BERNARD BERENSON

Bernard Berenson

A Life in the Picture Trade

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For Matthew Boyle

In the eye would lie for him the determining influence of life:
he was of the number of those who, in the words of a poet who
came long after, must be "made perfect by the
love of visible beauty."

—Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*

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Introduction

In the summer of 1895, Bernard Berenson, who turned thirty that June, was laboring over a follow-up volume to his successful first book, *The Venetian Painters of the Renaissance.* He wanted the projected book on the Florentine painters to convey to his readers not dry details of biography or composition but what he thought of as the "artistic personalities" of the painters. He disdained experts who simply pronounced paintings genuine or not; he wanted to formulate an aesthetic philosophy that would give his readers an understanding of a deep personal experience of art. That summer, he and his companion, Mary Costelloe, who would later become his wife, were living in separate apartments close together in Florence. After years of relative poverty, he was beginning to make a little money on commissions for paintings he helped collectors to find. Within a few years, he would be one of the most celebrated connoisseurs of Italian Renaissance art and would find that much of his

time was given to authenticating pictures for dealers and entertaining wealthy guests, but that summer his time was still his own, and he and Costelloe spent long afternoons arguing about what a person really *felt* standing in front of a Botticelli.

If you look closely at the lines of a Botticelli, Berenson wrote in the *Florentine Painters*, if you really give yourself over to "the lines that render the movements of the tossing hair, the fluttering draperies, and the dancing waves in the 'Birth of Venus,'" you will see how the "lines alone" have the "power of stimulating our imagination of movement." Anticipating the coming century of abstract work, Berenson noted that here we are seeing the "pure values of movement abstracted," and the effect of this on us is that the painting seems to be "directly communicating life." A Botticelli painting is not merely telling a story, it "holds the same relation to representation that music holds to speech." This, Berenson said, was the "art of arts." Berenson worked with an unusual breadth of reference for his day: "Sandro Botticelli may have had rivals in Japan and elsewhere in the East, but in Europe never." He was, Berenson concluded, "the greatest artist of linear design that Europe has ever had."[1]

Berenson's approach to art galvanized American readers, who, when they came across this passage, had generally never seen a Botticelli. The phrases are still surprisingly evocative of what we feel faced with a Botticelli—the sense of rippling movement, the exhilaration of the wind. The *Birth of Venus* has become a pervasive painting, the object of pilgrimages and constantly present in reproductions, but when Berenson wrote his consideration in 1895, Botticelli was not much studied and was widely considered a minor painter. Just the year before, Berenson had helped Isabella Stewart Gardner to acquire a Botticelli, of *Lucretia.* She had paid for it the equivalent of about $16,000. It was the first Botticelli in America. A few years later, in 1898,

when an important Botticelli of Saint Jerome was offered to the British National Gallery for £500, or about $2,500, the museum declined. As the century turned, though, tastes changed. More and more American viewers and collectors came into contact with the paintings of medieval and Renaissance Italy, and Berenson's works were an important guide to their appreciation.

Bernard Berenson was one of the leading figures in a new generation of seeing—one that grew up on the works of Walter Pater and John Ruskin, was newly open to the intellectual and sensual excitement of the paintings of the Italian Renaissance, and had new access to these pictures because travel had been made easier and photographic reproductions had become common. What Berenson made of these influences and opportunities was remarkable. He had an encyclopedic visual memory, and he mastered the careers and paintings of hundreds upon hundreds of Italian painters. His gift for discerning the artistic personalities of different painters and for naming their qualities with a few choice phrases meant that, when his readers encountered the works of these artists, the pictures seemed to come forward, ready to be seen—Cosimo Tura: "His world is an anvil, his perception is a hammer, and nothing must muffle the sound of the stroke"; or Fra Angelico: "The sources of his feelings are in the Middle Ages, but he *enjoys* his feelings in a way which is almost modern."[2]

In the Gilded Age, a generation of American collectors and art historians and museum professionals came to their understanding of what interested them in Italian Renaissance art in significant part by reading Berenson's work and by listening to him talk. In Berenson's descriptions, they heard echoes of their own interests—in scientific experiment and in the progress of humanism—and of their own deep involvement in commerce. The cohort of Berenson's listeners and readers built most of

the major American collections and museums, and the effect of Berenson's way of seeing goes on being felt to this day.

