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The emblem tradition and its mysterious signs

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> Still further along the street there are more pretentious house doors studded with huge nails. On these our forefathers exercised their ingenuity, tracing hieroglyphs and mysterious signs which were once understood in every household, but all clues to their meaning are forgotten now – they will be understood no more of any mortal. In such wise would a Protestant make his profession of faith, there also would a Leaguer curse Henry IV in graven symbols. A burger would commemorate his civic dignities, the glory of his long-forgotten tenure of office as alderman or sheriff. On those old houses, if we could but read it, the history of France is chronicled.
>
> Honoré de Balzac, *Eugenie Grandet*

Balzac describes an intriguing mode of representation, a mode in which people professed their faith, communicated their anger and commemorated their accomplishments not only in France but throughout Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By lamenting the loss of *clues* to the meaning of *mysterious signs* Balzac also laments for a way of thinking and a way of life, a cultural phenomenon or the whole tradition that enabled his forefathers to exercise their ingenuity in this manner. In his lament, he depicts accurately, albeit fictionally, the fate of the emblem tradition: its vast popularity and multiple uses in the past and its sinking into oblivion in his own time.

While the *clues* to the meaning of those *mysterious signs* and the origin and nature of the whole emblem tradition might have been *forgotten* by Balzac's time, they have not been lost. As a matter of fact, they have survived most of Balzac's *pretentious house doors* and can be found books in of emblems, *imprese* and hieroglyphs. As Karl J. Hoeltgen notes, 'there are about a thousand titles' of such books »with

over two thousand editions and more than a million copies« (26). We may only wonder whether Balzac was aware of their existence.

What Balzac's account does not indicate is the fact that those books, *mysterious signs* and the whole emblem tradition fell into disrepute toward the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century. Thus, in his *Second Characters of the Language and Forms* (1713), the Earl of Shaftesbury disparages the whole emblem tradition by describing the emblems of his predecessors as »False, barbarous and mixed« characters, or »Enigmatical, preposterous, disproportionable, gouty and lame forms. False imitation, lie, impotence, pretending. . . . Magical, mystical, monkish and Gothic emblems« (91). Also, the works of Wither and Quarles, two major English emblematists of the seventeenth century, were ridiculed by Pope, Swift and Atterbury. While Shaftesbury discards the emblem tradition primarily for esthetic reasons, Alexander Pope disparages Wither and Quarles in his *Dunciad* because of their association with Egyptian hieroglyphs and echoes already widespread resentment of hieroglyphs and conceits as vehicles of false learning.

Although twentieth century critics have done a great deal to exonerate the emblem tradition from such accusations, some of those old misconceptions concerning its origin and nature still remain current among literary scholars, though in a more refined form. Thus, we can hear that the emblem is an obscurantist genre or that the whole emblem tradition is conservative in its form and practice. To dispel these and similar misconceptions we have to take a closer look at the origin of this tradition and the nature of the emblem as one of its most representative manifestations.

There is no doubt that the publication of Andrea Alciato's *Emblematum liber* (Augsburg, 1531) provided his contemporaries with a long-awaited genre of an emblem book, a genre incorporating both verbal and visual forms of representation. However, that was not Alciato's intention. He started the project by compiling epigrams and adages – verbal forms of representation – whereby he translated a great number of epigrams from the *Greek Anthology* and drew on ancient historians, such as Pliny, Athenaeius, Pausanias and others. This diversity of sources and themes prompted Alciato to title the compilation *Emblemata;* he borrowed the term from F. Bude's *Annotationes ad Panectas* where it signified mosaic work (Praz 1964). It was quite by accident that this work became a »picture book«. Namely, Alciato's Augsburg publisher Heinrich Steyner decided to add plates to his epigrams. Not only did Alciato disown this edition as a *bastard child* (probably because the woodcuts were poorly executed), but he also did not use any plates in the 1547 and 1548 editions of his works which he edited himself (Miedema 1968).

