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**Gerardo de Simone, Emanuele Pellegrini** - [predella@predella.it](mailto:predella@predella.it)

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Review of: Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Picture Titles. How and Why Western Paintings Acquired their Names*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015

*Ruth Bernard Yeazell offers an interesting and much-needed account of how pictures came to acquire titles, in the sense of names functioning as guides to interpretation. Her historical analysis would benefit from greater attention to the title's evolving functions in discourse*

This book investigates a startling fact, one infrequently remarked on and even more rarely, if ever, spelled out in all its implications: pictures have not always possessed titles. Indeed, in many instances the titles by which they are familiarly known today were attached to them long – even centuries – after they were created. We are so accustomed to consider work and title as indissolubly and significantly, if perhaps enigmatically, linked, that it requires some effort to conceive of a world in which pictures lacked this distinctive and telling attribute. And yet, in the history of Western art at least, such a situation was the norm for thousands of years.

A measure of the comparative novelty in the West of the title of a work of visual art is given by the absence in Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (editions from 1755) of any definition of the noun "title" referring explicitly to pictures or non-literary productions; whereas the original edition of the OED (1884–1928) tags on to the entry dedicated to *written* compositions the specification, «Also, the designation of a picture or statue» (with no illustrative quotation, however).

Ruth Bernard Yeazell sets out to identify the historical period and conditions within and under which the practice of titling pictures came into use in the West. Crucial in her account is eighteenth-century France. She there pinpoints a series of events, all concomitant to the public display of art. Thus, in 1719, the abbé Jean-Baptiste Du Bos (*Reflexions critiques sur la poesie et sur la peinture*) remarked that a short accompanying "inscription" would considerably assist an often unlearned public in recognizing the subjects of history paintings. Then, in 1738, the Académie «experimented with labels for artists and their subjects in the Salon,

while an argument in support of the practice was delivered to the assembled academicians in 1751». Prints, Yeazell notes, had titles before paintings: the first appearance, in 1737, of the term *titre* in the minutes of the same Académie was made in reference to a reproductive print to be exhibited at the Salon. By 1796 paintings displayed there were also said to have a title: that year the minutes of the Académie's revolutionary successor, the Conservatoire, prescribed that, «In order to avoid the inconvenience of changes, the titles of the paintings [*titres des tableaux*] to make up the Catalogue could only be listed once the paintings were in place'».

Yeazell resists the temptation to identify any one such event as «the decisive break in this history», always insisting, rather, that «it is only very gradually – and unevenly – that we can see something like modern practice emerging from earlier modes of describing and classifying». The first two parts of her book aim to chart that gradual and uneven development, and in the process enumerate a series of contributing factors.

Chief among these is the increasing «mobility of images» in post-Renaissance Europe: the expression is E. H. Gombrich's, whose definition of titling as «a by-product» of such mobility Yeazell quotes, adding

and before the rise of the art market, the growth of public exhibitions, and the development of the reproductive print, the mobility of images was distinctly limited. As long as European art was dominated by a system of patronage, much work was site-specific and literally incapable of motion: think of a fresco on the wall of a monastery, for example, or the decorated ceiling of a princely palace. Easel paintings, of course, were free to move; and it was the increasing circulation of such images throughout Europe that would eventually make the need for titles salient. Yet to the degree that such images originated in commissions rather than the open market – as did most Italian paintings before the eighteenth century – they, too, were often designed for a particular space, where most viewers would be expected to recognize what they were seeing. The person who worshipped at the altar of a local church or chapel, the family and friends afforded access to the private quarters of a nobleman: such viewers could rely on a common culture and informal means of exchange to identify the images before them. Even today, few pictures that hang in private homes are provided with labels.

Though without naming it, this passage articulates another of the factors determining the rise of picture titling in Yeazell's account, a corollary of the increasing mobility of images: the “democratization” (the term resounds throughout the volume) of the creation and appreciation of art. The failure of a shared visual culture to survive the erosion of privilege and cultural authority gives rise to a heightened “need for words”, explanatory of meaning. At the same time, «modern conventions for identifying pictures» are determined by another, more practical need, the “need for efficiency”: «titling is a form of shorthand that encourages the efficient circulation of the objects it identifies».

