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THE EMBLEM: DOCUMENT OF BAD TASTE
OR MEDIUM OF ARTISTIC VALUE?

Writing on *English Emblem Books* (1948) Rosemary Freeman comments that the emblem "as a contemporary document [. . .] reflects the mind of the age", but "if judged by absolute standards, rarely of any value" because there is "no one which attained to great eminence as literature" (FR, 1, 2). True, if we have a narrow, purely aesthetic concept of literature in mind, detached and isolated from other systems or values, they might strike us as an eighteenth-century philosopher defined them: "magical, monkish, mystical and Gothic" (FR, 10). Such distaste for the enigmatic and arbitrary nature of the emblem has been upheld by critics who until recently denounced it as a "degenerated form of allegory", "the strangest of all Renaissance fashions" or an "irritating sort of learned game" (DET, 11). I want to argue that emblems are more than documents of bad taste, and that by a critical and selective study of emblem-books we can broaden and enrich our literary canon. T. S. Eliot wrote that "The greatness of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards; though we must remember that whether it is literature or not can be determined only by literary standards" (ERL, 388). Our first task will be to find out in what sense the emblem constitutes a literary genre and then to explore its particular nature in relation to mediaeval symbolic mode, typology and "unified sensibility".

I. *Emblematic Form*

For nineteenth-century scholarship emblem books represent-
ed primarily an exciting gold-mine for antiquarian curiosity.
Their significance in English literature was suggested by Henry
Green, an enthusiastic, pioneering but uncritical scholar.
Twentieth-century criticism — notably the works of Mario
Praz, Rosemary Freeman, Robert Clements, Albrecht Schöne,
Dietrich Jöns, the unique compendium of Henkel-Schöne, Peter
M. Daly, Barbara K. Lewalski — has contributed much to a
solid theory of the emblem. It is indeed important to assess
this vast flow of material theoretically: after the first appearance
of Alciatus' *Emblematum Liber* (1531), which went into more
than 170 editions, there was a boom in emblem-writing on
the continent for almost two centuries (Paradin, de la Perrière,
Iunius, Sambucus, etc.) and also in a somewhat more modest
quantity in England (Whitney, Combe, Peacham, Wither,
Quarles, etc.). Their widespread popularity, evidenced in trans-
lations and adaptations, has yet to be explored from a compar-
ative angle.

Barbara Lewalski considers emblems together with medita-
tion and sermon-theory as "ancillary genres" — a "curious
amalgam of picture, motto and poem [...] a minor literary
kind which contributed significantly to theories about [...]
poetic language and symbolism" (LPP, 179). Peter Daly, how-
ever, argues that, owing to meticulous German scholarship of
the past few decades, emblems have been elevated to a genre.
"In outer form the emblem is as clearly defined and recog-
nizable as is the ode or sonnet" (DET, 11), and "the emblem is
undeniably a three-part structure involving picture and words"
(DET, 16). Regarding the interaction of text and picture, critics
fall into two groups: some, like Schöne and Jöns, maintain
that the emblem is "basically an illustrated literary form, the
essence of which is the symbolic value of the object, scene or
action, and this is a verbal phenomenon. The association of the
pictured motif and abstract concepts is a function of language"

(DET, 16). The other group (Sulzer, Heckscher and Wirth) regards the emblem as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a "hybrid or mixed form", a synthetic art in the *ut pictura poesis* tradition.

Uita, aut mortt. 51

WITHIN one flower, two contraries remaine,
For proofe behoulde, the fpider, and the bee,
One poifon fuckes, the bee doth honie draine :
The Scripture foe, hath two effectes we fee :
Vnto the bad, it is a fworde that flaies,
Vnto the good, a fhielde in ghoftlie fraies.

De littera & fpiritu.
S. Paulus Cor. 2.
cap. 3.
Paradifus poëticus.
Vfus abeft manuitén-
cus pede flamina taxo,
Almus lanigera fr-
tilitate habet.
Non dulcem t quasuis
apu ingenofa haurit em
Flore: fed i lollo gor-
more, mella legit.

Nil penna, fed vfus.

To. Pr. Dr.

THE Hippocrites, that make fo great a fhowe,
Of Sanctitie, and of Religion founde,
Are fhaddowes meere, and with out fubftance goe,
And beinge ti'de, are but diflemblers founde.
Theife are compar'de, vnto the Oftriche faire,
Whoe fpreades her winges, yet fealdome tries the aire.

