Reviews

The Russell-Berenson connection

by Andrew Brink

Ernest Samuels. *Bernard Berenson: The Making of a Connoisseur*. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979. Pp. xviii, 477; 30 plates. US$15.00. C$18.75.

BERNARD BERENSON AND Bertrand Russell were of contrary temperaments, yet they were attracted to form a more than passing friendship. Berenson came into Russell's orbit by marriage to Mary Costelloe, the older sister of Russell's first wife, Alys Pearsall Smith. During his time in the British diplomatic service in Paris in 1894 Russell enjoyed Mary's enlivening company. Her free spirit delighted him, and she figures frequently as Mariechen in the love correspondence with Alys. Until Ernest Samuels's biography of Berenson it has been difficult to picture this Philadelphia Quaker turned art critic and supporter of the most celebrated art expert of the century. Samuels's study gives her a vivid presence in the international set to which she belonged—a woman of drive and ingenuity without whom Berenson wouldn't have become the legend he was. Samuels stays close to the very full correspondences which constitute detailed documentation of their lives together. He interprets little, allowing the record to speak for itself. We hear in detail of the breakdown of Mary's marriage to Frank Costelloe, of tensions with her mother, of loyalty to her two daughters and of the difficulties of keeping peace with Berenson. Stresses and tempests are not hidden. There are attractions to other men, Mary taking advantage of new sexual freedoms in the set she joined, freedoms which Berenson's firmer conscience forbade. We learn too of her powerful ambition not only to excel in connoisseurship, to assist dealing in Renaissance paintings, but to live bountifully and beautifully in the environs of Florence.

Ernest Samuels gives a much fuller picture of Mary Berenson than that in Robert Allerton Parker's *The Transatlantic Smiths* (New York, 1959). It is impossible to speak of Berenson apart from her. As she confessed, her "baleful" influence "profoundly modified his life, and gave him a secondary

conscience about work, and especially about writing, that has never ceased to harass him" (p. 131). Berenson began as an aesthetic culture-seeker, a man of feeling; he turned out to be a brilliant and urbane talker, a cosmopolitan opinion-maker, a hard-driving scholar-critic and a shrewd businessman in one of the most risky trades on earth. It was Mary who put a point on his talents, who set the peripatetic Harvard graduate in the way of becoming the most influential art authority to write in English. Only Roger Fry, with whom he both agreed and differed, could rival him in persuading a growing public that the pursuit of aesthetic values is as important as pursuing truth.

No such influence as Mary's can be claimed for Russell, but the interplay of his personality with Berenson's is significant. I miss in Samuels's biography an explanation of what drew Russell to Berenson and of why their friendship failed to hold. If Samuels had addressed this question, he might have helped with a perennial puzzle about Russell—how it was that strong attractions to men of genius so often ended in misunderstanding and antagonism. Broken alliances with Wittgenstein and D.H. Lawrence are the best known examples, although of course Russell had no such break with that deeper searcher of hearts, the novelist Joseph Conrad. With Berenson there was no flash point of differences realized, but there was nothing like Conrad's power to sustain admiration either. Berenson had simply not experienced the refiner's fire that burns away infatuation with the world. Russell spent a great deal of time with the Berensons in Florence, yet his remarks and judgments on Berenson in the *Autobiography* are few. Nor did Russell favour Berenson with one of the brilliant brief "characters" in *Portraits from Memory*. There are ostensible reasons why not, as we shall see, but he seems also to be making an implicit judgment upon Berenson's intellectual importance.