But Berenson himself is an odd figure—he was dignified and erudite but also capricious and heedlessly romantic; his arrogance was matched by his self-contempt. His contemporaries thought of him as one of the greatest perceivers of paintings, a man whose sensitivity to art had seldom been surpassed. Now he isn't especially well known outside of art historical circles, and when his name appears, it seems smudged around the edges by questions about his reputation and by patches of secrecy that obscure aspects of both his private and public lives. For, along with being a connoisseur of paintings, he, too, was deeply involved with business. His fine eye made him a great authenticator of the notoriously difficult-to-attribute Italian old masters, and this led him to have, for twenty-five years, a profitable, and secret, partnership with the famous dealer Joseph Duveen. The obscurity with which Berenson shrouded this relationship followed in part from a lifelong practice of keeping his origins, and methods of survival, to himself.

During his lifetime, Berenson had an august reputation in the minds of wealthy and educated people on five continents. He was said to live like a Renaissance gentleman in his Villa I Tatti in the hills outside Florence, where he was a fixture for sixty years, graciously receiving and instructing merchants and scholars. He worked in the mornings, took two walks a day, and every summer made a tour of the great European museums. He hoped by his villa and erudition to suggest that an aristocratic life had been his since birth. But he had, instead, been born, in 1865, in modest circumstances in the Lithuanian town of Butrymancy. When he was ten, Berenson and his family were part of the tumultuous issuing forth of Jewish émigrés from the Pale of Settlement, and they had lived, crowded together in the poor West End of Boston, on the wages of his father's tin peddling.

It was a youth of rapid transformations. When Berenson arrived in Italy at twenty-three, he was a Harvard-educated gentleman, baptized into the Episcopalian church, and a man with an impressive knowledge of art, literature, and languages, whose funds were supplied by wealthy friends, including his most important patron, Isabella Stewart Gardner. Thirteen years after that, by then a widely known critic, he had converted to Catholicism, married Mary Costelloe from a prominent Quaker family, rented the Villa I Tatti, which he would eventually bequeath to Harvard, and begun summering with the Rothschilds in Saint Moritz. As Elizabeth Hardwick says drily in a memoir essay of Berenson, "His success . . . aroused superstitious twitchings in people everywhere. . . . Hadn't life turned out to be too easy for this poor Jewish fine arts scholar from Boston? Was knowledge, honestly used, ever quite so profitable, especially knowledge of art?"[3]

Kenneth Clark, although he considered his early art historical training with Berenson formative, thought of his mentor as an "exquisite little conjuror," and a business associate at Duveen's recalled that "BB always reminded me of Svengali."[4] The idea that he was a magician, and in some way a Jewish magician, was part of the atmosphere in which Berenson moved. His reputation among the great collectors was always trembling between light and shadow, and they may well have wanted it that way. After all, in the cutthroat competition to acquire old masters, when getting the picture you wanted was often a matter of having it cut down off the wall of a monastery and spirited out of the country before your rival could get there with his knives, you didn't want the men working for you to be checking manuals of conduct before they acted on your behalf. In fact, you wanted them to take the roles that have often fallen to Jews: you wanted the sultan's doctor, the emperor's banker, the gentleman's pawnbroker—the man whose knowledge of your intimate desires did not give him more

power over you than your knowledge of his religion and credibility gave you over him.

Berenson himself felt his own career to be a constant and disturbing battle between scholarship and commerce. His professional life took place in the context of an explosive American market for old master paintings. Work on his books, and his relations with other art historians and museum curators, seemed to him to be encroached upon and disrupted by the increasing demands of picture dealers, and especially of Duveen. But then he wanted a secure place in the world of the wealthy; he came to feel he needed the chauffeured car, the room at the Ritz, ever more rare volumes for his library. Gradually, he became more and more of an expert, attributing pictures and writing scholarly articles, but no longer writing for the general reader. Berenson at last broke with Duveen not long before World War II. He survived the war in hiding outside of Florence, and circumstances transformed him again.

Berenson emerged from the war as a kind of sage; people saw in him a last link to a European and Jewish culture now destroyed. In the final decades of his very long life, Berenson published a succession of memoirs that became extremely popular. But were these prose meditations—aphoristic, wonderstruck, cynical, sepia-toned—at last the authentic Berenson? When the writer S. N. Behrman went to interview Berenson in his late age, Behrman observed: "One doesn't quite get from his imposing appearance an impression of serenity. . . . When his face is in repose, there is, at the most, the suggestion of a fleeting truce between the warring of what he has called his 'many selves.'"[5] Life, from the age of ten, had been a scramble to maintain a surface impression of belonging, with all the while a sense of incoherent and alien depths roiling beneath.

