A LIFE OF BERNARD BERENSON

Ten Years of Preparation for Connoisseurship

Chapter 1
CHAPTER I.

Ah, dearest, we were young so long,
It seemed that youth would never die.
(Browning)

When in 1890, Bernard Berenson presented to me a letter of introduction from an old college friend and was invited to visit my family at our house in the country at Fernhurst in England, his visit was like a chemical reaction, precipitating the various elements held in solution in our family group. We had come out of a Quaker community, and although my Mother and Father had spent their lives experimenting in various religious creeds, and had made English and continental connections which propagated their own views on Christian doctrine, and although I had somewhat surprisingly branched out and married an Irish Catholic, our habits and our outlook were still based on a modified form of Philadelphia Quakerism.

If in this chapter I have fallen into the egoism of most wives who write the lives of their husband and put in far too much about themselves, I offer the (perhaps insufficient) excuse that the entrance of the gifted young Polish Jew into the alien and yet miraculously congenial circle of Quaker and Catholic
to which I belonged, played such a part in his subsequent life that, to understand his development it has seemed to me, and to him as well, necessary to describe in some detail this new milieu in which he suddenly found himself. And as I came to be for him the most important part of that milieu, with my idea of Duty, the shreds of worldly wisdom I had acquired, my love of taking risks, and my more or less methodical methods of work, I cannot leave myself out of the picture, however desirable on personal grounds I might think it to be.

After my marriage my family came to live in England where I had settled with my husband, who was a member of the English Bar, and we had all made many English friends among whom were very few Quakers. We played with art, and music and literature, and my brother had deserted the traditional family business in search of the education that he felt Oxford could give him more richly than the American Colleges of Haverford and Harvard, where he had received a training that he felt to be unsatisfactory.

He perhaps only among us was in the way to take seriously the pursuit of culture. It did not exist as more than a superficial ornament to life for the rest of us. In a sense it did not exist at all for my Mother and Father, absorbed as they were
in religion and philanthropy. My sister, who was still at Bryn Mawr College in America, had heard of culture, but it ranked far behind her social and her embryo philanthropic pursuits.

My husband had every reason for possessing it, having passed through the University of Glasgow and gone up to Oxford on a scholarship, at the end of his Oxford career dividing a final Fellowship with Asquith. He was a first-rate Latin and Greek scholar, but his real interests were philosophical and political. When I met him some five years before Bernard Berenson appeared on my horizon, I had taken it for granted that philosophy and philanthropy, and English politics through which philanthropy could be most effective, were the only rational pursuits of human beings, and I fully meant to dedicate myself to them, but when I got really into their toils they became dust and ashes in my mouth. My husband had felt sure that he would be able to convince me by philosophical reasoning, of what I had always secretly doubted - the existence of God, Of Immortality, the Objectivity of Duty, and also of what I had never thought about until I met him, the absolute truth of Catholic doctrine. In the intervals of a very active, almost hectic political life and of an overcharged legal practice, he found scant time to
expound the Catholic view on these matters to me, and as no conviction on my part followed his expositions, he had by 1890, practically relegated me to the kindly limbo of the invincibly ignorant.

In the meantime I had put out for myself feeble tentacles towards things that did not require logical proof, nor involve painful, and generally fruitless association with "cases" of human shipwreck and distress, or with people who might or might not vote for my husband. I had often stolen around to the National Gallery and had even organized pitiful little "art classes" in my own drawing-room. I felt somehow wicked, although uplifted, in doing this in a world so full of ignorance and misery and so desperately in need of betterment. At the most, art and music and literature, seemed to me ornamental excrescences upon "Real" life. Only "Real" life ought to count and these other things should not be taken seriously.

