for an American publisher, which he knew would be provocative and possibly scandalous<sup>21</sup>. In an 1890 letter to Costelloe, Berenson used a reference to Baudelaire's *Litanies à Satan* as a statement of identity: he confessed that he had once considered himself one of the *exilés* who honored the *Prince des Exilés*, Baudelaire's figure

<sup>15</sup> VICINUS 2009.

<sup>16</sup> VICINUS 2004, p. 99.

<sup>17</sup> BL ADD MS 46783, 78v.

<sup>18</sup> HIRSHLER 2007.

<sup>19</sup> SAMUELS 1979, pp. 52-66.

<sup>20</sup> SAMUELS 1979, pp. 52-59.

<sup>21</sup> HADLEY 1989, p. 15.

of Satan from *Les Fleurs du Mal*<sup>22</sup>. For Berenson, Gustave Flaubert represented the height of literary expression and in the *Correspondance*, of cultural perception. He read and re-read Flaubert throughout the early 1890s and continued to cherish his work even after abandoning modern French authors in favour of ancient and early modern literature<sup>23</sup>.

By 1890 Berenson had decided against a literary career and dedicated his life to art.<sup>24</sup> In that year, he began making annual summer visits to Paris. After establishing connections with leading connoisseurs in Italy and demonstrating his cultural acumen, he received the blessing of Giovanni Morelli (1816-1891). With Morelli's encouragement as well as that of Jean Paul Richter (1847-1937) and Gustavo Frizzoni (1840-1919), Berenson was determined to establish a career as a professional connoisseur and continue the important work of systematically identifying the art of the Italian Old Masters.

It was in 1890, during a visit to the Louvre on his way from Italy to London, that Berenson first met Cooper and Bradley. They were introduced to him by a shared acquaintance, Louise Moulton (1835-1908). Moulton was a well-known New England poet who regularly spent the summer Season in London and from there traveled the Continent. She had known Berenson since at least 1889<sup>25</sup>. In a later diary entry, Cooper described Moulton as Berenson's «woman helper of yesterday» compared to Costelloe, «his woman helper of today»<sup>26</sup>. The group met on the 10<sup>th</sup> of June in one of the Louvre's Early Italian picture galleries<sup>27</sup>. The poets noted the meeting in their shared diary and described Berenson as «a young Russian qualifying to become an art historian»<sup>28</sup>. In presenting his credentials, Berenson may have highlighted his Morellian education: as Cooper later recorded, Berenson described how the great man «used to teach Bernhard with the boy's head on his shoulder»<sup>29</sup>. The «young Russian» had an alluring aspect, with eyes that were «beautiful with the tints of Italy» and «an eagerness to charm»<sup>30</sup>. Before they met Berenson, Cooper and Bradley had been visiting the Louvre galleries to seek out works with Bacchic significance, noting down relevant iconography and titles such as Correggio's «Faun's Punishment» (*Allegory of Vices*)<sup>31</sup>. Once they met Berenson their notes record his connoisseurial opinions and biographic information he had gleaned from Vasari. They followed the first visit with another the next day: «A Long morning with the Italian Pictures in the Louvre, instructed by Mr. Berinson [sic]»<sup>32</sup>. In total, they met with Berenson on four occasions in five days, sometimes with Moulton and her travelling companion, Arthur Symons, and sometimes alone. After one final visit on June 15<sup>th</sup> to see «our beloved sculptures and pictures at the Louvre», the poets departed for Italy armed with a list of paintings Berenson recommended they study, including Botticelli's *Primavera*.

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<sup>22</sup> Mary Berenson, *Life of Bernard Berenson, 1890-1929* (unpublished), B.B.M.B.

<sup>23</sup> BODLEIAN, MS. ENG. LET. D. 408, 90.

<sup>24</sup> SAMUELS 1979, pp. 97-105.

<sup>25</sup> The earliest surviving letter from Berenson to Moulton is dated July 6, 1889. LOUISE CHANDLER MOULTON PAPERS, 1852-1908, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

<sup>26</sup> BL ADD MS 46779, 58.