In notes he wrote around 1939, Berenson reflected that, "almost from the cradle to the grave one has an audience to whom

one is playing up." He felt that his own life was continually affected by the force and expectations of other people. "The story of these audiences succeeding one another," he continued, "their character and quality should be treated as an important part of a biography or an autobiography."[6]

Given the immense pressures on him as a young Jewish man making his way without money or connections in the rarified art world, it is not surprising that Berenson formed a view of life as a succession of performances for changing audiences. Still, this certainly presents challenges for the biographer who is attempting to create the sort of coherent picture Berenson himself demanded in matters of attribution. The sense of who Berenson was changes not only with the direction of his attention but with the historical era and with his geographical allegiances, and this is reflected even in his name. He began in Lithuania as Bernhard Valvrojenski. When his family came to Boston, they all changed their surname, and he became Bernhard Berenson. As a young man, soon after he arrived in England, he began signing himself B.B., and it was in this way that he was known to his friends and lovers and even distant acquaintances. Meanwhile, in his given name, he retained the German "h" until World War I, when, wishing to ally himself with France and not Germany, he became Bernard. In Italy, in his maturity, he was fondly referred to as "Il Bibi." In this book, he is referred to by the name he used in a given period; when his whole life is meant, these various identities are understood to assemble under "Bernard Berenson."

Different aspects of this various self came into play within Berenson's wide network of friends and acquaintances. He maintained a prodigious correspondence with more than twelve hundred people, leaving an archive of some forty thousand letters at his death, and was a slightly different Berenson with every new person he encountered. A biography of the present length is naturally more distillation than excavation, and it has

been necessary to make compact mention of relationships that have in some cases produced whole volumes of biography and published correspondence.

Instead, this book focuses on a handful of relationships that allow Berenson to be seen in the round. In the past twenty-five years or so, a wealth of new material has become available about Joseph Duveen and about six women to whom Berenson was devoted. These central women were scholars, art historians, librarians, collectors, and writers: Berenson's sister Senda; his patron Isabella Stewart Gardner; his companion and wife (referred to in this book first as Mary Costelloe and then as Mary Berenson); the mistress for whom he had a towering passion, Belle da Costa Greene, who was also J. P. Morgan's librarian; Berenson's friend Edith Wharton; and the companion of his last forty years and collaborator in building the library at I Tatti, Nicky Mariano. In addition to Ernest Samuels's foundational two-volume biography of Berenson, wonderful new books on Duveen, the art market, and the lives of these women have been an important resource for this book. My indebtedness is detailed in the acknowledgments and endnotes.

In memoirs and letters, the women of Berenson's life left records of the strong impressions they had taken of him and of his work. "What do I not owe you?" his sister Senda wrote. She was looking back over old letters, which "brought that first rapturous experience of Italy so vividly to mind." She remembered how, when she was thirteen, "you opened the world of poetry to me and it has been a passion ever since—and later you revealed the world of paintings, sculpture, architecture—and they were always a sweet solace—a joy. God bless you for being yourself."[7] Writing of the period when she first knew him, Mary Berenson said his letters "made me feel I was taking part in the kind of life I longed for; free, devoted to beauty, fortified by study and leading to endless spiritual and aesthetic adventures."[8]

These women found, around Bernard Berenson, a sense of a place to belong to, a set of values to aspire to, and a life's work to uphold. That they themselves did a great deal of the work and were shouldered with many of the burdens was sometimes a frustration, but not, for them, a prohibitive one. Mary Berenson's widely attended lectures on Italian Renaissance painting, Isabella Stewart Gardner's museum, the collection Belle da Costa Greene made for J. P. Morgan, Edith Wharton's writings on art and travel, and the library of I Tatti itself—these were lasting monuments of education and of a certain vision of culture that flourished in the world around Berenson and that his own exhilarated looking helped to sustain.