Martialis 3.
Decipes alas verbis,
voltuque benigno
Nam mobi aura natus
diffimulator eru.

G 2 Fortiffima

Fig. 1

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A glance at contemporary Renaissance literary theories and "emblem criticism" will help to clarify the issue. George Puttenham in his *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589) devotes a whole chapter to the description of *devices, impresa* or emblems, which he considers as synonymous. Their function is to "insinuate some secret, wittie morall" (LPP, 183). Samuel Daniel in his rather critical preface to the translation of Paolo Giovio's *Delle Imprese* (1585) emphasizes the primacy of picture-language, the hieroglyphics of the Egyptians, which preceded the use of words. These people were induced to "figure beasts, plants, trees, celestial signs [. . .] observing the nature and quality of every creature". As opposed to the similar *impresa* emblems are "general conceits rather of moral matters, then credit to the wit, then to reveal the secrets of the mind" (FT, 31). They are closely related to conceit and epigram: "emblems are things [representations of objects] used to illustrate a conceit, and epigrams are words [a conceit] used to illustrate objects, such as works of arts or tombs" (LPP, 180).

Renaissance Neoplatonic theory held that the ultimate source of the emblem is ancient hieroglyphics. Henri Estienne's *The Arte of Making Devices* (translated into English by Thomas Blount, 1646) traces the origins of the devices back to hieroglyphics, the Egyptian sacred sciences, forms of writing considered to have marked man's divine origin. In the author's view symbol, enigma, emblem, parable and fable can be traced back to hieroglyphics.

> The emblem is a sweet and moral symbol. The chief aim of the emblem is, to instruct us, by subjecting the figure to our view and the sense to our understanding [. . .] if the picture of it be too common, it ought to have a mystical sense, if they be something obscure they must more clearly inform us by the words, provided they be analogous and correspondent. (p. 7)

The *pictura* of the emblem is indeed relevant. It is not an extraneous ornament, but something that must be "read". Recent critics like Gilman and Scholz dwell upon the emblem as

embodying a language *in rebus* mutually interchangeable with
the language *in verbis* of the text. Scholz especially emphasizes
the essential linguistic and semiotic aspect of the emblematic
image.

II. *Emblematic Mode and Content*

Daly distinguishes three approaches of emblem-criticism: (1)
The historical-chronological approach analysing the origin of
the content of the *pictura*, *inscriptio* and *subscriptio*, studying
the relationship between *pictura* and *scriptura*, etc. (Jöns); (2)
the selective-comparative method, which looks for some com-
mon characteristic features of the emblem-tradition (Schöne).
(3) With his formal method Daly creates a category of value-
neutrality by which he considers content, theme, *Weltanschau-
ung* as non-defining. This approach led to his concern with cata-
loguing and indexing all extant emblem books. Practical and
ambitious as Daly's indexing project is, we can, I think, benefit
more from the studies of Jöns and Schöne, especially if we ap-
proach them from the perspective of literature.

The indisputable merit of Jöns and Schöne is that they have
established the roots of the emblem not only in Renaissance
hieroglyphics but also in the Christian medieval tradition of
hermeneutics. Both authors were influenced by Friedrich Ohly's
study on the spiritual meaning of words in the Middle Ages.
The biblical symbolic mode created the tradition of mediaeval
exegesis and typology. The notion of prophecy and fulfilment,
shadow and reality (HEB, 10,1), type and antitype was in the
mind of the mediaeval exegetical scholar. The distinction be-
tween the literal and the spiritual senses was eventually to cul-
minate in the famous principle of fourfold meaning. It has been
understood since St. Augustine that "God as creator has in-
vested the things of creation with rich emblematic significance
[. . .] and as designer of providential history has invested the
persons, things and events recorded in scripture with figurative

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[typological] significance, whereby they foreshadow what is to come" (LPP, 113). The basis of the biblical symbolic mode is to discern unity in diversity, the transcendent in the immanent, and the creator in the creation. For mediaeval man "the whole world had been symbolic, and all the details of experience had formed part of one unified allegorical conception of the meaning of life" (FR, 20). Gabriel Josipovici in his study on "The World as a Book" reminds us of Hugh of St. Victor, who wrote that "this whole visible world is a book written by the finger of God" (JWB, 29). The idea of the world as being the sign of God was also inherent in the seventeenth-century Christian hieroglyphics. Jacopus Typotius, the author of *De Hierographia* (1618) writes that the fountainhead of hieroglyphics is not Hermes Trismegistus but God himself. The things in the world are signs created by God, and God's sign-language is creation itself. Michael Meier's *Atlanta Fugiens* (1618) suggests that Christ is the greatest hieroglyphic symbol and that nature is to be interpreted as a hieroglyphic written by God's hands (FT, 38); and Jacob Boehme in his *Signatura Rerum* (1682) writes that "man is [. . .] God's masterpiece, a living emblem and hieroglyphic of eternity and time" (p. 3).