Nevertheless, Alciato's contemporaries were not at all bothered by this adulterating interference of the Augsburg publisher, and they embraced *the new picture book* as a God-given genre. It is not surprising that Alciato's *Emblemata* achieved over 170

editions with numerous translations, and over 600 authors followed his example in writing one or more books of this kind. Although these emblem books vary in their content and purpose, they share one common element, the tripartite form of the emblem unit. In contemporary terminology the components of an emblem unit are defined as *pictura, inscriptio,* and *subscriptio* (a plate, a motto, and the accompanying text in verse or prose), and individual emblem units are very often placed on separate pages (figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1. A. Alciato, *Emblematum liber* (1531)

Figure 2. N. Reusner, *Emblemata* (1581)

While Alciato never laid down any fixed rules about the emblem-book genre or about the emblem unit itself, his translators and imitators did so in his name. Alciato's more immediate design was to compose a book of epigrams »after which painters, goldsmiths and founders can fashion objects which we call badges and which we fasten on our hats, or else bear as trade-marks, such as the anchor of Aldus . . .« (Miedema 1968:236). Thus, we can conclude that Alciato intended to create a verbal »source book« of icons for the visual and applied arts and that the *mysterious signs* on French house doors reflected his design, while the production of emblem books came as a strong, but probably unexpected, side effect.

Although Alciato's design might appear very simple, his technique is rather complex; it has not been fully grasped by his contemporaries and it causes disagreements among twentieth-century scholars (Daly 1979). It should be noted that the language of Alciato's epigrams is as ecphrastic as his source, the *Greek Anthology.* This very fact made the »illustration« of individual epigrams almost inevitable and, one might think, very easy. But that was not always the case because Alciato's epigrams very often describe numerous objects of art and present various images, and Alciato does not give explicit instructions to the painter or the goldsmith how to choose from among those images. Consequently, a great number of plates for Alciato's epigrams in various editions tend to »illustrate« the *ekphrasis* of his epigrams, which leads us to a conclusion that the artists misunderstood his intention as well as his technique of representation. And this is the technique of *emblematic reduction* of a literary *topos,* or any type of treatise or argument, into an icon or what was at the time considered to be a hieroglyphic sign. That Francis Bacon was fully aware of this technique becomes evident in his *Advancement of Learning* where he defines the emblem as follows: »Emblem reduceth conceits intellectual to images sensible, which strike the memory more.« Needless to say, Bacon simply gives a clearer idea of what Alciato expresses very obscurely in a letter to Francesco Calvo: »I give in each separate epigram a description of something, such that it signifies something pleasant taken from history or from nature . . .« (Miedema 1968:236). What Alciato could not define clearly he definitely put very effectively into practice.

The technique of *emblematic reduction* is nicely demonstrated, for instance, in his *Milan* and *Alliances* emblems. In the epigram of the former emblem, Alciato describes various aspects of Milan's hybrid culture; he points out the fusion of paganism and Christianity in Milan's history, art and architecture; then he reduces the whole discourse to a single icon, or conceit: *a fleecy pig.* Following Alciato's original intention, we can assume that the people of Milan should have worn badges with an icon of a *fleecy pig as* their trade-mark or taken it as an emblem of their city. And this visually presented conceit or icon, as Bacon suggests, was supposed to remind them of their dual – pagan and Christian – heritage. For the same reason one would expect to find the same icon visually presented in the plate accompanying this epigram in an emblem book. However, judging by the plates for this emblem in various editions, the artists seem to have misunderstood Alciato's design for they depicted the city of Milan, its art and architecture, in their plates rather than a single icon of a *fleecy pig* (Daly 1985).

The artists had an easier job in producing plates for the *Alliances* emblem. The epigram reads as follows:

Accept, Duke, this lute, which is said to
derive its form from a fishing boat,
and which the Latin Muse claims as her own.
May this gift of ours be pleasing
to you at this time,
as you prepare to enter upon new alliances
with your allies.
It is difficult, unless a man is skilled,
to tune so many strings.
And if one string is not well tuned,
or is broken – which can easily happen - the
entire pleasantness of the shell perishes;
and that excellent music will be ineffectual.
Thus the leaders of Italy are joined together in
alliances.
There is nothing for you to fear, if harmonious
love for you continues;
but if anyone withdraws – as we often see – the
entire harmony is reduced to nothing.
(Daly 1985)

In this particular instance *emblematic reduction* is effected through a political treatise on the ideal manner of governing an alliance whereby political wisdom is *reduced* to an icon of a lute. Although there is no explanation in the epigram as to why this particular object or instrument has been chosen, we have to remember that in Alciato's time the lute was one of the most difficult instruments to tune. In addition to this, Alciato exploits a well-established literary tradition in which the skills of government are metaphorically presented as the skills of musicians (Sternfeld 1963). And this metaphor crept even into contemporary political theory, such as Jean Bodin's work *Six Livres de la Republique* (Paris, 1576).