Notable in the passages thus far quoted is the double meaning carried by

the verb “to identify”, which is used to signify both “to discriminate” and “to comprehend” or “to interpret”. This reflects one of the major concerns of the book, which is to demonstrate that a title is a label which is more than a “handle” for a work; that it is a name whose function however goes beyond that of more or less rigid designation (to allude to the definition of a proper name advanced by the philosopher Saul Kripke). In an article cited by Yeazell, another philosopher, John Fisher, defines titles as «names for a purpose», and «not merely for the purposes of identification and designation». Rather, the «unique purpose of titling», Fisher claims, «is hermeneutical: titles are names which function as guides to interpretation». Similarly, Yeazell points out that, while a title, like a proper name, serves as a conventional signal of unique reference, it is also «a directive for viewers. Under modern conditions of circulation and display, it typically provides our first key to interpretation – , as we often put it, to “reading” the image». «The requirement to label pictures», she further explains, « – even for the simple purpose of assuring that one canvas in a crowded competition can be distinguished from the next – is always bumping up against the viewer’s appetite for significance».

It is indeed what one chapter heading calls “The Power of a Name”, the (often opaque) interpretative force of titles – understood however in a broader sense than Fisher’s – which is the central subject of the book. This is the point from which it sets out (a discussion of Magritte’s *Trahison des images*) and to which it returns in the third part, which consists of a series of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and twentieth-century case studies of the by turns pragmatic, provocative and self-authorising aims and tactics pursued by artists in wresting entitlement to title from the “middlemen” – dealers, critics, curators, printmakers – who had been responsible for establishing the practice in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and who to some extent have continued to be among the principal inventors and affixers of titles.

But this brings me to the shortcomings of an otherwise admirable book. This suffers from limitations affecting most, perhaps all, discussions of the subject, namely a too-exclusive focus on the title and its immediate referential and representational relation to the work it names, to the neglect of its functions in discourse.

Certainly, Yeazell is less inclined than some other commentators on the subject to rest content with the remark that a given expression in a historical text «looks like a title». In her book, remarks of this kind are accompanied by a degree of linguistic analysis. However, this does not go far enough. Fixing on a kind of text she terms «the list of already-made pictures» (a genre including inventories, auction and sale catalogues, Salon *livrets*, dealers’ handbooks, museum guidebooks

and published inventories of wealthy collectors) and intent on highlighting the transition from the «tendency to register the images as members of a class» to the tendency to register them as «single instances», she rightly focuses on the distinction between the indefinite and definite articles. In reference to two late-eighteenth-century sale catalogues, she writes that the «title-effect» produced by these texts

is partly due to the definite article, which in designating a singular subject appears to designate the painting that represents it as well: “The adulteress before Christ,” “The departure of Helen,” “The Holy Family,” (“A Holy Family” is a type of picture, but “The Holy Family” seems to name both subject and painting alike).

This is not exact. “A Holy Family” – an expression typical (in grammatical form at least, if not perhaps, problematically, in its actual wording) of catalogues or contracts of prior date – does not designate a “type of picture”, but a particular instance of such a type, distinguished from other types by the subject it represents. In reference to a given picture, “The Holy Family” also designates such an instance, but non-explicitly, in a way that veils or brackets the picture’s status as one of a kind, presenting it directly in terms of what it represents. That there is more to this particular choice, historically speaking, than emerges in Yeazell’s analysis may become apparent if one compares “The Holy Family” with the other two expressions she instances as communicating a «title-effect». If the choice between definite and indefinite article seems admissible in theory but improbable or even impossible in practice in the case of “The departure of Helen” or “The adulteress before Christ”, this may have to do with the lower degree of verbal codification reached by these particular episodes of classical myth and Biblical story. “An adulteress before Christ” seems improbable or impossible because “adulteress before Christ” lacks the compact referential familiarity and authority (in modern times at least) of “Holy Family” and is thus unable to correct the ambiguity in reference which would be introduced by the indefinite article (“an adulteress”? what, not the one mentioned in the gospel story but some other?). But this only confirms that the «title-effect» is in part at least due to the process of nominalization entailed in such (unevenly achieved) codification. Close comparative examination of a variety of texts, early and later, would shed light on this process, by contrast with what David Ekserdjian – in a stimulating article on “Vasari and the Birth of the Picture Title” (in *Le Vite del Vasari. Genesi, topoi, ricezione*, a cura di K. Burzer et al, 2010) which Yeazell does not cite and which considers medieval and Renaissance contracts, inventories, artists’ account books and letters and writing on art – calls the «traditional narrative modes» of verbal representation: subordinate finite clauses introduced by relative adverbs or conjunctions such as the Italian *quando, como*

or *dentrovi*.