<sup>27</sup> BL ADD MS 46778, 134v.

<sup>28</sup> BL ADD MS 46778, 134v.

<sup>29</sup> BL ADD MS 46780, 107.

<sup>30</sup> BL ADD MS 46780, 112.

<sup>31</sup> BL ADD MS 46778, 45.

<sup>32</sup> BL ADD MS 46778, 134v.

*From Faun to Idol*

Upon their return to London in August, the poets began to socialize with Berenson in literary London circles and at the Costelloe's house in Grosvenor Street. One day in February, 1891, Berenson and the poets visited the National Gallery. Echoing their Louvre experience, Bradley exclaimed in her diary: «Ah, *there* [that is, in the galleries], how great, how simple, how happy he is! He persuades one to enter into his experiences as an orator persuades one to enter into his convictions»<sup>33</sup>. In front of works of art, Berenson displayed an earnestness combined with erudition that the poets clearly found enchanting. But he also allowed his interlocutors to enter into his own powerful experiences of works of art and this distinguished him in the minds of Cooper and Bradley. They felt transformed and elevated by these encounters.

When Berenson encountered the poets in London in 1891 he told them not only that he admired their work, but also that he saw himself as their Faun from *Callirrhoë*. Berenson had first read Michael Field's well-reviewed tragedy, *Callirrhoë* (1884), in 1888 and wrote to his correspondent, Isabella Stewart Gardner, that it was «full of the most exquisite poetry»<sup>34</sup>. The drama follows the story of the Bacchic priest, Coresus, who falls in love with the chaste Calydonian maiden, Callirrhoë, and attempts to convert her to his religion. When he fails, he calls on Dionysus to send a plague to smite Calydon, which is spared only when the citizens demand the sacrifice of Callirrhoë herself. Berenson added that he knew nothing else in literature to equal the character of the Faun: the woodland playmate of Coresus, who embodied natural wonderment and innocence. After their visit to the National Gallery Berenson announced to Cooper and Bradley his sympathy with the Faun. Bradley writes: «After the gallery – a drive in Hyde Park – talk of art and life all the way. M. Berenson [sic] assures us he is the Faun, the Faun of our *Callirrhoë*. He goes about enjoying himself – his mission is to make other fauns»<sup>35</sup>. The poets well may have welcomed this revelation as a flattering affirmation of their creative powers, as if they had conjured him from their art.

Berenson's physical appearance confirmed his identification with the Faun. As Cooper writes, Bernard's brow and hair have «something deliciously pagan about them»<sup>36</sup>; his «glance is close and naïve, without sympathy, like a Faun's»<sup>37</sup>. When Bradley reflected back on their first meeting in Paris in June of 1890 she surmised, «Last summer “there was no doubt in him, no fear.” He was a piece of pure, unflawed paganism»<sup>38</sup>. Berenson's appearance was an important part of his allure to Cooper, and confirmed for her his natural intellectual gifts. She located Bernard's distinctiveness in the charm of his eyes. He «glowed with eyes that hide their light and then scintillate like an aspiring... flame»<sup>39</sup>. «His eyes are as if polished with the activity of their vision and full of joy their service has made perfect. His lips open like ripe pomegranates filled with seed»<sup>40</sup>. Berenson's physical appeal to Cooper was allied with his piercing intellect and vivid discourse. He embodied the animated spirit they had come to worship as Bacchic.

Between their first meeting in Paris in 1890 and their 1892 summer sojourn there, Cooper and Bradley began to conceive of Berenson not just as a faun, but also as a manifestation of Dionysus. In a diary entry, Cooper records a fevered dream in which Berenson appears at once as himself and as an avatar of the god.

<sup>33</sup> BL ADD MS 46779, 19v.

<sup>34</sup> HADLEY 1978, p. 15.

<sup>35</sup> BL ADD MS 46779, 19v.

<sup>36</sup> BL ADD MS 46779, 43v.

<sup>37</sup> BL ADD MS 46779, 52.