Russell's reason for near silence may be that he saw Berenson as an imperfectly realized man of talent rather than as one realizing his genius to the full. Berenson the dealer was a main agent in the questionable export of Italian art treasure to America. His fame and fortune soared in just that turn of the century period when Americans of super wealth, more ostentatiously than knowledgeably, took to art collecting. The Berensons promoted missionary style art collecting in the mansions of Boston, Chicago and New York. Samuels fully conveys the relationship of charm, intrigue and greed which Berenson long maintained with one of the most determined of collectors, the Bostonian Isabella Stewart Gardner. Descriptions of pictures he wanted her to buy are too often not in the language of strict truth but emotive fancies to reach the heart of a none-too-well-informed woman of wealth. Speaking of a Raphael he was promoting, Berenson wrote to Mrs. Gardner that the painting was a "jewel of the most exquisite delicacy.... In a word the little picture puts you in a mood as if far away and yet within hearing you suddenly heard angels playing on their stringed instruments.... So you see it is a Raphael of exquisite quality, of finest Umbrian feeling, of unquestionable authenticity, of perfect preservation and with an almost matchless pedigree" (p. 349). It was probably a very good painting, able to take care of itself without the humbug.

It is doubtful that Berenson ever directed anything quite so fulsome to Russell, but in any measure the lush aestheticism would not have appealed to the mind of one who sought the most precise uses for language. Yet there is no escaping the fact that Russell needed Berenson to help him correct a defective visual sensibility. As Russell's biographer Ronald Clark recounts, Berenson's attempt to awaken Russell in the Uffizi had little effect: "I've looked at everything you wanted me to look at; I've listened to all you've said; but the pictures still don't give me the funny feeling in the stomach they give you." But there was hope. When Berenson pointed out the extraordinary beauty of a chance arrangement of pebbles and wood, Russell exclaimed: 'But this is out and out mysticism'" (*Life* [London, 1975], p. 60). The mock protest covers an undoubted perception. But Berenson could not carry him further—he would not have understood mysticism at the depth Russell did. Berenson was an international art expert, an authority using Morellian "scientific" techniques to authenticate Renaissance paintings. Unless in his most private moments, he seems to have remained well this side of the unitive vision which aesthetic experience sometimes induces. The world's pull was irresistible. As Samuels writes with regret, "Though deviousness and mystification seemed inseparable from the trade in art, he was confident that his judgment would remain uncorrupted. But as he began to be drawn more and more into the world of the professional art expert, he was to discover that there was another insidious temptation. That world promised to assure him the means of a comfortable, even luxurious existence ..." (pp. 225-6).

Russell and Berenson differed on aesthetic theory. Berenson's view of "Tactile Values" and pleasure in *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance* led to a difference with Russell when Mary showed him the MS in 1895. Berenson said that through colour Florentine painters excelled in stimulating the "tactile imagination"—they were more "life enhancing" than the Venetian. As Samuels writes, "Russell disputed the notion that pleasure resulted from the enhancement of 'capacity for life', arguing that 'capacity' involved capacity for something specific. In his view the 'pleasure' of art arose from the satisfaction of desire. And as for a sense of heightened awareness, *that* might come as well from pain, as in the case of a toothache" (pp. 231-2). Russell had little patience for the imprecise naturalistic hedonism of Berenson's aesthetic, no matter how he dressed it up in the language of positivism. As we have seen, Russell was out of sympathy with Berenson's aesthetic aims, this being well in advance of the period when Lady Ottoline awakened Russell's dormant capacity for liking the visual arts. It is interesting that she should succeed where Berenson failed. Beren-

son's aesthetic sophistication was a much less effective stimulus to change than was Lady Ottoline's spontaneous sense of aesthetic wonder, which combined with an exploration of personality more penetrating than any Russell had known. Berenson had little of the natural psychologist about him. It was only Lady Ottoline whose person and social position inspired the trust which allowed Russell to feel beyond the protective rigidities of logical thought.