Therefore when this beautiful and mysterious youth appeared for whom nothing in the world existed except a few lines of poetry which he held to be perfect, and the pictures and music he held to be beautiful, I felt like a dry sponge that was put into water. Instinctively I recognised that those were the real values for me, however wicked and self-indulgent they might be.
He was a brilliant, eloquent talker, and not only I, but the whole family, listened to him with astonishment and delight, during the whole of that Bank Holiday week-end he spent at our house. He unrolled before us a great panorama of human history and achievement, in whose course man had reached a few — but how few! — really high spots of achievement. Greek poetry and sculpture he mentioned but did not dwell upon; for Arab poetry he showed enthusiasm; for the music of Wagner he was fire and flame, and he rapidly sketched the course of European painting from Giotto to Velasquez, and on — truth compels me to say, to the last and greatest achievement of art — the painting of Bonnat! At home we had never heard of Bonnat. The young Berenson was fresh from Paris and Berlin and exhaled an enticing, if frightening atmosphere of foreign culture. I have said nothing existed for him except what seemed to him beautiful, and I have had to put it like this, because as time went on his taste developed and changed: Bonnat was despised, though Velasquez remained. Bach and Mozart cast Wagner in the shade, and Robert Browning, who was then the supreme master of English poetry, became only a youthful Bostonian memory. I do not think he will like me to record the futile trails he
which so often ended in an impasse, but as I followed him, enthusiastically chopping with my little hatchet, I have not forgotten them.

He did not come out of so hide-bound and anti-cultural a milieu as my own. He had behind him the culture of a precocious little Jewish boy, who had lived for ten years in Lithuania before coming to America. In Boston, where his father had prepared a home for the family, he had received an excellent education first in the Boston Latin School, and then in Harvard, as a somewhat erratic student who enjoyed the friendship and individual teaching of such men as Professors Barett Wendel in English, Toy in Arabic, Lanman in Sanscrit, Pierce in Greek, James in Philosophy and psychology, and Charles Eliot Norton in Art. He was looked upon as a very gifted and promising student, and indeed he had been pointed out to me at one of the University concerts, as the most brilliant member of the then Sophomore class at Harvard.

For I had gone to Harvard too, deserting my Alma Mater, Smith College, to join the small band of eight girls who were the first students in what was then called the "Harvard Annex", which has since developed into the institution known as Radcliffe.
College. My brother came with me to Harvard, leaving the traditional Philadelphia and Quaker College, Haverford, for he felt, as I did, that Harvard was the best college in America. We had the typically American feeling that the best was good enough for us! It was during the year that we were there that we "discovered" the poetry of Blake and the paintings and poetry of the Pre-Raphaelite school. Although I was convinced that the only study for serious people was philosophy (with a view to proving the truth of religion) and spent most of my effort on that subject, getting infected with the philosophy of Berkeley (which in fact, I have not had the mental energy to entirely shake off) and being led by Professor Palmer, whose sole female pupil I was, to become a Hegelian, (I have almost forgotten now what it was, but I remember a great sense of elation and enlightenment), I nevertheless joined my brother in various crude attempts to penetrate the world of culture. We went to see Elihu Vedders' illustrations to Fitzgerald's translation of Omar Khayyam, which I learnt by heart, trying to give a sort of religious meaning to the old Persian's praise of wine. On one memorable occasion we devoutly listened to one of the Lowell lectures given by Edmund Gosse. When he mentioned the sacred word "Botticelli", I remember looking at my
brother with eyes brimming with emotion and excitement and saying "Oh, Logan, we are at the very centre of things!". We became pre-Raphaelite and hung photographs of Rossetti's pictures in our rooms.

All these interests and many more, Berenson had been carrying on in his own way, more detached, somewhat more critical, more serious and enthusiastic.

My seriousness went, as I have said, into the vain pursuit of philosophy, and my entusiasme was largely directed upon the figure of an English publicist, considerably older than myself, whom I had met the previous summer, whose London life and pursuits represented my ideal existence of service to humanity, and whose culture was at that time far better grounded than anything that America could give. In fact toward the end of my college year I became engaged to him by cable, and we exchanged many letters in which a philosophy which seemed to me very profound was united with a love that seemed to him equally profound.