In this particular emblem, Alciato's epigram seems to have achieved its proper objective for even the plate in the Augsburg edition depicts a single icon, the lute. Thus the lute became an emblem not only of Maximilian, to whom Alciato dedicates it, but of all wise rulers or monarchs who knew how to tune the strings of government. Whether directly under the influence of Alciato's work or the influence of his own sources this particular icon found its way into royal emblematic portraits, such as Hilliard's miniature portrait of Queen Elizabeth playing the lute (Strong 1987) and Holbein's *Ambassadors* (Heckscher 1972).

Both Bacon's definition of the emblem and Alciato's technique of representation clarify the functional relationship of visual and verbal components within the emblem unit. This relationship is not based on subservience of either components in the sense that the text »explains« the plate or that the figure simply »illustrates« the text, as some scholars tend to believe (Freeman 1948); rather, they seem to be bound on a complementary basis. The emblem is univalent in meaning but its

components are directed toward different human faculties. While the verbal part engages our intellect in discursive thinking, the visual part, or the icon presented in the plate, addresses the senses and enhances our memory.

There is a close resemblance between icons and conceits in the way they are effected and in their origin. As Mario Praz has demonstrated, both the sonneteers and the emblematists learned their art from the Greek masters of the *Greek Anthology.* While Petrarch had no interest in the visual representation of conceits, some of his sonnets were subsequently recognized by the emblematists as potential emblems and were »illustrated«, almost in the same manner as Alciato's epigrams. But the distinction between the icon and the conceit is not purely in the form of representation, verbal and visual, but also in their purpose and presupposed nature.

In the dedication of the Augsburg edition of his epigrams Alciato says that »Just as one can attach trimmings to clothing and badges to hats, so must each of us be able to write with dumb signs« (Miedema 241). So the potential icons effected by his epigrams are regarded as a curious means of communication, *dumb signs.* Alciato's search for *dumb signs* coincided with the search of his immediate predecessors and contemporaries for natural language and real characters and particularly with their interest in Egyptian hieroglyphs (Singer 1989). There is no doubt that Alciato shared the willing deception of his contemporaries in believing that the hieroglyphs were ideograms, rather than phonetic signs, and Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica* (1505) exerted a great influence on his art, so much so that he compares his *dumb signs* to 'the hieroglyphics in Horus' (Volkmann 1923; Miedema 1968: 242).

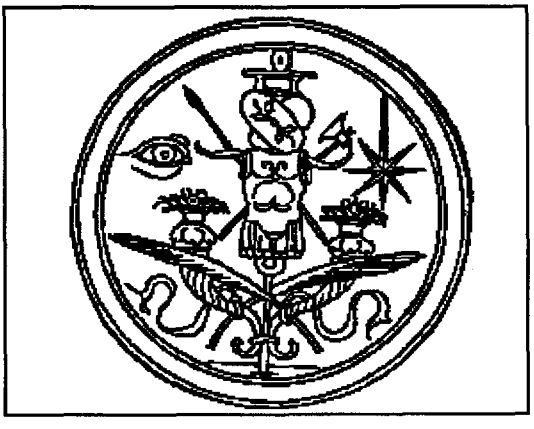

Figure 3. Hieroglyphic sign
Hypnerotomachia Poliphili,
(Venice 1499.)

