Leonard Barkan, *Mute Poetry, Speaking Pictures* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2013). i-xv + 192. Illustrated.

Reviewed by James Heffernan

Like an oil well kissed by Midas, Leonard Barkan keeps on pumping gold. Three years after magisterially glossing the interplay of words and images that Michelangelo set down on some 200 sheets of paper (in *Michelangelo: A Life on Paper* [2010]), he has now compressed—with admirable elegance--the long history of theorizing about the relations between language, literature, and visual art. In the past fifty years, this topic has become a major intellectual industry, and Barkan's book ends with a brief account of its boldface names such as John Hollander and W.J.T. Mitchell. But with refreshing audacity, his own text sidesteps virtually all modern scholarship to focus instead on what has been said about words and images by poets, painters, and philosophers from ancient times to the Renaissance, Barkan's home turf. (He mentions Lessing only in an Afterword.) The result is a lucid, compact, highly readable book that is free of footnotes—free of all fencing with arguments made by modern scholars-- but rich in rumination on the problems created whenever one medium of representation is compared with another.

Unsurprisingly, his point of departure is the dictum that Plutarch ascribes to Simonides and from which Barkan plucks his title—"Painting is mute poetry, poetry a speaking picture." In calling this chiastic formula "even-handed" (30), Barkan curiously fails to note its radical asymmetry: while poetry is said to equal picture *plus* speech, painting is said to equal poetry *minus* speech. But the logocentrism thus lodged in what is perhaps the oldest known formula for interart relations is the key to Barkan's argument about the history of those relations up to and through the Renaissance. When, for instance, Horace compares poetry to painting (*ut pictura poesis,* "as in a painting, so a poem"), he takes for granted the meaning of *pictura* "so as to prove something about" poetry (30). From Aristotle to Sidney, Barkan contends, logocentric theorists use "the point that x is true of pictures" to argue that x is also true of poems, but x "refers to a set of properties that word-makers have imposed on pictures" (30).

Yet the book is much more than a brief against the logocentrism of word-and-image theorists, and much more than a survey of attempts to define the relations between poetry and painting, or to explain poetry in terms of painting. Written by an art historian who reads language and literature just as acutely as he reads visual art, it is also a study of how

particular works of art, poetry, and theater instantiate as well as elucidate the interdependence and the rivalry—the *paragone*—between the verbal and the visual. In chapter one, for instance, Barkan considers a set of paintings that literally combine words and images but also prompt us to imagine what cannot be seen or heard in them, such as the invisible contents of the book in Rembrandt's painting of a famous preacher. Chapter two moves from Socrates' reductive theory of imitation and Horace's critique of monstrous conjunctions in painting and poetry (such as a woman-fish) to the riot of metamorphoses with which Ovid turns Horace's critique upside down; and to explain what Christian culture does with the rivalry between poetry and art, this chapter also examines the succession of ekphrases in cantos 10-12 of Dante's *Purgatorio*. Chapter three takes Praxitiles' now lost sculpture of Aphrodite as the point of departure for a meditation on desire and loss in the experience of all visual representation, especially sculptures or paintings of a beloved or erotic figure. Finally, chapter four cogently argues that in the Renaissance, above all in Shakespeare, theater embraces poetry and painting and thus trumps them both: just as Edgar (in *King Lear*) invents a purely verbal picture of the view from Dover cliff,

Shakespeare's plays "constantly create verbal fictions about visual experience that the audience is not really having" (154).

Even after fifty years of scholarship and theorizing about words and pictures, this book will be indispensable to anyone who wants to understand not just the relations between the two, but the fascinating history of those relations in poetry, theory, and visual art itself.

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