

On the good practice of lending resources between the arts. *On the Road* by Adela Goldbard

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*The sky turned red, the sun was almost gone.
The riches and treasures are too much to take
all at once. I gulped. I saw streams of gold
pouring through the sky and right across my
eyeballs and indeed right inside them; it was
everywhere.*

On the Road, J. Kerouac-A. Goldbard

In 1845, six years before he died, J. M. William Turner finished his painting *Norham Castle on the River Tweed. Dawn*. The highly visible light and color qualities of that painting, distinctive in late Turner, were not caused by Norham's natural scenery, where the painter had been to on a regular basis since 1797. Turner found inspiration for the painting in a James Thomson poem named *Summer*, which makes a visual description of dawn. Through a free use of paint that is closer to the use of watercolor than to oil painting, Turner sought to emulate the atmospheric and ethereal quality of the poem. Also, he used a fragment of the poem as the information card next to the painting.

The fact that a painter would be inspired by a text in those years was not rare: European painting in the mid-nineteenth century was dominated by a "logic of the gaze", which was translated in a rational and mimetic way to construct a pictorial narrative through historical and allegorical images. Turner uses the resources of poetry in a very different way: he makes them the source of the painting's *idea* as opposed to its *form*. By bringing it to abstraction and focus on the language of painting, Turner imprints an interesting twist to the debate that had been going on since the Renaissance around Horace's saying *ut pictura poësis* (as is painting, so is poetry). The discussion revolved around the lending or *paragone* qualities of the arts, in particular, on the pictorial description abilities of poetry and, the saying reversed as *ut poësis pictura*, the poetic nature of painting.

Indeed there is a time difference of more than fifteen decades between Turner's work and Adela Goldbard's *On the Road*. However, the analogy between the two is maintained by the shared intent to break with the specific and restrictive use of artistic genres and to dispel the differences between them by the rhetorical resources of each. Both Turner and Goldbard begin by taking the poetic character of the text as source for the visual image: Turner jumps off from a poem, and Goldbard does so from the Jack Kerouac's landmark book *On the Road*, which is also undeniably poetic. In both cases, a verbal image ends up transformed into a visual image.

However, the dialectic Goldbard's work establishes between text and image is much more complex than in the case of Turner. *On the Road*, is not only a visual reinterpretation of the text Kerouac wrote in 1951 on one continuous paper roll — published by Viking Press in 1957—, our author also envisions a derivative text, a paraphrase of *On the Road*, in English, which revives the iconic text of the *beatnik* movement in contemporary Mexico. Goldbard's text is about a natural desert landscape, uncertain and unclear, as well as about a fractured social dimension, marked by economic crisis, drug trafficking, and corruption: a country of convenience stores, guns, and dry land, of candidates for governor shot dead. In re-writing Kerouac's text, Goldbard did not intend only to emulate a situation or to imitate a language: she wants to derive from Kerouac's text an *atmospheric* quality that will serve her, as for Turner, as a meeting point with visual art.

The poetic quality of writing is meaningful to Goldbard because, like Turner, she is more interested in describing feelings than in narrating actions. Her text, like Kerouac's, is a montage of descriptive fragments tenuously linked by the narrative thread of a voice in first-person. But the 'I' who talks (significantly named Gold) is not a *positive* modern subject, author of free, voluntary, and autonomous actions: he is the inhabitant of the perpetual crisis product of the economic collapse of a liberal capitalist economy, mired in

alcohol or cannabis addiction, caught in a social class with no future, who has turned into one continuous evasion enterprise, and stay *on the road*.

Thus, Goldbard's work could be interpreted as a nihilistic proposal. My reading, however, sees a strong romantic spirit in it, just as in Kerouac's work, an interest for the emotional part of the experience: like eighteenth-century Romantics (defending, indeed, the pictorial quality of poetry, or vice versa) the artist takes a passionate protest against the mechanic and technocratic reason that uniforms modern society. It is marked, rather by contradiction and diffusion than by consistency and coherence. Goldbard's work manifests a continuous altered state of consciousness: hence, the skies saturated with color described in the text and captured in the photographs. Romantic subjectivity is also found in the detailed and elaborate graphic description of people, objects and landscapes; motifs acting as projection screens for the fragmented self. *On the Road*, like eighteenth-century poems, uses pictorial description (the ekphrasis) to affect the senses of the reader.

The eighteenth-century Romantic is struck by the freedom of nature because it opposes the rationality of culture: thus, the classic images of raging seas and storms and erupting volcanoes. Goldbard, like Kerouac, chooses ruin: a common element from the pictorial tradition of the "views" or romantic *vedute*. Likewise, Goldbard's pictures represent indeterminate landscapes with fragmentary remnants: what in Canaletto and Piranesi is the Roman ruins, it is junkyard trash for Goldbard: a wheelbarrow, some lockers, tanks, the rear rack of a VW "beetle".

To address the meaning of these elements in Goldbard's work we must go back to a discussion on rhetoric. We said before that *On the Road* could be seen as a result of a dialectic between imaginative text and visual image. But since the text coming from the images is a paraphrasing discourse that reproduces and updates Kerouac's text, we must look for a dual mechanism of rhetoric transcription in Goldbard's strategy: first, the displacement of the literary genre by visual staging and reproduction through

photography, and second, reading and writing using Kerouac's original as mirror, and from it, an updated discourse which is incorporated into the images.