<sup>38</sup> BL ADD MS 46779, 19.

<sup>39</sup> BL ADD MS 46778, 102v.

<sup>40</sup> BL ADD MS 46779, 43v.

I had a dream last night.

I thought Bernie invited us to drink tea before some kind of celebration in which he was to take part. He was as irritatingly beautiful as he has ever been. I left the room, often to escape my admiration. [. . .] After a while Sim [Katharine] and I were sitting with many others in an open-air walled enclosure, watching curious worshippers and members come in, their heads bowed and their robes trailed on the grass. A coffin was carried with stately slowness and laid under an altar – down the vista of this temple, unoppressed by roof. I saw a scarlet panoply advance, the edges gilded and tassled. I knew that Dionysus walked underneath and that the part of the young god was taken by Bernie. The assembly rose and sang “O God, our help in ages past, Our hope for years to come.” Sim stepped fearlessly in front of the initiated and said in a voice of stern protest, “Edith, don’t you sing” – nevertheless I heard my voice like a lark’s, high and irrepressible<sup>41</sup>.

The narrative of the dream proceeded from social convention to performance, to the revelation that Berenson was indeed the embodiment of the god, being invested with the power to overcome his worshippers. In the diary, the description appears almost as evidence of Berenson’s divine charisma, as if only a dream could reveal such a truth.

Despite knowing the tragic possibilities that worshipping Dionysus could bring, Cooper and Bradley sought out their idol at every opportunity, in part because this benefited their art: by early 1892, the poets had embarked upon a new literary work, *Sight and Song*, to render into written form the art experiences Berenson had inspired in them<sup>42</sup>. The trip to Paris in 1892 was to help advance this work, as they sought to discuss drafts of the book, revise, and publish. A four-hundred-copy edition would be printed by the end of the year. However, the stated purpose of the 1892 Paris trip was to gain the promised «guidance to an understanding of recent art and Morellian help in the Louvre»<sup>43</sup>. In addition to regular visits to the Italian galleries in the Louvre, they planned to visit the *Salon des Independants* to learn about contemporary art.

While the Paris trip had a clearly defined purpose, it was, for the poets, a sacred pilgrimage to see their idol and, through the medium of art interpretation, to gain new Bacchic knowledge. They made elaborate preparations, including Cooper’s purchase of a new hat, «wreathed in Bacchic fashion with ivy, and bright with scarlet bows»<sup>44</sup>. They read romantic poetry to stir their enthusiasm. Keats’ *Endymion* and *Song of the Indian Maid* offered passages to express their exalted aspiration:

We have been reading Keats.  
 “An endless fountain of immortal drink,  
 Pouring unto us from the heaven’s brink.”  
 With Morelli and chastened hearts we got to join  
 “Bacchus, young Bacchus! good or ill betide,  
 We dance before him through kingdoms wide:  
 Come hither, lady fair and joined be  
 To our wild minstrelsy”<sup>45</sup>.

As they left England for the Channel crossing Cooper hymned, «Now with an ache I turn from England toward Dionysus. I lift my voice to sing. Oh young Dionysus!»<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> BL ADD MS 46779, 142v-143. The Bacchic invocation is derived from an 18th century hymn popular in Methodist circles, «O God, our help in ages past».

<sup>42</sup> BL ADD MS 46780, 124.

<sup>43</sup> BL ADD MS 46780, 114.

<sup>44</sup> BL ADD MS 46780, 101.

<sup>45</sup> BL ADD MS 46780, 101.

<sup>46</sup> BL ADD MS 46780, 106v.