The nominalization of events recounted in traditional sources and the standardization of the names (in fact “titles”) assigned to the figures of myth, history or religious narrative are important aspects of the process issuing in the practice of titling as «a form of shorthand that encourages the efficient circulation of the objects it identifies». But titling cannot be explained solely in terms of practical efficiency, as Yeazell herself clearly comprehends, when she stresses the interpretative impulse so evident in the titles assigned by printmakers to seventeenth-century Dutch genre paintings:

identifying a subject from history or myth is a different activity from baptizing a genre painting. Even as middlemen came to supply titles for paintings of all kinds, the freedom to invent those titles – and to read accordingly – was clearly much greater when the image in question had no fixed textual source.

It may be mistaken or pointless to ask what motivated that impulse or “appetite for significance”, or what drove the drive to nominalize. But there is no doubt that greater light may be shed on titling and on the processes giving rise to it by looking beyond “the list of already-made pictures” and comparing examples, from different periods, of other textual genres, to see how individual works are represented there and for what purpose. If, as Ekserdjian states, «all titles are attempts to identify and discriminate», what is the communicative resource they thereby come to represent in actual discourse and how does this relate to their capacity to transmit directives to viewers, as Yeazell affirms? What difference does the availability of that resource make? How does its absence, for historical reasons in need of investigation, limit discourse about art?

These are highly complex questions which require detailed, comparative analysis of discursive text. Only through such analysis, indeed, can there be any certainty that a given expression does indeed have the status of a title rather than merely “look like” one. Conclusive evidence of titlehood is only obtained where an expression’s discursive function confirms its status as a special kind of proper name. Proper names are the most direct or “rigid” kind of individual or singular expressions (i.e. those expressions «only capable of being truly affirmed, in the same sense, of one thing» [J. S. Mill, *A System of Logic*, Ch. 2]). Their referential intent is immediately intelligible, even where the referent is not actually known, and does not entail any kind of circumstantiating detour, as in the case, for instance, of so-called definite descriptions. Proper names are the most individuating of individual expressions. Their primary referents are persons, whose manifold and unlimited aptitude for disclosure is in some degree conceptually extended to other possible referents, namely the places (cities, buildings, regions, etc.) such persons inhabit



and the creatures and things that constitute their close or serviceable companions. As such, proper names are the expressions fittest to assume the key role in the individuating function that lies at the heart of discourse, the role of subject in the logical structure of predication underpinning and organizing syntax, whereby «speakers bring things into focus and establish references for the audience and themselves, and then determine features in what they have isolated» (R. Sokolowski, *The Phenomenology of the Human Person*). As a special kind of proper name examined in this light, the title is an instrument of “efficiency” different in kind from that illustrated by Yeazell, an efficiency less practical than pragmatic.

The hypothesis to be tested is that in pre-modern discursive text on art expressions referring to individual works will commonly be specific but indefinite in reference, even where they *feature* proper nouns and names rather than general or common nouns. Such expressions will not usually be definite in reference except where the referent is syntactically reiterated, for instance by means of a relative determiner:

Partito d'Arezzo, se n'andò Gaddo a Pisa, dove nel Duomo sopra la capella dell'Incoronata fece nella nicchia una Nostra Donna che va in cielo, e di sopra un Gesù Cristo che l'aspetta e li ha per suo seggio una ricca sedia apparecchiata: la quale opera, secondo que' tempi, fu sì bene e con tanta diligenza lavorata ch'ella si è insino a oggi conservata benissimo.

(G. Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori*, 1568; my italics)

Outside of such appended or supplementary clauses, expressions referring to individual works will not normally serve as subject in a predication. Primary reference to such works will have the function of signalling their presence in some real or ideal space – chapel, room or life/oeuvre – and will thus introduce them into the discourse as items in a sort of catalogue:

Nella Cappella della Nuntziata di Firenze, che fece fare Piero di Cosmo de' Medici, dipinse gli sportelli dello Armadio, dove stanno le argenterie, di figure piccole condotte con molta diligenza. Di sua mano è la tavola del deposito di Croce che è nella sagrestia di Santa Trinita, la Nuntziata, che è in San Francesco fuor della porta à San Miniato, la tavola che si vede nell'Ufficio dell'Arte de' Linaiuoli ...