Bernard Berenson and his colleagues in turn-of-the-century Florence saw how Italian Renaissance culture—its secularism, its self-consciousness, its business sense and innovations in scholarship, its ideas of collecting, display, and magnificence—anticipated, suggested, and influenced our own. By the end of Berenson's career, it had become common for people concerned with the making and preserving and consuming of culture to think of their ideas as, in some special way, related to the view of life expressed by the men and women of the Italian Renaissance. For a while, people attributed this transformation of their taste and self-perception to Berenson himself, and this was a part of his magical appeal. But even if Berenson was not the cause of this change, his life may still be an unusually fine record of its happening. Berenson, busily reflecting his audiences back to themselves, became a kind of turning mirror in which are to be seen the dark and bright conflicts by which he was surrounded. It may even be that, as we watch his life unfold, we can catch a glimpse there of our arriving selves.

I

Jews of Boston

Sometimes now as I walk . . . I see again the world as it was to me when I was five years of age. There is the same mystery to everything, the same feeling of standing in the presence of things that I see, but have not yet thought of, the same feeling of saturating coolness that I used to throb with when I was a child of five years old, in the orchard of a spring morning, listening to the call of the cuckoo at the end of the garden by the brookside.

—Bernhard Berenson, early journal

When he wrote these lines, Bernhard Berenson was only twenty, but already when he spoke of the Lithuanian landscape of his childhood, it seemed to him, and to those who heard him, a mysterious place, poignantly far away. Berenson's place of origin, to which he would never return, was almost always

Bernard Berenson at twenty-one and seventy-one. Biblioteca Berenson, Villa I Tatti—The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies, courtesy of the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

present in how he was understood, though it was taken in quite different ways by different people. The art dealer René Gimpel referred to Berenson as a "feline Pole," while Edith Wharton wrote tenderly of his "little Russian childhood."[1] In conversation, Berenson's allusions to his childhood were often more in the realm of legend than of fact, and this added to the feeling people had, listening to him, that his wisdom and insight had distant sources, accessible to him alone.

At the time that he wrote in his diary about his first experiences of "standing in the presence of things that I see," Berenson was struggling to stake out a place for himself in teeming Boston. He had discovered that one of the things which distinguished him was his phenomenal capacity for talk. Berenson could hold the attention of an audience for hours with what later auditors remembered as his "whiplash epigrams" and "the vast layers of learning that seemed to rise up behind him."[2] He

seemed a sorcerer with words, his incantatory power associated in the minds of many with his Jewishness. In 1887, when Berenson was nineteen, he encountered the future justice Louis Brandeis, then thirty-one, and a man who knew only too well how Boston responded to Jews. The impression Brandeis took gives a sense of how Berenson, talking, seemed against the backdrop of Boston society: "Saturday at the Salon met an extraordinary man—Berenson, I think, is the name, a student at Harvard of great talents—particularly literary talent. A Russian Jew I surmise, a character about whom I must know more. He seemed as much of an exotic lure as the palm or cinnamon tree."[3]

In the young Berenson's crowded household his talk, already of poetry, painting, and the wide world of culture, was a way to draw the attention of his mother and sisters. In his adult life, although he sometimes wished for solitude, he kept his home thronging with interlocutors. One of his most frequent commendations was to say approvingly of this or that person that he "did everything to draw me out."[4] His stature as an interpreter of paintings was in part founded on his talk. When he guided people through the long cool galleries of the Uffizi and the Louvre, and spoke of the particularities of the paintings, their colors and forms, the qualities of figure, space, and light, his listeners *saw* as never before.

In the full strength of his maturity, Berenson, like one of the fifteenth-century humanists who were his constant reference, could speak with knowledge and sensitivity of the literary tradition in seven languages. He had a lively curiosity and an astonishing range of reference. He was familiar with, and wry about, the habits of medieval French princes and modern-day Greek shepherds. And his talk, he felt, brought him close to the spirit of the great creators whose work he loved. Kenneth Clark said of Berenson that "through talk he made himself into a work of art."[5]

It was part of Berenson's aesthetic creed, articulated in his

late work *Aesthetics and History*, that the artist, when creating, did not plot his way through already-worked-out ideas but was spontaneous. The brilliant talker, Berenson wrote, is "almost unconscious and even surprised to hear what comes out of his own mouth," but while his "winged word" amuses many, it also "stings others, and deeply offends a few." The born talker had a helpless need to talk, and even if he sometimes became a "verbal clown," his talk went on: "No amount of whippings cured the mediaeval court jester."[6] In Berenson's colloquies ran the conflict between being a Renaissance humanist and being a medieval court jester, between the power of secular knowledge and the experience of struggling at the margins of a religious society, and both of these were facets of his family's experience from the beginning.