Berenson seems to have valued Russell's company more for the mental stimulation than because he could convince him of anything. Russell valued the traditional civilization represented by I Tatti—nature made perfect by art. But he had Puritan doubts about the rightness of it. Reservations are stated in a letter of 1902 to Gilbert Murray: "The house has been furnished by Berenson with exquisite taste; it has some very good pictures, and an absorbing library. But the business of existing beautifully except when it is hereditary slightly shocks my Puritan soul." Russell declares himself a "British Philistine", saying that "the whole business about art is external to me" (*Berenson*, p. 385). Somehow Berenson's life was based on artifice, not on a family tradition of living in seasoned luxury. Berenson in fact became the perfect exemplar in Italy of what the new American wealth wanted for itself—instant opulence and instant tradition. Social conscience was missing from the recently risen Lithuanian-American Jew who knew the immigrant's grinding struggle, only to put it behind him. Berenson lived as an aristocrat in apparent disregard of the suffering world; Russell was an aristocrat who could not tear his attention from how the world suffers. This was the fundamental difference dividing them.

But in one respect the encounter was fortunate: Berenson's aestheticism was just enough to tip Russell toward the new language of feeling in which he wrote that remarkable document of twentieth-century angst, "The Free Man's Worship". In "How I Write" Russell speaks of being under the influence of Pater and especially Milton at the time, but it is plausible to think that Berenson's own verbal amplitude was having a temporary effect. Begun at I Tatti in the Christmas holidays of 1902, the former essay spoke from the soul of a kind of suffering that only twentieth-century man without God needed to voice. The precise interaction leading to it is not known, but clearly Berenson felt much as Russell did that "only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built" (*Mysticism and Logic* [London, 1918], p. 48). Here was a point of essential contact, yet the two men fell into misunderstanding. Berenson puzzled over why for 40 years there was no communication: was it Russell's divorce from Alys, Mary's sister, "Or did Russell from the beginning feel that I did not belong to his world, glad to get rid of me? Then why did he frequent me with apparent delight for so many years ...?", Berenson wrote in his *Diary* in his 88th year. An entry in his 91st year comments that "The pity is that he has no greater admirer of his qualities as a writer and thinker. He might have found me as stimulating as I certainly should have found him." Samuels does not enlighten us on the meaning of these bleak comments. Ronald Clark, on the other hand, explains that the reason for estrangement was that Mary had strongly disapproved of Russell's liason with Lady Ottoline (saying that Berenson disapproved too). There are two ironies in this, the first that Clark suggests Mary's relations with Russell in Paris to have been an "affaire", which just avoided consummation (p. 54). Who was she to disapprove other such relations? The second is of course that Lady Ottoline aroused Russell's aesthetic sensibility, not Berenson. Russell simply did not find Berenson as stimulating as he had hoped to be. Russell stayed away not out of regret for past actions, much less out of shame, but because he had nothing more to learn from the Berensons' life and thought. I wish that Samuels had followed through this important matter rather than attending to the many minor figures he does.

Berenson did not have Russell's psychological complication. His was more consistently an optimistic credo—aestheticism. Berenson, like Russell, sought true religion in the uncertain late nineteenth-century aftermath of Darwin-induced crises in Christian belief. Such spiritual forbearers as J.S. Mill, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold had met crises with personal answers to which they gave aesthetic form. Russell by temperament subscribed wholeheartedly to Mill's intellectual solution—to think through at the highest level possible the principles by which human affairs are conducted. He also warmed to Carlyle's prophetic new asceticism. But Arnold's attempts to educate the middle classes in "the best that is known and thought in the world", and Ruskin's religion of beauty, were of greater appeal to Berenson's temperament. The aestheticism which little impressed Russell when Logan Pearsall Smith recommended it, swept Berenson away. Charles Eliot Norton, a follower of Ruskin's cult of beauty, had been Berenson's most effective fine arts professor at Harvard. He taught him to hate American tawdriness and to love the Middle Ages and the Italian Renaissance. Walter Pater, John Addington Symonds and Oscar Wilde, the most powerful critics of the '80s, released the rebel Mary Costelloe from her Quaker anti-aestheticism and gave Berenson hope in a religion of beauty. The religion of beauty probably did not serve him any better than did Russell's sceptically qualified mysticism of the same period. Neither gave answers to the puzzle of existence; both aesthetic and mystic consciousness are left to guess how to manage in the perplexities of human relationships.