Schöne finds that there is a "related mode of perception" between emblems and the typological way of seeing. The emblematic picture hides a "higher meaning". It can also be "traced back to the typological exegesis and the allegorical procedures of mediaeval theology, which understood everything created to be a sign, an indication of the creator and which sought to reveal significance implanted into things by God" (DET, 52). Schöne also appeals to the patristic-scholastic doctrine of the fourfold meaning, where the *sensus spiritualis* is subdivided into *sensus allegoricus* (typology), *sensus tropologicus* (morality) and *sensus anagogicus* (eschatology). Above all, says Schöne, "the interest in the *sensus tropologicus* appears to survive in the emblematists' conception and interpretation of the world" (DET, 52). According to the context the spiritual sense can be interpreted either *in bonam partem* or *in malam partem:*

e.g. the lion can signify Christ, because it sleeps with open eyes;
the devil because of its bloodlust, the heretic because of its
evil-smelling mouth, or the upright Christian because of its
courage.

"Ars" and "Cognitio"

Emblems share the function of art insofar as they represent
figures, images or an idea, but intellectual reasoning is also
involved. Schöne calls it "the function of representation and
interpretation". He says: "The three-part structure corresponds
to a dual function of representation and interpretation, descrip-
tion and explanation" (DET, 22). Any part of the threefold
structure of *inscriptio-pictura-subscriptio* can function as repre-
sentative while the others are interpretative.

Jöns introduced the principle of pure *Kunstform* (artform)
and *Denkform* (mode of thought). The latter term is taken from
C. S. Lewis, who conceives of symbolism as a mode of thought
unlike allegory, which is a mode of expression. "It belongs to
the form of poetry, more than to its contents, and it is learned
from the practice of the ancients" (JSB, 29). Jöns's notion of the
"Denkform" or "mode of thought" of the emblem has much
in common with Schöne's observation on "the priority of the
idea in the emblematic picture" (DET, 35–6). For Jöns the
artform is neutral, characterized by enigmatic veiling, while the
mode of thought conveys necessary *(verbindliche)* relationship
based on the tradition of mediaeval exegesis and typology (DET,
46). The aesthetic problematics of the emblem have been dis-
cussed since Paolo Giovio (who distinguished between "body"
– picture and the "soul" – text of the emblem. Jöns finds that
the emblem is to be understood not primarily as "ars" but as
"cognitio" and as such to be of divine origin (DET, 55; JSP,
46).

If the mode of thought, it seems to me, is a displaced example
of mediaeval exegesis and if this symbolism is ultimately rooted

in the Bible, then we may well suspect some kind of kinship between emblems and the biblical symbolic mode of the parables. John MacQueen defines parables as "narrative allegories" which speak about things hidden or concealed. Indeed they share many features with the "typological allegory" that constitutes part of prophetic or situational allegory. We have already cited Henri Estienne's *The Arte of Making Devices*, which establishes a close relationship between symbol, enigma, emblem, fable and parable. All of them are dependent on the hieroglyphical way of thought. To substantiate this view we may quote Francis Quarles. In his Preface to *Emblems* (1635) he wrote that "the emblem is but a silent parable", mentioning that Jesus also figured as the type of the Sower, the Fisher, the Physician. Quarles then raises the question: "why not presented so, as well as to the eye as to the eare? Before the knowledge of letters, God was known by hieroglyphics. And indeed what are the heavens, the earth, nay every creature but hieroglyphics and emblems of his glory" (p. 7). Scholarship still has to explore in detail the inner relationship between the emblematic and parabolic modes of thought.

