Double Talent and Double creativity.
Artists as Writers and Writers as Artists in Italian literature from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth century

The studies on the relationships between words and images have devoted only scarce attention to the works produced by authors which were both writers and artists, in spite of their obvious significance as paradigmatic case of the connection between verbal and iconic creativity. Although numerous studies have been dedicated to certain ‘double-talented’ authors and certain iconotextual forms of hybridization of words and images, a comprehensive enquiry on so-called Italian ‘double talents’ has never been attempted so far, with a theoretical approach and in a long-term perspective. The present project aims thus to fill this gap by investigating the double talent in Italian literature from the 15th to the 18th century.

An investigation into the figurative and literary work by artists-writers (or writers-artists) shall pursue a twofold goal: On the one hand, the approach proposed here allows us to achieve a better understanding of literary works and artworks that are often interconnected (e.g. as to their creative genesis). On the other hand, this approach leads us to examine more precisely the similarities and dissimilarities between verbal and iconic codes that have been a focus in the reflection of artists-writers and writers-artists. On both levels, the examination of the hybridization and the mutual expressive collaboration that characterise the works of double talents opens up a scarcely explored path of inquiry, which highlights the cooperation of the ‘sister arts’ as a long-lasting, pivotal phenomenon in the reflections and works of outstanding Italian authors and artists.

1. State-of-the-art
In light of the significant interest in the relationship between verbal and iconic languages developed in the last decades, the lack of a comprehensive and theoretical examination of the double talents in Italian literature stands out. The absence of such an inquiry is probably due to the assumption that the phenomenon of double talent exceeds the boundaries of literary history and criticism, thus requiring an exploration of the origins and forms of creativity itself. Arguably, a further reason for neglecting this important phenomenon has been the primacy of a traditional, exclusively textual-oriented approach to the study of literature even in cases where the text is accompanied by images or other visual forms. These prejudices aside, the double talent deserves to be considered in a comprehensive and long-term perspective as a crucial component in the history of Italian literature, thereby drawing on the important results of the recent scholarship in the field of visual studies. Investigations have been so far limited to specific case studies, focused on the works of art produced by various Italian writers (e.g. Levi, Buzzati, Pirandello, Pasolini) and the literary production of renowned artists (such as Leonardo, Michelangelo, Cellini, Bronzino). Special attention has also been paid to the visual *marginalia* which accompanied handwritten texts, such as the drawings that enrich Boccaccio’s manuscripts and the autographs by Gozzano. These visual comments, or self-comments, might be rough sketches or complete illustrative sets deeply linked to the text. However, these *marginalia* have mostly been explored in a merely descriptive and rather superficial way. Both the specific case studies and the inquiries in particular visual self-comments have thus failed to analyse the double talent in a long-term perspective and to observe the influence that this sort of ‘artistic bilingualism’ has on creativity and representation. Up to now, not only has the scholarship had a rather restricted focus, but it has also paid attention mainly either to the mere recognition of another artistic domain in the work of a writer or a painter, or to the alleged primacy of one art form at the expenses of the other. This traditional focus fails to acknowledge the very nature of the complex creativity of a double talent, in which two expressive languages cooperate.

A first attempt at a development covering a range of significant cases (most of them from the German literature) through a larger time span, considering the double talent as a crucial example of the intertwining of visual and verbal codes, is a recent article by Michele Cometa, \textit{Al di là dei limiti della scrittura. Testo e immagine nel “doppio talento”}, in \textit{Al di là dei limiti della rappresentazione. Letteratura e cultura visuale}, ed. by M. Cometa and D. Mariscalco, Macerata, Quodlibet, 2014. Cometa has put forward a preliminary description of the typologies of double talent that is necessary to differentiate in a theoretical investigation of that complex creative phenomenon. Cometa’s work therefore represents the unavoidable starting point for the present project.


2. Motivations and objectives

The project aims to fill this patent lacuna in the understanding of modern creativity, mapping the phenomenon of the double talent, strictly construed (i.e. where the author of a text and the author of a visual work are one and the same), from the late 15th to the 18th century. In a further step of the research it will be possible to broaden the scope of the inquiry including modern and contemporary literature (19th and 20th centuries), thereby also considering the transformations of the double talent related to historical and poetical changes. The main goal is twofold: First, the research will explore through an extensive mapping in a long-term perspective the origins and the development of the inter-artistic dialogue essential to the double talent’s creativity in the early modern age. Secondly, the research aims to examine the mutual influence of these acts of creativity on the literary and aesthetic self-reflection of double-talented authors, with special regard to the theoretical issues concerning the limits of representation that the intertwining of verbal and visual code determines.

The research shall shed light on the works of numerous Italian writers-artists and artists-writers from the late 15th to the 18th century, considering also the possible influence of European authors and painters. Special attention will be paid to the most relevant experiences, on both a theoretical and...
literary level, of writers-artists in whose production both arts are equally involved, so that neither of them can be regarded as having a primacy.