For their time in Paris together, Costelloe had arranged to take the apartment of her brother. Located at 14, rue de la Grande Chaumière near the rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs, the apartment was in an area of the *Quartier Latin* favored by American artists and expatriates<sup>47</sup>. Costelloe had been travelling with Bernard since 1891 in order to study art, and was pursuing a divorce from her husband. However, the relative anonymity of travel in northern Italian towns was not the same as Paris. The presence of the poets offered a veneer of respectability to these scandalous proceedings. Upon their arrival, Costelloe toured the building with Cooper and Bradley. As Cooper recalled, «Mary shows me the studio under our vine-tree where a painter lives with his mistress – a *gisette*. We seem to live in the air of a French novel; there is a great strangeness in us – an awe that is not sacred»<sup>48</sup>. The shabby circumstances did nothing to lessen their Bacchic enthusiasm however. The presence of the vine growing outside their window glimpsed upon awaking on the morning of the first day was enough to make them cry, «Evoe, Evoe!»<sup>49</sup>.

Berenson and Costelloe had quickly assimilated to their American expatriate neighborhood, which featured casual social calls and bohemian-style entertainments involving spontaneous music and poetry recitals. On the first evening of the visit, Cooper describes how, «A young *Americaine* comes in – a little shapely dusk thing, with fireflies in her pupils. A despair lies over me. I cannot play with life as she can. Bernhard plays too, and I feel heavy»<sup>50</sup>. One night, Cooper and Bradley returned to the apartment to find Costelloe hosting a bohemian salon in sparkling raiment of white and blue silk. Cooper was incensed: «her beauty is radiant... We go into our room, furious, impotent – for my love [Bradley] has only an ugly ancient satin, grey and pink – and I, thinking that in Bohemia one needed no evening attire, had put none in my box»<sup>51</sup>. After they returned to the gathering an American woman called Mandie arrived and, in imitation of a gypsy storyteller, tied a handkerchief around her hair, recited a poem by the romantic New England poet, James Russell Lowell, smoked a cigarette, told funny stories, and then shouldered a violin and played for them. They were all enchanted. Costelloe, «blond, blue and white – the *grande donna*; then [slipped] into the prevailing tone of her Bohemian salon by repeating the poems of [Lewis] Carroll and [Charles Stuart] Calverley»<sup>52</sup>.

Their first visit to view art together during their stay was to the *Salon des Independants* where, Cooper writes, they were «conquered by the first piece of modernity [they saw]: Fourié's *Sous les branches* (Fig. 1) – womanhood set free to nature»<sup>53</sup>. Berenson explicated it in terms they appreciated, saying, «that she is more than Bacchic, she is not drunk with wine, but with that which makes wine, sunlight»<sup>54</sup>. In front of one of Eugène Carrière's paintings, *Maternité* (Fig. 2), Berenson expounded «beautifully» upon the theme of passion: «its ravenous, its divine igniting force»<sup>55</sup>.

Early on in the Paris visit, Berenson displayed his treacherous double nature; sometimes using his powerful charisma to draw Cooper and Bradley in, while other times appearing to cast them off. On one visit to the Louvre, Berenson and Costelloe evaded Cooper and Bradley's attention, and unkindly excluded them from a conversation about a Sieneese painting the two were having with James Burke. (Berenson was then cultivating Burke who would be his first art-buying client.) Shocked by this rebuff, the poets repaired to the other end of the

<sup>47</sup> HIRSHLER 2007.

<sup>48</sup> BL ADD MS 46780, 108v.

<sup>49</sup> BL ADD MS 46780, 108.

<sup>50</sup> BL ADD MS 46780, 107v-108.

<sup>51</sup> BL ADD MS 46780, 115v.

<sup>52</sup> BL ADD MS 46780, 116.

<sup>53</sup> BL ADD MS 46780, 109. Albert August Fourié (1854-1937), *Nu Sous les Branches*, ca. 1892.

<sup>54</sup> BL ADD MS 46780, 109.