Five years later I began to feel hopeless of reaching the religious conviction and surety I longed for by way of philosophy. To my surprise, political and philanthropic life bored me; so did my husband. I have never blamed him for this, but his Irish
gift of words, his eloquence, his feeling that he was called upon
to improve the world, or, as he put it, "to bring the kingdom of
Heaven nearer to Earth", no longer stood for anything that seemed
real to me, and Quaker that I was in my upbringing, the observancces
and manifold dogmas of the Catholic church had become to me almost
abhorrent. Therefore when I was brought into contact with a
brillaint (and I must add handsome) contemporary who was not con-
cerned with the Kingdom of Heaven, but passionately loved the earth
and the beauties thereof, I felt that he possessed the key that
would give me entrance into a garden where I could live according
to my own nature and be happy.

Of course I had no clear idea of what it all meant, and indeed
we were in the end to explore it together, for passionately as he
desired knowledge, he was very young and still very much entangled
in the New England puritanical ideas which belonged to his up-
bringing. We were both, in fact, among the last survivors of the
New England Transcendental movement, as it was called, and this
was one of our points of sympathy, for we adored what we had
nourished in our spirits, and yet we deplored its one-sidedness
and narrowness. Concord had been for both of us an almost sacred
goal of our pilgrimage. Bernard often walked out there from
Cambridge to gaze upon the dwelling of the New England prophet, Emerson, and I as an undergraduate attended one of the last séances of the Concord "Scho̩l of Philosophy." I remember Emerson himself already separated from all the worldly preoccupations and seeming to be already living partly in another world, as he sat on the little platform in the small wooden Gothic edifice where the sages met. Old Miss Peabody was there also, asleep most of the time, nodding her white head causing her frilled muslin hat to slip on one side. Like a war horse hearing the bugle, however, she started to life at the familiar sound of the word "Infinity," and stretched out her mitted hand to check the lecturer, the young William James, who had used the word. "Infinity," she said; "we should all rest upon the bosom of the Infinite." And then feel asleep again.

Well, there we were, to young people extraordinarily different in origin although in both our homes, saturated with the Old Testament, both caught by chance into the ebbing tide of Transcendentalism, and both of us formed to some extent by the same outstanding personages of New England, by Emerson, by William James, by Browning (who was at that time a New England be
her), and, of course, we were fascinated by each other.

In my ignorance of what culture might be to a serious young man in Paris, it had occurred to me to prepare myself for meeting the already much talked-of Bernard Berenson by reading George Moore's "Confessions of a Young Man", and upon this book I turned the conversation as I sat by him the first night at dinner. To my surprise and discomfiture he said, "Oh, that rotten book!" He has since confessed to me that he thought my conversation very silly, but my pink satin dress very becoming. And in spite of my silly and artificial conversation I suppose he must have felt in me a spirit that reached towards the things he cared for.

Fascinated, I listened to his talk about Provençal poetry, about the Greek anthology, about Russian novels and the operas of Wagner. His enthusiasm made everything he touched vivid and fascinating. Even my dear Quaker Mother listened to his strange doctrines in admiring silence, and we all ordered large photographs of the pictures of Giorgione and Botticelli. At last I felt I really was at the centre of things, not sitting on a bench listening to a lecture, but partaking, in imagination at least, of the real feast.

He said many things that disturbed our conversational standards, I remember in particular the indignation, almost amounting to a sense of outrage, of an older friend who was spending the holiday
with us that "the young whipper-snapper should have dared to say that the moon looked more beautiful when seen through the branches of a tree than when sailing across a clear sky."

He came and went. We framed our photographs, we read Provençal petry, we went up to town to visit the National Gallery. We did not hear of him for some time. He went off by himself to try to think out the problem of his future and mine. This "penniless Bohemian," as my father in anger called him at a later stage, was anything but an irresponsible aesthete. His home life, hampered by poverty and the difficulties of a growing family of brothers and sisters, with a father so erratic and idle - although so passionately intellectual that he thinks of him with undying gratitude - had placed him far too early in the position of the responsible head to the family. He knew the seamy side of life and he suspected the dangers and difficulties that beset those who step aside from the recognized paths. I suppose he felt in me the daring, somewhat reckless and unconsidering spirit I have always possessed, the "Experiment lust" that has so often come near to wrecking me. He knew that in any relation that might arise between us he would have to bear the responsibility, and this period of lonely meditation was one of the unhappiest periods in his life.