While Alciato exploits the interest of his contemporaries in Egyptian hieroglyphs, he does not translate but rather emulates the old masters and creates a contemporary equivalent of their ideogramic language. Unlike various books of hieroglyphs published before and during his life time (see figure 3), Alciato's work does not promote Egyptian but humanistic learning and it demonstrates how icons or hieroglyphs can be used as a means of communication. And this is more than evident in his *Alliances* emblem, cited above. It should be noted once again that the lute icon emblematically represents a great deal of contemporary political theory on the ideal manner of governing the state, or an alliance in this case. However, Alciato does not simply represent a treatise. By presenting the lute as an inauguration gift to Maximilian, the Duke of Milan, he expresses political advice and warns the Duke against potential dangers of his office. In other words Alciato communicates by way of a *dumb sign,* hoping that it will retain the message in Maximilian's memory and thus continue speaking in his own stead. At the same time Alciato pays tribute to Maximilian and »communicates« to the artist or artisan how to represent the Duke as a wise ruler in potential portraits, medallions or *imprese*.

Although there is no evidence that the artists heeded Alciato's advice in this particular instance, Nicolas Reusner's emblem with a motto *Pro Lege, et Grege testifies* to the success of Alciato's intention in the instance of another icon: the pelican (figure 2). In the *inscriptio* to this emblem, Reusner informs us that King Alfons of Aragon had a pelican in his *impresa*. The pelican emblem was one of the most widely disseminated emblems in various emblem books, and whoever decided to include this particular icon in Alfons's *impresa* must have been aware of its emblematic import. The icon represents a virtuous king who is ready to sacrifice his blood for his people and for justice. Thus it was easy to associate Alfons with Christ.

Furthermore, the pelican icon became a powerful medium by means of which European monarchs created and propagated their imperial cult image. It was one of the most frequently used icons in Queen Elizabeth's portraits and medallions. As Roy Strong demonstrates, the proliferation of royal portraits, miniatures and medallions with various emblematic accessories was instrumental in the creation of Queen Elizabeth's personal and imperial cult image; the Queen was aware of and exploited the interest of her subjects in emblematics and communicated political messages to her subjects in this peculiar manner (Strong 1977). Equally so, the subjects communicated their compliments, tributes, and pleas to their monarch. By means of various emblematic accessories depicted in their portraits, both the Queen and her subjects communicated, as Peter Daly notes, their conceptions of themselves and their »role in society« or their »social and political status« (1988: 6).

While the English published relatively few emblem books in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Whitney, Wither and Quarles), the emblem tradition

flourished in the fields of visual and applied arts and literature; it influenced the way of thinking, living and dying (See Walton's account of John Donne's life and death). Even sermons were preached emblematically, in London as well as on the Continent (Daly 1988; Joens 1972). This broad cultural portrait corresponds with Balzac's statement in that it depicts an age in which the emblematic mode of representation and communication played a very dominant role. Whether directly under the influence of emblem books or through the exposure to live emblematic practices of their time, and the latter seems more probable, even the greatest playwrights and poets such as Shakespeare, Webster, Herbert and Donne practiced emblematics in their respective works. The appearance of pelican or broken-string icons, for instance, in Shakespeare's *Richard II* and *King Lear* is not accidental. They have the same functional purpose in the commerce of political dialogue that they had in the religio-political environment of the Elizabethan age.

Our difficulty in noticing icons in literary works of that period arises not only from our unfamiliarity with emblem books but also from the fact that we live in a different cultural milieu. The political polemics of our age are characterized by explicit mud slinging rather than by veiled communication of ideas through *mysterious signs.* For this reason, the emblem books offer themselves as an indispensable tool for our hermeneutic procedures. On the other hand, those responsible for the formation of a new European alliance, and those responsible for the design of its emblem, ought to consult those emblem books for political and artistic purposes, respectively. The »dumb signs« still speak to us, if we could but hear their voice.

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TRADICIJA EMBLEMA I NJENI *MISTERIOZNI ZNAKOVI*

Emblematski način reprezentacije, izražavanja, komunikacije kao i način razmišljanja jedan je od dominantnih fenomena šesnaestog i sedamnaestog stoljeća u Europi. Manifestacije tog fenomena su vidljive u velikobrojnim publikacijama emblem knjiga, kao i u područjima likovne i primjenjene umjetnosti, u književnosti i kulturnom životu toga vremena. Da emblemi ne bi ostali samo »misteriozni znakovi« potrebno je razumjeti način i izvore iz kojih su nastali kao i njihovu potencijalnu namjenu, kako je to zamislio Andrea Alciato i kako su to prihvatili i provodili u djelo njegovi suvremenici i sljedbenici.