<sup>55</sup> BL ADD MS 46780, 110.

gallery. Without Berenson's guidance, the paintings remained unanimated. «We look with constraint at the Botticellis... We stand before the Mantegnas but they are dead canvas to us... We wander into the Long Gallery and every picture is but a manufacture»<sup>56</sup>. Without Berenson, great examples of Renaissance art were not only lifeless, but Ruskinian falsehoods in the sense of mechanically-reproduced copies. On another occasion, Costelloe was appointed to give them «Morellian instruction» while Berenson was elsewhere in Paris. While they acknowledged Costelloe's command of the material, «she does not endow us with the life of the picture»<sup>57</sup>. At the end of their 1892 Paris sojourn, the poets made one final visit to the *Salon des Independants*. From a distance, they observed Berenson occupied with another group of followers:

Bernhard, Boucher, Hapgood are there. We take care not to encounter them, but we see in the distance the fat Frenchman, the shapeless American, both leaning toward the expressive little form between them. How he does draw men and women – this Deliverer – with the shine and depth of the grape in his eyes!<sup>58</sup>

Despite disappointment in their idol, they left Paris confirmed in their belief in Berenson's Dionysian powers, and in the arena in which those powers were best revealed: in a gallery in front of a work of art with a few choice followers.

### *Berenson and Dionysus*

How did Berenson understand his identification with Dionysus? In an 1897 letter about an acquaintance's accidental death that prompted a meditation on mortality, Berenson contrasted his current despair at the loss of life and his earlier illusion: «And I had the presumption once to think of myself as a reincarnation of Bacchus! I am punished»<sup>59</sup>. The manner in which Berenson might have understood himself thus can be gleaned from one of his early pieces of art criticism. In a description of François Rabelais from «Certain Copies after Lost Originals by Giorgione» (the result of one of his first attempts at Morellian connoisseurship in 1890) Rabelais stands in for Giorgione as possessing the qualities the artist exemplified<sup>60</sup>. The French writer is presented, «not as the vulgar know him, but as he reveals himself to his nobler votaries, an artist glowing with the purifying fires of health, kindling into exuberant life whatsoever he touches, the last reincarnation of Dionysus»<sup>61</sup>. For Berenson, Dionysus was a life-bringing force who was present ever after in a genealogy of spiritual descendants. In his 1897 letter to Bradley, Berenson acknowledged, however foolishly, that he had once considered himself among this line of descent.

Any discourse of Dionysus in the 1890s occurs in relationship to Friedrich Nietzsche, for whom Dionysus was an emblem of modernity<sup>62</sup>. Though he did not openly cite Nietzsche at this time, Berenson was reading Nietzsche and espousing his philosophy, as well as mirroring the fevered tone of the German's rhetoric. This included precepts and maxims presented as worldview-altering declarations. On the very first morning of the 1892 Paris trip,

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<sup>56</sup> BL ADD MS 46780, 111.

<sup>57</sup> BL ADD MS 46780, 128v.

<sup>58</sup> BL ADD MS 46780, 158v.

<sup>59</sup> BL ADD MS 46786, 99v.

<sup>60</sup> For the visit to Budapest in autumn of 1890 that inaugurated this line of inquiry, see SAMUELS 1979, p. 125. The article was first published in October of 1897 in the «Gazette des Beaux-Arts» and later in BERENSON [1901] 1903, pp. 70-89.

<sup>61</sup> BERENSON [1901] 1903, p. 85.

<sup>62</sup> GOODING-WILLIAMS 2001.

the poets joined Costelloe and Berenson for breakfast. Cooper described how «Bernard drinks his coffee, eats his roll and eggs, while he talks as naturally as he breathes – of God, fate, art and man»<sup>63</sup>. Berenson exhorted Cooper and Bradley to be current with their age and so seek complete intellectual freedom.

[Long] ago the god of the Christians is dead and his rival is in his place. I believe in a God who suffers when we suffer, who rejoices when we are happy. His one command is: Be contemporaneous! The people who are so make tomorrow. To be contemporaneous is to digest today's meat. The great people of all ages are those who have been contemporaneous. There is no beauty like the beauty of freedom; no grace that must not be forgone for freedom<sup>64</sup>.