Why do aesthetes usually end up disappointed with life? Samuels does not directly address this question, but he helps us to understand it in Berenson's case. Berenson was a wandering Jew whose migrations into new cultures lost him the sustainment of Judaism. Conversion to Roman Catholicism proved a sentimental mistake. Culture itself was to be his religion, with works of art its secular votive objects. Samuels tells the story

of how Berenson found that the Pitti Palace collection held a little-known, unhung Botticelli, the "Pallas" which, when the party he conducted to the gallery saw it, "we all bowed down and worshipped" (p. 218). Art was to be a "consoling divinity", a deliverer from the world's cares: in Ghent in 1888 "he worshipped before the tremendous Van Dycks which he had known in reproduction since boyhood" (p. 71). But what is such worship of, if not the Christian realities those paintings originally witnessed? You cannot worship a picture itself; but by means of a votive picture the spirit can be directed to unseen realities beyond. Evidence of Nature worship, of Platonism or of any other non-theistic spiritual reality is missing from Berenson's formulation of aesthetic experience. "Life-enhancement" is a this-worldly "state of mind, that makes one feel more hopefully, more zestfully alive; living more intense, more radiant a life not only physically but morally and spiritually as well ...", he writes in *Aesthetics and History* (New York, 1948), p. 137. But this spirituality isn't associated with a sense of the unseen sacred, as the greatest religious art always is. It isn't even a version of the numinous salvaged from Mary's lost Quakerism. It is much more emotional uplift, with nothing at all beyond euphoria of the senses. The Berensons looked appreciatively at the art object's configuration, at drawing, at tone and colour—the over-all management of the paint's illusion. They became formalists, analysing the techniques by which individual artists worked so as to be able to differentiate the great from the less great. Greatness was in turn tied to a price stucture which, as dealers, they wished to improve. Whatever his hopes had been, Berenson could not expect art to remain a "new Talmud, in which the beauty of the visible world was inscribed" (p. 93). It was a commodity, cynically on its way to becoming the "investment" that the art dealer now points out to his clientele. Berenson, as Samuels explains, shunned modern non-figurative art from Monet onward, but he did as much as it to commercialize and secularize one of mankind's oldest media of the spirit. He would be dismayed to be counted among the demythologizers of ancient truth, but that was the effect of his career. Art became, if not an end in itself—mere art for art's sakes—then art for the collector's and connoisseur's sake.

As Berenson became more commercially active, art-induced ecstasies seem to have gone into decline; dealing supplanted the spontaneous delight given by pictures when he was a young man. The spiritual disease of boredom threatened. This is the message of Ernest Samuels's biography. It is not entirely bleak, for Berenson greatly enlarged the scholarly authentication and historical development of Renaissance painting. As a critic in the secular humanist line he said some things finely:

> Humanism consists in the belief that something worth while can be made of life on this planet; that mankind can be humanized, that it is happiness to work toward that goal. A humanized mankind is the supreme creation.... (*Aesthetics and History*, p. 127)

Russell would have had no trouble agreeing with this.

Did Berenson reach a personal serenity surrounded by the natural and man-made beauty of I Tatti? The first volume of Samuels's biography does not tell us. Sylvia Sprigge's *Berenson: A Biography* (Boston, 1960) claims that he did. She more briefly recounts the whole of his life story, drawing on personal observation of the concluding period. It seems likely that the ceaseless activity it took to keep Berenson's boredom at bay diminished with age and that this worldly wise master of the arts saw himself as the limited and mortal being each of us is. To learn humility and irony are not bad achievements for a lifetime: the pretentions undeniably diminished. Berenson's story is exciting, a high point in the dedicated but futile twentieth-century attempt to recapture directly in the arts lost religious meaning. Many still find his critical writing as "life enhancing" as he meant it to be. But finally Russell's quest for social justice and for clarified principles of relationship is the main theme we must pursue. Berenson's is an important but exotic contributing theme in the search for human meaning.

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