Berenson's father, Albert Berenson, had an apprentice, and the two used to go peddling in the towns around Boston together. It was from the apprentice, Louis Aron Lebowich, that Berenson's first biographer, Sylvia Sprigge, learned a story that gives a glimpse of the young Berenson talking. In this story, Albert Berenson, peddling pack on his back, arrived at the door of a Concord house only to be told: "Guess who is in the drawing-room! A young man called Bernhard Berenson." The host or hostess apparently had no idea that Bernhard Berenson's father was a peddler or that this peddler might be he; it was simply good fortune to be able to hear a young talker of such prowess hold forth. But Albert Berenson hurriedly gathered his things and rushed away. The father was, Louis Lebowich said, "shy of disturbing his children's progress in the New World." Bernhard Berenson never went peddling with his father: "Even sixty-five years after these events, Mr. Lebowich remembered that Albert and his eldest son did not get on well, certainly not well enough to go on these journeyings together."[7]

Elements of Albert Berenson's life can be seen, redrawn,

in the life of his son. Albert Berenson, too, was a great talker. Louis Lebowich remembered his holding forth brilliantly on Voltaire. But unlike his son, Albert Berenson did not generally find delighted audiences. "Lebowich still, in old age, maintained that Albert Berenson was unappreciated at home, unlistened to, so that often he would just go on talking to himself in a kind of *sotto voce*."[8] The young Berenson did not want to be the two things he saw his father as: a frustrated intellectual and a man who got his livelihood in a demeaning trade. But Berenson would grow up to be an intellectual who frequently encountered great frustrations and to work in a trade that, though much more luxurious and outwardly significant, still seemed to him sordid. Part of what differentiated them was that the son was the darling of salons where his father felt embarrassed. Berenson's uncomfortable stronghold lay in being the center of his mother's world.

"My mother was born tidy and so was I," Berenson used to say, and this was not the only affinity between the mother and the son. Both were small, precise, elegant, and had what a friend described as "natural chic" and "enormous dignity." The mother was "very charming, but with a whim of iron."[9] Bernhard was her first and favorite child, and all his growing up took place in the atmosphere of her constant and doting attention. He said that his earliest memory was of "the sensation of rapture with which he stretched out his baby-hands, while he was still in his mother's arms, towards a picture of a bunch of grapes on a wine bottle."[10] The image suggests that his passion for painting began as soon as he could see, and the memory seems almost to be a painting: the adored son on his mother's lap reaches toward the icons of his future. As he grew, Bernhard found his mother's complete attention both necessary and intolerable. Eventually, one of the world's most sought-after

Judith and Albert Berenson, 1904. Biblioteca Berenson, Villa I Tatti—The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies, courtesy of the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

talkers could hardly bear to speak before the mother who hung on his every syllable.

The children who followed were not seen by their mother with the same halo of glorifying attention, but they all shared in the same family culture and played important roles in one another's lives. Bernhard was born in 1865, and his sister Senda in 1868. A brother, Abie, was the last of the children born in the old world, in 1873. Two more daughters, Bessie and Rachel, were born in Boston. Abie was a sullen child, whom Louis Lebowich described as "a rough lad whom no one could get on with," and whom the family found it convenient to blame and disparage.[11] The father was feckless and did not succeed in the new world as some of his relatives did. The life of the household revolved around the women, and the women hovered anxiously over one another and over Bernhard.

"Above all things be careful this summer mother dear," Rachel wrote. "It is generally in the summer that your little Tummy goes wrong—so be extra careful what you eat."[12] Rachel teased that she was expecting from her mother "a telegram to say that you lie awake nights wondering whether I have tuberculosis or Bright's disease or a stomachache."[13] Family life was humid. At the bottom of a letter from Rachel to another sibling, Rachel added, "Mother wants to write one word of reassurance," after which came, in Judith Berenson's scrawl: "My dearest love to you my precious child and to your beloved friends God bless you all your always loving and devoted mother I feel fine."[14]

They were a family that suffered and surveyed illness, but they were long-lived. The father lived to eighty-three, the mother ninety-one, and three of the children lived into their late eighties and even well into their nineties. The mother's "little Tummy" was a central feature of life. Bernhard Berenson, too, had endless stomach complaints and became a fussier and fussier eater as time went on. (Berenson's great-niece,