In addition to the core Nietzschean doctrine of intellectual freedom, Berenson echoed Nietzsche's belief in the «death of god». Cooper later recorded a summary of Berenson's religion that elaborated on this theme: «Bernard despised the Cross, “because it crucifies us – it is like a rotting corpse tied to us that rots into our bones”»<sup>65</sup>. Without being able to attribute it to Nietzsche, Cooper discerned the Nietzschean quality of Berenson's vocation as priestly provocateur<sup>66</sup>: «he is born to be listened to and to inspire, to alter the lie of the certainty in other's souls»<sup>67</sup>; he had «in him the stuff of a founder – the passion against prejudice»<sup>68</sup>. Nietzsche's critique of the outmoded Christian expressions he felt diminished life offered Berenson a strong defense of the Hellenistic ideal that was more robust than Pater's evasive Epicureanism. The Janus-faced Dionysus was at once ancient Greek, and in Nietzsche's formulation, profoundly modern, which helped Berenson navigate his understanding of modernity. For Berenson, Nietzsche's Dionysus could be a bridge between the culture of Victorian Hellenism, with its late-romantic retreat from modernity, and the alluring prospects of contemporary life that promised new scientific understanding and intellectual freedom.

Berenson formulated his career as a connoisseur upon the new professionalism and empiricism of the late-19<sup>th</sup> century and employed the recently available methods of commercial photography. He was enthralled with the new science of psychology and other currents of thought that repealed the assumptions of previous generations. But unlike avant-gardists he was seeking no rupture with the past, but rather a recalibration of past and present. His visceral, psychophysiological responses to works of art and literature guided him into an understanding of what was «life-enhancing» in the face of the «sordid» aspects of modernity. This is shown in a passage in Michael Field's Paris 1892 diary entries where Cooper reports how Berenson chastised her after the poets visited the morgue at Notre-Dame de Paris. For them, the visit was a life-expanding expedition to fuel their art. For Berenson, it represented the sordid reality that Hellenism was meant to eschew.

As Bernhard and I go down the staircase and cross the courts of the Louvre, he reproaches me with my visit to the Morgue. It is not Greek, it is morbid and shocking [he says]. I defend myself – death is one of the facts of life, modernity reaches to all factions and includes them: classic antiquity ignored many [facts], but the new art and literature is great enough to bear all truth. Then I tell him what vital lessons I had learned from the Morgue. “I have never seen anyone dead” [Berenson replied] – his tone is exactly what I imagined the Faun's like, when he talked to Machaon of the dead deer! [...] No, there is not the least memory of death in this

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<sup>63</sup> BL ADD MS 46780, 108v.

<sup>64</sup> BL ADD MS 46780, 108v.

<sup>65</sup> BL ADD MS 46804B, 66 and 66v. This is loose-leaf materials from «Works and Days», with ff. 65-72 derived from BL ADD MS 46781 (1893). This material corresponds to the 1892 Paris trip, but appears to have later been placed in the 1893 journal from which it was removed and bound in ADD MS 46804B.

<sup>66</sup> For Nietzsche's philosophical vocation, see VAN TONGEREN 2000, pp. 2-19.

<sup>67</sup> BL ADD MS 46780, 133v.

<sup>68</sup> BL ADD MS 46780, 133.

beautiful face besides me, quick with sensation, with thought, with fervent independence – racy with the present, simple as an animal's<sup>69</sup>.

Whether as the Faun or Dionysus, Berenson's cultural receptors were attuned to that which he felt was ideal, eternal, and life-enhancing. Renaissance art, and the canon of ancient, medieval, and early-modern Western literature stood out to Berenson as worthy of such descriptors. In an 1897 letter to Bradley, Berenson looked back on the earlier years of the decade. He explained his turn away from modernity by way of his current choice of literature.

I have just finished re-reading [Flaubert's] *Salambo* [sic]. I cannot say anything about this wonderful book because it has left me open-mouthed. Ah, there were giants in the land so recently. Where are they now? Have I told you that last winter I read every word that passes under the name of Homer? That was clarifying and elevating. Now I am going through Virgil but it is very inferior country. Was I not “a modern” once? Well, now even the most stirring modernity would not touch me [...] [But] for Flaubert I should read in French nothing more recent than Montaigne<sup>70</sup>.