(R. Borghini, *Il riposo*, 1584)

Seen from our perspective, in pre-early-modern texts such as these the essential, ontological structure of individual works fails of articulation. Occasionally, supplementary clauses (as in the first extract) may express, or modifying participial phrases (as in the second) or adjectives may evoke or implicate, a judgment on a work or on one of its elements or aspects. Normally, as above, such judgments will be of an evaluative nature (and will frequently, again as above, make use of a complex construction combining the representations of two states of affairs, the

one the causative result of the peculiar degree of quality manifested in the other). Otherwise, individual works are hardly made available by speakers for other speakers as objects of mutual disclosure. Their individuality remains largely unachieved and they fail to enter fully into what has been termed «the human conversation» (Michael Oakeshott, cited in Sokolowski, *Phenomenology of the Human Person*). Their peculiar manner of being is imperfectly displayed, the rational exchange they occasion limited. The «guided act of inspection» (Michael Baxandall) conducted by one speaker for others, responsibility for which entails the onus of justification, is mostly limited to the enumeration and descriptive coordination of compositional elements, interspersed with modifying expressions which evoke but do not express assertions of those elements' artistic merit or affective power. Individual works remain largely unsusceptible of the kind of comment that registers global character, comprehensive aesthetic or emotive appeal, or overall likeness to some other entity.

One can see such individuating comment emerging, for instance, in the following "description" by Roger De Piles of a painting by Rubens, though the status and function of the heading remain ambiguous. Significantly, the final remarks, which focus on the *Tableau* as an artistic whole and on the treatment of its principal figure as a token of the "union" characterizing and constituting that whole, are paralleled, though not directly prepared, by the earlier remarks focusing more directly than above on the *character* of the individual figures which compose the scene:

#### SUSANNE AVEC LES DEUX VIELLARDS

Susanne, qui est la figure principale de ce Tableau, est assise auprès d'une fontaine. Elle croise les bras fortement sur son sein, elle plie le corps en devant, & tourne la teste du costé des vieillards qui le surprennent, & qui sont néanmoins separez d'elle par un balustre. Nostre Peintre qui cherche toujours à plaire aux yeux par la diversité en fait paroistre avec beaucoup d'esprit dans ces vieillards; car il y en a un dont la passion est secondée de la force du corps, & l'autre paroist ne l'avoir plus que dans l'esprit. Le premier qui est plein de vigueur, et dont le visage est enflammée & satyrique, passe par dessus le balustre sans deliberer, & suit l'ardeur de son temperament. L'autre est un homme pasle & cassé de vieillesse, & qui appuyé sur une branche d'arbre, regarde avec avidité l'objet de sa convoitise, laquelle il ne peut plus satisfaire; il y a une admirable union dans ce Tableau, & le corps de la Susanne est d'une exacte recherche de couleur, & d'une grande intelligence de lumière.

(R. De Piles, *Conversations sur la connoissance de la peinture*, 1678)

Compare these twentieth-century texts, where the mode of comment indicated is fully achieved and the title present as such within the text:

... La tarda *Crocifissione* di Rogier a Filadelfia e quella dell'Escorial appaiono come il frutto delle sue conversazioni con l'Angelico e forse non sarebbero state dipinte se egli non avesse visto gli affreschi di San Marco. Lo sviluppo artistico dell'Angelico sembra aver condizionato l'opera successiva di van der Weyden. La sua *Deposizione* al Prado, dipinta per una confraternita borghese di Bruxelles, può essere paragonata alla *Deposizione* Strozzi dell'Angelico, mentre le già menzionate *Crocifissioni* eseguite per



dei monasteri certosini trovano preciso riscontro con gli affreschi di San Marco ...

... La *Incoronazione della Vergine* e la *Trasfigurazione* sono immagini trionfali ...

(C. B. Strehlke, *Angelico*, 1998)

... To put it another way, Bacon's *Man with Arm Raised* looks as if he had managed to swing open the right-hand section of a Newman as the rest of us swing open a door. Newman was in the "New American Painting" exhibition which came to the Tate Gallery in 1958, and although Bacon is no great admirer of the artists in this exhibition, there is no doubt that he gave them his usual penetrating attention

...

(J. Russell, *Francis Bacon*, 1979)

Such modes of representation, indeed, though certainly available to earlier speakers, underwent considerable intensification in the period marked by the birth of the picture title, leading to the eclipse of the straightforwardly evaluative or verdictive mode and opening the way to the incrementation of others, such as the interpretative, whereby a work is individuated in terms of what it signifies. A symptom of the enhanced individuation which it facilitates, the title comes to encapsulate those other modes, by evoking or partially expressing a corresponding range of propositions and thus epitomizing the discourse which, as John Fisher points out and as Yeazell acknowledges, but as neither fully explains, it enables.