Following the scheme proposed by Michele Cometa, the research shall examine three main kinds of relationships that characterise the double creativity: 1. the double talent in the strict sense; 2. the practice of double creation or cross-medial creativity; 3. the dialogic, or meta-textual/meta-artistic, disposition that characterises the two creative productions.

This preliminary distinction will be verified during the development of the project and will probably be enhanced through the addition of further categories relating to the relationships between verbal and iconic code involved in the works of double talents.

2.a. Double talents

First, the research shall analyse the double talent (Doppelbegabung) strictly speaking, namely the cases where a writer is also an artist (a painter or an illustrator) or, on the contrary, an artist is at the same time a poet, a novelist or a comedy writer, but where the two artistic spheres never merge. The one creative form is thus just an interruption of the artistic tension of the other. In some cases, an art replaces the other one, either when painting substitutes poetry and writers give literature up to cultivate visual arts, or when, the other way around, writing replaces painting or other visual arts (a case in point is Benvenuto Cellini, who stated that writing was an alternative for the artistic work).

These are, thus, productions of double-talented authors who produce separated works, even if it is hardly possible to distinguish their main source of inspiration. When the ‘second’ art is abandoned, left behind, or considered just as a divertissement, it is hard, and at the same time wrong, to ignore the profound intertwining between iconic and verbal code connected with double talents’ creativity. It will be necessary, therefore, to verify how this kind of productions, even when they are parallel, entail a mutual influence of each expressive code on the other. Special attention will be devoted to the relevant dissimilarities between the two artistic ‘callings’, especially when they yield two different creative experiences.

2.b. Double works

Second, the research shall focus on ‘double works’, namely on cases where the two languages, and the two media, cooperate in determining one imaginative world. This second line of inquiry allows us to approach the origin of the act of creativity itself and the grounds for choosing a medium instead of the other. Indeed, the phenomenon of double talent is more complex than it might appear, because it involves the co-genesis of such works. On the one hand, it is often difficult to pinpoint the genetic relation between the two media involved, in particular in the creation of literary works. On the other hand, verbal-visual works, insofar as they are cross-medial works, result from a common creative impulse. The analysis of the double talent, thus, can shed light on the genetic phase of a work, allowing us to explore a territory in which visual and verbal representation merge, and sometimes struggle with each other (e.g. the marginalia in manuscripts that are not just playful digressions but forms of actual creative fusions).

A comparative approach will allow a better understanding of creative ways of writers-artists and artists-writers, not only as to thematic aspects, but primarily as to formal features. The aim is identifying the mutual influence of verbal and iconic codes in their creative mechanisms and the mutual help (or, on the contrary, the struggle) that, thanks to a double creative circuit, allows the author to improve the expressive means of his, or her, creativity. The different grammars of the two artistic codes cooperate in double-talented works enhancing creativity and making the representation more powerful. As a
result, an ‘artistic bilingualism’ would enable the artists-writers and the writers-artists to overcome the limits of both the iconic and verbal code.

2.c. Auto-comments
Third, the research shall analyse cases where, in the dialogue or fight of the ‘sister arts’, one of them serves as a comment on the other, on a sort of a meta-level. In some cases, this dialogue allows the writer to produce a visual comment for his/her texts or, the other way around, an artist produces a verbal commentary on his/her works of art. For instance, images function as integration and interpretation of the text. Therefore, the double talent entails a critical distance of the author from his, or her, own work. The analysis of this feature points out less evident, but nonetheless crucial, aspects of texts or artworks. In these cases, texts and images make double talents’ creativity less abstract, as their connection revolves around the author’s own process of clarification of the double layer of the work.

The distinction of different kinds of double talent creativity provides a starting point for the research, but shall arguably be widened during the development of the project. The preliminary distinction will interplay with the literary genres and styles that are central for iconotextual choices in orienting recurring themes and motives. On an iconotextual level, special attention will be paid to cases of self-illustration, that is, where a writer draws the illustrations for his, or her, text. On a thematic level, huge importance assumes the genre of biography and autobiography that characterises memoirs, diaries, letters and self-portraits. Here the double creativity can play two different roles: Either it aims at providing figurative or literary portraits of the author-character, or, even more importantly, double-talented works cooperate in the self-fashioning of the writer-artist. Indeed, most often self-portrait and autobiography are expression of the same tension, which strives for an ideal image of the writer-artist or artist-writer, especially as a double talent. While in the former case the connection of the two languages defines the real personality of the author, in the other it mirrors the expectations of an ideal audience.

The general goal of the project is thus to shed light on double-talented creativity, not merely by examining total works of art, which result from iconic and verbal codes merging together, but by focusing on the different modes of their mutual influence and cooperation that characterises the phenomenon of double talent through the entire modernity.

Because of the intrinsically interdisciplinary nature of the project, which aims at bringing together different fields of studies both thematically and chronologically and covering a broad timespan, the collaboration with scholars from Italy and abroad will be essential. Internationally renowned specialists in Italian literature and history of art will be invited to participate in seminars, whose results shall be published in edited volumes or in special issues of international journals.