Though he abandoned his commitment to modernism, Berenson preserved his appreciation for works with Dionysian qualities. If he could isolate through an empirical means the qualities of works of art that ignited his pleasurable psychophysiological responses, and align them to eternal values, he could elevate aesthetic experiences. This would also distinguish his theory of aesthetic response from the morally suspect associations of fin-de-siècle decadence that Oscar Wilde's interpretation of Paterian aestheticism invited. In 1895, Bradley wrote to Berenson about how their shared commitment to the Greek Ideal was now problematized by the Oscar Wilde trial. «Doctrine, I tremble to think of how difficult in the face of this Oscar business, it will be to go on singing the praise of youth and beauty and all those things that from the beginning of the world have been priceless to every artist»<sup>71</sup>. By the middle of the 1890s, Berenson's inquiries into aesthetic experience had taken a more systemic turn as he and Costelloe worked to create a coherent aesthetic philosophy based on psychophysiological responses to art. They returned to Nietzsche, began reading William James critically, and studied the psychology of aesthetic empathy<sup>72</sup>. Principles of their aesthetic philosophy began to emerge in their shared publications of the 1890s within the widely popular series on Italian Renaissance painters of Venice, Florence and Central Italy.

Berenson's identification with Dionysus, and the Nietzschean philosophy it represented, affirmed and elevated the aesthetic experiences that were integral to his religion of art and later his aesthetic philosophy. His relationship with Michael Field in the early 1890s was an important catalyst for this evolution. Both Michael Field and Berenson needed the other to mirror back the performed identity that animated their shared ideals. Having early on proposed himself as a living representation of Michael Field's literary creation, the Faun of *Callirhoë*, Berenson ascended in the poets' estimation to be the idol of their worship. For Cooper and Bradley, imagining Berenson as Dionysus helped them fashion a world of complete intellectual and creative freedom and, by making their god manifest, confirmed their own identities as Maenads. For Berenson identification with Dionysus provided an exalted rationale for his religion of art and his own role as a priest of culture. The Paris of the 1890s, which embodied both bohemian retreat and glittering modernity, provided the indispensable atmosphere in which Berenson's act of self-creation could take place.

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<sup>69</sup> BL ADD MS 46780, 123v.

<sup>70</sup> BODLEIAN, MS. ENG. LET. D. 408, 90.

<sup>71</sup> BODLEIAN, MS. ENG. LET. D. 408, 38.

<sup>72</sup> For Berenson and James, see BROWN 2014.

*Where Dionysus Goes*

Even after Berenson abandoned his Dionysian conceit, his aesthetic philosophy was still animated by the god of pleasure. By 1897, Berenson and Costelloe had settled permanently in Florence where the hills of Fiesole performed a similar role as Paris once had: a place of greater imaginative possibility. Then, Mary and her brother, Logan Pearsall Smith, formed the nucleus of Berenson's band of followers. In June of 1897 Logan wrote Mary about an essay describing their Berensonian art religion.

I want to write for the next Golden Urn<sup>73</sup> an account of our religion as if it already existed "among the remote romantic Italian mountains," and I want a name to call it by. I thought the name of some place "The Purple Order of..." What would be a good name? Was there any saint Pagan and Catholic enough – in the true sense of Catholic? Here is a motto for us from Flaubert [:] "Inclinons-nous devant tous les autels"<sup>74</sup>.

The essay Smith would write described «Altamura», a fictive utopia with a yearlong liturgy sanctifying all of human experience<sup>75</sup>. It was published in 1898 in the third volume of the «Golden Urn». There is no record of who proposed the «pagan saint» who would preside over the imagined palace-monastery, but his name was a thinly veiled allusion to the god of pleasure, the Olympian in disguise: «St. Dion».

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<sup>73</sup> In 1897 and 1898 Bernard Berenson, Mary Costelloe and Mary's brother Logan Pearsall Smith published together a few issues of a little magazine called the «Golden Urn».