Rachel Berenson Perry, would remember that her father, Bernard Perry, complainingly referred to "his 'Berenson' or 'Jewish' stomach.")[15] Senda Berenson suffered an almost crushing fatigue and muscular atrophy until she seized the matter firmly in hand in her early twenties and began the gymnastic training that she would later be responsible for teaching at Smith College. She told Abie that he wouldn't feel so low if he would "take exercise every day" and "*eat a luncheon*." "I hope and pray," she said (it was his birthday), "that this may be a happy year for you full of *health* and contentment and my great wish is that you should make up your mind to live this coming year as hygienically as possible."[16] Bessie Berenson had chronic depression and exhaustion. Rachel Berenson had cluster headaches and debilitating migraines. When Rachel's son Bart brought home the small and delicate Harriet who was to become his wife, Harriet remembered Rachel saying that "she hoped I was not so healthy that I couldn't sympathize with someone who wasn't."[17]

Along with his mother, Berenson's sisters—Senda, Rachel, Bessie—played roles in his life that would subsequently be taken over by other women; glints of these originary personalities reappeared in Isabella Stewart Gardner, Mary Berenson, Belle da Costa Greene, Nicky Mariano, and many of Berenson's mistresses and friends.

Berenson's most formative relationship with a sibling was with Senda Berenson. Forceful in her work and convictions, insightful, genuinely self-sacrificing, a worrier and a keeper-together of the family, Senda was Bernhard's great confidante in youth and remained the person to whom he was closest in the family. She was, he said late in life, "the nearest to me in age, in looks, in bringing up, of all relations."[18] She was a person of large accomplishment in her own right—not only did she hold the first documented game of women's basketball at Smith, but

Senda Berenson, photographed by Bartlett F. Kenney. Biblioteca Berenson, Villa I Tatti—The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies, courtesy of the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

she chaired what became the national women's basketball association and played a significant part in a national movement that encouraged physical activity in women as part of their education.[19] In photographs, her face is a mixture of loveliness and concern.

For many years alone and lonely, Senda, at forty-three, married Herbert Abbott, like her a professor at Smith. As was true of all the other Berenson spouses, Abbott was not Jewish, and like all the other Berenson spouses, he was an ambitious intellectual. Writing to Bernhard of the new marriage and its happinesses and difficulties, Senda referred to the family's shared institutional passion as the solution to all problems for her husband: "If he could *only* get a professorship at Harvard—I feel *that* is the only place where he would be encouraged to do his best and where he could be appreciated."[20] Not too long after the marriage, Abbott became seriously ill, and he died relatively young.

The youngest child, Rachel, had good luck where Senda did not. Rachel was extremely funny, the most vivacious member of the family, and the most selfish, according to her siblings; she seems to have been the one besides Bernhard to see what she wanted and to seize it. She took a master's in classics from Oxford, and her letters home from frequent travels are always full of charming, and expensive, sights and sounds, rendered with a verve that is sibling to Berenson's own descriptions. Rachel maneuvered around Senda to marry Ralph Barton Perry, who had been interested in Senda when both were teaching at Smith. By the time he declared his intentions to Rachel, Perry had a credential much prized in the Berenson household: he was a professor of philosophy at Harvard. Rachel wrote to Bessie pleading with her to take her side, "Everything I know would have been different if these former relations between Ralph and Senda had never existed. That's all the more reason why I long to feel that you are with me—thinking *with*

me & *for me*—and about *it*."[21] Senda, writing home around the same time, commented drily of Rachel, "She has not lost *all* her selfish tendencies with *me*."[22] Rachel was the youngest, but the first of the siblings to marry and the only one to have children. It was, apparently, not easy to be a Berenson child and to grow up and leave home.