To illustrate the exegetic principle inherent in the emblem, we may conveniently turn to Geoffrey Whitney's compilation, *A Choice of Emblemes and Other Devises* (1586). On p. 51 (G2) we find two emblems. It is fascinating to observe how elements of extremely diverse registers make up a whole, each contributing to the composite elucidation of one idea. In the emblem on the top half of the page the Latin *inscriptio* "Vitae, aut morti" (for life or for death) perches upon the *pictura* representing a flower with (faintly visible) bees and spiders. The *subscriptio* or epigram explains how two contraries reside in one flower. The concrete images are immediately spiritualized and by way of analogy are elevated to an abstract level. The idea is that holy Scripture can be a sword for the wicked and a shield for the good. Marginal notes always prove relevant in Whitney's work. In this case St. Paul's passage on the letter and the spirit is quoted (2 Corinthians, III), marked as "paradisus poeticus".

So, the emblem is an object of meditation, the various parts
of which illustrate a spiritual or moral truth. This seems to bear
out Jöns, who said that "the emblem is the last attempt spiri-
tually to grasp the world in an exegetical manner (DET, 77).

The emblem in the bottom half of the page begins with the
motto: "Nil penna, sed usus" (The wing [is] nothing but the
use). In this case the abstract sense is presented in the *subscriptio*:
there are some who show religious devotion but in reality are
dissemblers, hypocrites. The conclusion is that they may be
compared to the "Ostriche faire / Whoe spreades her winges, yet
sealdome tries the aire". In the margin there is a fitting quotation
from Martial. Thus the significant attributes potentially inherent
in the ostrich are used to convey a piece of wisdom.

"Unified sensibility"

The idea of connecting sensuous physical and concrete images
with intellectual and abstract concepts is characteristic both of
the conceit and of the emblem. Critics like Praz, Jöns and Daly
emphasize the close relationship between the conceit and the
emblem. Mazzeo, in his criticism of Praz, finds that "the conceit
was the instrument for the poetic exploration of reality" (DET,
67), but he is more sceptical about a cause-and-effect relationship
between the emblem and the conceit. Daly, however, finds that
Mazzeo exaggerates the incompatibility (DET, 67). Indeed,
metaphysical poetry is closely linked to emblem-writing. Dis-
cussing Crashaw's poetry, Austin Warren has shown that
"both the emblem and the conceit proceed from wit" (MZ,
96), Lederer has convincingly written about Donne and emble-
matic practice (LD), and Lewalski exhaustively explored the
emblematic background to the poetry of Donne, Herbert,
Vaugham, Traherne and Taylor (LPP).

My last point relates to the unity of imagination and thought,
art and science, the original unity of knowledge. We have seen
that Schöne speaks about the dual function of representation

and interpretation in the emblem, Jöns finds it both *ars* (art) and *cognitio* (knowledge), and Daly joins them by considering the emblem as an illustrated form of literary or verbal allegory, *illustrare* in its original sense meaning the intellectual effort of clarifying, illuminating and teaching (DET, 71). I would suggest that the emblems are Renaissance and Mannerist hermeneutic tools of interpreting the world and that hermeneutics is both an art and a science, insofar as it is a creative use of science.

It was T. S. Eliot who in his famous review essay on Grierson's *The Metaphysical Poets* (1921) introduced the now current term of "dissociation of sensibility". He argued that contrary to Dr. Johnson's view, the seventeenth-century poets possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could embrace any kind of experience"; that for them "thought and feeling were fused"; that they were capable of a "direct, sensuous apprehension of thought", whereas later poets "do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of the role". After these "simple, artificial, difficult or fantastic poets" something has disappeared: "In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in from which we have never recovered" (EL, 286–7). Many critics and historians of ideas have taken up Eliot's celebrated notion. Basil Willey in his *The Seventeenth-Century Background* (1934) also graphically depicts how the original unity of knowledge was split; how, due to departmentalization, a dichotomy arose between the natural sciences and the humanities: how scientific truth in the name of "explanation" divorced itself from "understanding" totality. This seventeenth-century rift in human thought was strongly felt in the declining prestige of the traditional poetic language: figures, tropes, metaphors and symbols came to be understood as suspicious and gloomy devices, and the poetic use of the language was seen as an abuse of "clear and distinct" ideas (pp. 206–7). Only recent philosophers like Paul Ricœur attempt to fill the gap between the now traditional dichotomy of "scientific" explanation and "humanistic" understanding by uniting both the symbolic and the logical potentials of language and by discovering "the rule of the metaphor". This

ultimately "poetical" task in the sciences, in Eliot's words is "to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into [. . .] meaning" (EL, 289).

This undissociated or unified sensibility of some of the world-exploring emblems might help us to regain a lost symbolical consciousness which is, ultimately, an artistic one.

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