As in enigmatic works in the history of painting —*The Arnolfini Wedding* by Van Eyck or *Las Meninas* by Velázquez— there is some mirror play in *On the Road*. In the paintings, the dialectic of mirror reflection is established between the elements of the painting and the viewer. In *On the Road*, the pictures put the viewer in front of a double mirror image: first, the photographs reinterpret Kerouac's original text, and, second, the latter regarding a second text that fictionalizes the creative experience. At this point, we should stress the relevance of the use of photography in Goldbard's rhetorical strategy. Reflection and mirror image of reality, the photograph represents the prominence of the painting in the tradition of *ut pictura poësis*.

Photographic representation of the imagination is fundamental to the work: not only should the image have an enhanced mimicry to work as a plausible, detailed description (i.e., to achieve an effect of reality), but indeed, that the viewer can sense a metonymic presence of the represented objects. The picture not only makes us feel that the objects *are there* in front of us, but that we, ourselves, are there too. Similarly in the cited paintings of Van Eyck or Velázquez, the sense of inclusion of the viewer into the work is achieved by the geometry of the composition and the mimetic description of shapes and lights that accrue. Goldbard's photographs use the syntax of the picture to cause a synesthetic effect on the viewer. The placement of the photographs, the sound track that accompanies the installation, and the viewer's journey through the exhibition space are designed by Goldbard to accentuate the reality effect of the piece and to affect the viewer's senses.

The loan of rhetorical means between the poetic text and the photographic image —Aristotle's *paragone*— aims to produce a multiplier effect of a single message. What would that be? Is it desolation? Is it abandonment? The corruption of time? All these issues are clearly present in *On the Road*. But we must read the text and analyze the photos

more closely to see what lies behind the obvious issue of corruption and decay. Let's look at the most conspicuous quality, light: why is it so meaningful, the light that bathes these seemingly useless objects turning them into main characters in an bizarre scenario on a landscape?

Probably the answer lies in the ambiguity of the pictures in relation to painting genres. The images are and are not landscapes: the quality of light creates a semantic shift in the pictures so that we see them more as still lifes than as landscapes. Not only is the format associated with the romantic view, but also to the pictorial tradition of the *vanitas* paintings, i.e. the compositions of fruits, animals, and common objects that suggest the passage of time (or, more directly, deterioration or decomposition) they refer to a reflection on life and death. The light that bathes the objects in these paintings (consider, for example, the still life paintings by Sánchez Cotán) works as a metaphor for the disappearing energy in the represented motifs.

Something similar happens with the *On the Road* pictures. Both light and color (another element intentionally handled by the photographer in her images) drives the images away from the classic landscape reference, closer to a "landscape-scenario." On this, we must note a subtle but significant difference between Goldbard's pictures and those of other authors who modified and then photograph the landscape, such as *Land Art* artists. In Particular, Goldbard's work could be associated with Richard Long, Robert Smithson or Hamish Fulton, who began working in the late sixties, a decade after the publication of *On the Road*. Like Goldbard, they most likely found inspiration in Kerouac. Fulton or Long focus primarily on *walking* as action; while Smithson seeks to poetically modify the landscape.

There is a strong relationship between Goldbard's work and Smithson's photos of *Monuments of Passaic* (1967) or from *Hotel Palenque* (1969), more than with his *Spiral Jetty*. Smithson portrays debris-objects in the Passaic River environment and makes them industrial/archaeological 'monuments'. In his other project, the artist focuses on

documenting the irrational and absurd architecture of a cheap hotel in Palenque. Half-built (or half in ruins), Hotel Palenque becomes, in Smithson's photographs, a mirror reflection of the actual Mayan ruins, whose image did not interest the artist. What fascinated Smithson about the Mexican hotel is the image as a symbol of architectural loss of reason. Its endless stairs and corridors, its roofless columns, its useless arches and windows are just like the objects photographed by Goldbard: elements without any functional purpose, which only justify their existence through a purely aesthetic-imaginary reason. In the case of *On the Road*, the *raison d'être* of the photos comes from a similarly absurd logic, as Goldbard described in the text:

So I approached Don Inés and told him a story about us making an art project on Route 85. I told him we were taking photographs of old objects collected in dumps, that we used the truck headlights to illuminate them and that we were looking for interesting spots, that we just needed a few hours, to place the chair we were carrying and take a few pictures.

That aesthetic-imaginary logic is the axis of Goldbard's work: a complex and poetic strategy of creation, emerging from the dialogue between text and image and from the loan of rhetorical means between poetry and the visual arts. Ultimately, Goldbard's work is a complex —and very contemporary— machine that uses postmodern rhetorical art strategies (appropriation, quotation, pastiche, staging) to insist on the validity of poetry as an expressive tool of art. *On the Road* is a metaphor for the corruption and deterioration, and a meditation on the meaning of life today. She proposes, in a powerful and sensitive way, that even in the arena after disaster —in a trashcan— we can find a treasure or a reason to exist.