Bessie—melancholic, self-diminishing, often exhausted, and never married—was, among the sisters, the most solitary and the most dissatisfied. Languishing at home for decades, she at last came into her own when, over the course of many European visits to Bernhard, she discovered her talent for sculpture. By the time Nicky Mariano met her, Bessie had "lovely silver white hair" and was "cultivated, well read, subtle in her appreciation of literature and art, gifted as a sculptor," and "in artistic sensibility . . . nearest to B.B."[23] Like all the others, Bessie looked down on Abie, to whom she wrote letters that chastised and pitied him. Abraham—morose, ineffectual, using in his letters only the most rudimentary language, and that shot through with a kind of bleary resentment—was the child least favored by fortune and his parents. He never once made the European voyage that became common for the others; he lived at home or in a rooming house not far away. Bessie, writing to Senda after Abie had been briefly away and returned, gave vent to the family criticism of Abie, "To tell you the honest truth, I don't care to have Abie live in Boston. His friends here are all among the 'sheeney tribe' & I suppose he will go back to them."[24]

The family's quickness to criticize on the grounds of seeming too Jewish might be one of many manifestations of their perfectionism. Berenson periodically quoted Heinrich Heine's assertion, which could be a kind of family motto, "A Jew, to be taken for silver, must be of gold."[25] Meryle Secrest, another of Berenson's biographers, noticed Berenson's ardent effort: "Every aspect of his life and thought must be flawless, a work of art, even if he might be dimly aware that he could never learn

enough, master enough, or accomplish enough to appease the inner tyrant."[26] Things always ought to have been done better or turned out better than they had. Each Berenson was self-critical, and each was critical of the others. Probably because of both their collective temperament and the chaotic injuries of emigration, they fought to maintain some sense of control of their lives. In the new land of business, secularism, and what felt to them like a chaos of opportunities and pitfalls, the Berensons tried to enter the world each day immaculately turned out and accomplished. Tidiness was not merely a healthy and sensible way to live, it was a compulsion among many compulsions, to have everything exactly in place, to present a perfect facade to the world.

In all the brilliant conversation that his friends and mistresses recorded, and in all the hundreds of pages of autobiographical musings that Berenson later published, there is hardly any mention of his family. His sisters came fairly often to visit him in Italy, and he sent large sums of money home, but he didn't tell stories from his childhood, and those he told were masked in layers of romantic invention. In his late autobiographical work, *Sketch for a Self-Portrait*, he said that his childhood was "spent in an aristocratic republic. . . . There my family was among the first if not the first."[27] But the realities of their life in the Pale of Settlement must have been far from the aristocracy of Berenson's aspirations.

If the Berenson family, then the Valvrojenskis, had stayed in Butrymancy, he might never have come to visual art as his central subject. That picture of the grapes on a wine bottle would have been one of the very few painted images he encountered. Not only was the Jewish community wary of possible idolatry, but the paintings that belonged to the Christian communities, and to the nobles and the tsar, were in great measure inaccessible to the Jews, especially to relatively poor, rural Jews.

Butrymancy was only forty miles away from Vilna, which was a great center of religious learning, but forty miles was a long way then, and there is no mention in the record that the Valvrojenskis ever went there.

Russia at that time was a place ruled by a complex bureaucracy, one that managed to keep something in the neighborhood of fifty million serfs and state peasants, almost 80 percent of its population, in servitude until the emancipation of 1861, four years before Berenson was born. The Valvrojenskis were among the five million Jews restricted to the Pale of Settlement. Berenson remembered that, on this fertile land, Jews were often prevented from attempting agriculture and were sometimes close to the brink of starvation.[28] In 1868 and 1869, when Berenson was three years old, the governor-general of Vilna appointed a commission to make new statutes for the Jews. The commission advocated for the abolishment of Jewish community institutions altogether, asserting that the Jews "remain a contemptible and abominable nation. As members of civil society, they are like a diseased limb in the body politic, infecting all that it touches."[29]

A constant worry for Jewish families was conscription into Russia's standing army of more than a million men. Conscription was for twenty-five years and could be a family tragedy—one did not expect to see the conscript again. The practice also deprived communities of their young men and, during the Crimean War in the 1850s, sowed conflict among those who remained and who accused one another of having had a hand in what felt like, and sometimes were, abductions. These bitter denunciations became vivid stories, which Berenson remembered hearing in his childhood. Family rivalries took on force as other traditional sources of authority declined. Rabbis had less prestige and power, and so did the schools, the *heder* for boys, like the one Berenson attended.

In Butrymancy, as in many of the villages and towns of the

Pale, Jews made a life in those trades and services that grew up around the open marketplaces. Jews worked in the market stalls, were tailors, blacksmiths, and cobblers, and worked as factors for the landed gentry. Their positions were as intermediaries—between farmers and townspeople, between landowners and peasants, between cloth manufacturers and individual customers. With the advent of railroads, which came slowly and late to Russia, centralization in cities meant that the traders of small towns had less work. Jews, who worked primarily in the professions threatened by the changing economy, were in grave economic circumstances.