<sup>74</sup> Letter dated 4 June, 1897, Houghton Library, Harvard, Logan Pearsall Smith Papers, 1871-1946, Box 4, LPS Letters 1897–99. The quote is from Flaubert's *Correspondance*.

<sup>75</sup> SMITH–BERENSON–SMITH COSTELLOE 1898. For more on Altamura, see COLBY 2014.

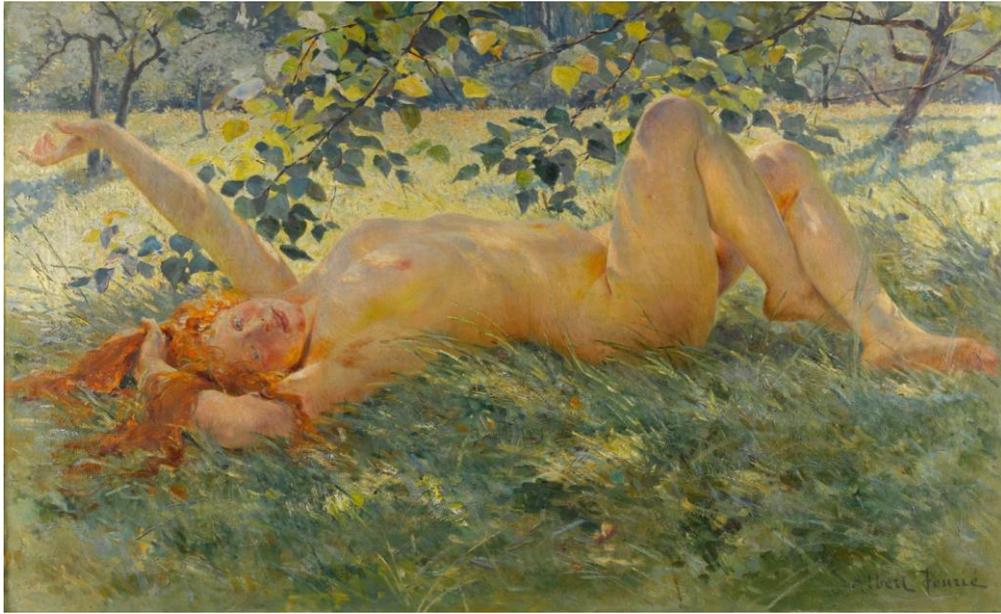


Fig. 1: Albert Auguste Fourié (1854-1937), *Nu sous les branches*, 1892. Oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris



Fig. 2: Eugène Carrière (1849-1906), *Maternité*, 1892. Oil on canvas, Musée des Avelines, Saint-Cloud

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## ABSTRACT

In 1892 Bernard Berenson and Mary Smith Costelloe arranged a visit to Paris with the poet-dramatists Edith Cooper and Katharine Bradley. The episode reveals a remarkable facet of the Berenson story: the young aesthete's identification with Dionysus. For Berenson, the Greek god represented a concept of pleasure that underpinned Berenson's religion of art and his philosophical commitments: by the early 1890s he was reading Nietzsche closely. Identification with Dionysus allowed Berenson to delineate a philosophy of pleasure distinct from the aestheticism of Walter Pater (and Oscar Wilde) and to navigate his own understanding of modernity at a critical time of intellectual and professional formation.

Nel 1892 Bernard Berenson and Mary Smith Costelloe progettarono una visita a Parigi con le poetesse e drammaturghe Edith Cooper e Katharine Bradley. L'episodio rivela un risvolto notevole della storia di Berenson: l'identificazione del giovane esteta con Dioniso. Per Berenson il dio greco rappresentava un concetto di piacere che sorreggeva la sua religione dell'arte e il suo impegno filosofico: nei primi anni Novanta stava leggendo attentamente Nietzsche. L'identificazione con Dioniso permise a Berenson di delineare una filosofia del piacere distinta dall'estetismo di Walter Pater (e Oscar Wilde) e di dare una direzione alla propria concezione della modernità in un periodo critico della sua formazione intellettuale e professionale.