These were the forces buffeting the Valvrojenskis when their first son, Bernhard, came into the world, in Butrymancy, on June 26, 1865. The boy's young parents had been married the previous year, in 1864; Albert was then nineteen and Judith Mickleshanski seventeen. Early marriages were common—they allowed young Jewish men to be exempted from conscription—and the new couples usually lived with one of the sets of parents. Berenson's sense was that his own mother, "herself too much the young girl—lovely, and perhaps giddy," did not "play the mother. She left the happy task to her own mother." Berenson was very close to his grandparents. "My giant grandfather," Berenson wrote, "used, like St. Christopher, to carry me seated on his right shoulder."[30]

One of the picturesque details that Berenson would occasionally let fall about this grandfather was that he was employed in the timber trade, overseeing the peasants who felled the deep woods of Lithuanian timber and rafted the logs down its rivers to western markets. In his carefully documented biography of Berenson, Ernest Samuels contents himself with saying, "One surmises that [Solomon Mickleshanski], like many other literate Jews in that timber-rich district, was engaged as a subcontractor to one of the great Polish landowners."[31]

Solomon Mickleshanski lived into his nineties, but after their departure his grandchildren never saw him again. Berenson's grandmother died when he was quite little and still living in her household in Lithuania. In describing this loss, his prose turns suddenly stark and clear: "My grandmother died before I was five. Her departure stunned me. She had meant more to me than all other people put together, including my mother. I not only missed her day and night but could not understand what had happened."[32] Later in life, he was haunted by a terrible dream-image of his grandmother "encased like a mummy" in a "tomb-like chamber of polished black stone."[33] The recurrent fears he had, both of being buried alive and of his remains being moved after his death, seem to hearken back to the traumas and beliefs of his childhood.

Berenson's grandmother died the year after a severe famine had struck the region of the Pale where the Valvrojenskis lived. Many Jews in this period were so-called *luftmenschen*, men who contrived to survive on air. Samuels conjectures about Berenson's father that his "prospects had evidently been very slight, for he had been bred to no trade or profession."[34] But it could be that the family remembered Albert not working because there was no work to be had. If Bernhard Berenson had any memories of being four years old, as he claimed to do, they would have been from the period of the famine, another thing he never mentioned, and about which perhaps none of the people by whom he was surrounded in his later life would have known to ask.

Berenson's house, I Tatti, was an essential security for him throughout much of his adult life, and this, too, may have had a source in his childhood, when the loss of their house precipitated the great movement and change of his early years. The Valvrojenskis' house burned down, probably early in 1874, though whether from accidental or pernicious causes is not

known. Little Senda Berenson was saved, so the family used to say, by being carried out in her mother's arms. In Albert Valvrojenski's mind, the disaster apparently settled the question of whether to stay.

The communities of the Pale were long isolated, but the beginning of the 1860s had seen the founding of Hebrew-language newspapers, which brought news from Germany and beyond. Men selling third-class tickets on steamers for England and America now passed through the towns. Even in these years, before the worst of the pogroms and the great flood of emigration, people began to talk about going, and to go. Albert Valvrojenski decided on Boston, which until this period had not had much of a Jewish population, but where enough people from Butrymancy, including cousins of his, had already gone that, within a few years, Boston would have a Butrymancy Society. Boston had a reputation for learnedness. A Hebrew guidebook published in Berlin at that time gave Boston the label "the Athens of America," adding that the city was "the nation's foremost seat of wisdom and learning."[35]

In 1874, Albert and a young nephew of his, who would take the name Louis Berenson, departed from the Pale. And the following year, the boy who would become Bernhard Berenson, his mother, and his two younger siblings, left the four thousand people of Butrymancy and took ship for a city with a population of nearly four hundred thousand, a city that had itself recently had a disastrous fire but was already vigorously rebuilding.

In the life of Bernard Berenson, certain cities played a role of central significance, and it is no exaggeration to say that, when the Valvrojenskis' choice fell on Boston, everything followed from that. Their Boston houses—first at 32 Nashua Street, which was nearly in the North Station railroad yard, and then around the corner at 11 Minot Street—were Judith Berenson's domain. Many of the women in the new commu-