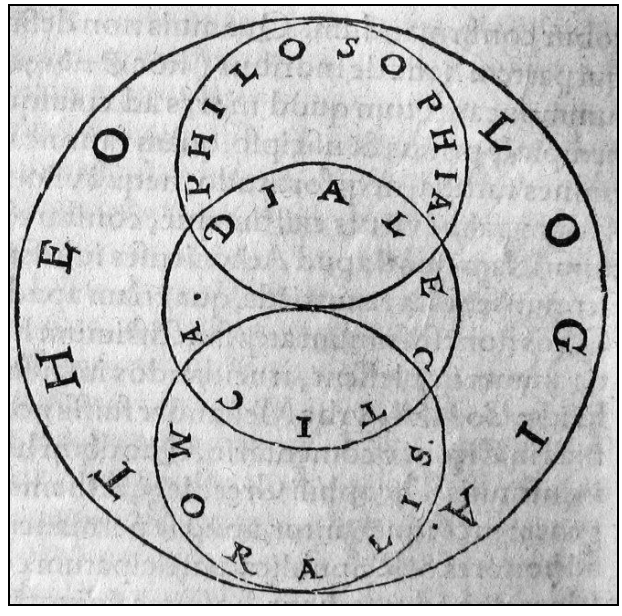

10. The Philosophy of Images

Claude-François Menestrier, described at the time as 'that prodigy of nature' was perhaps the most prolific seventeenth century writer on the theory of symbols and images with one hundred fifty-two works on aspects of symbolism attributed to him.[1] He acknowledged that his life's work was to expound a complete *Philosophie des Images*, a Philosophy of Images, and he wrote books or essays on festivals, funerals, hieroglyphs, symbols, devices, heraldry, coins and medals, ciphers, enigmas, rebuses, the ballet[2] and other topics. Confusingly, also amongst his works were two books entitled *La Philosophie des Images;* one on devices and the other subtitled, '*images enigmatiques*'.[3] The principal work of Jakob Masen, which I review below, was the *Speculum Imaginum* or Mirror of Images of 1650 and to take a modern authority, Praz' pioneering commentary on and bibliography of emblems and devices was called *Studies in seventeenth century*

[1] Renard 1883 cited Praz 178.

[2] His book on the ballet describing some eighty contemporary ballets is still required reading in today's ballet schools.

[3] *La Philosphie des images; composée d'un ample receuil de Devises* of 1682 and the *Philosophie des Images Enigmatiques* of 1694 which latter is a discussion of some eleven categories of symbolic expression including, inevitably, enigmas and hieroglyphs.

Imagery.[1] Praz had a generous view of what was to be included in his bibliography and he used books of emblems, devices, hieroglyphs including Horapollo and iconologies such as that by Ripa. All these genres included pictures as part of the signifier but pictures were not what was referred to in their titles either by him or the earlier authors.

In the late Renaissance, image had the principal meaning of representation. A picture is one type of representation but it is not the only one. Today, picture is the main sense of the word image but the original meaning still survives; we hear it in phrases such as 'he was the image of respectability.'[2] Image in this latter sense has a meaning close to that of symbol and it was this which was the purpose of these authors; to expound a philosophy of symbolism. Giordano Bruno, in his book *De imaginum, signorum, et idearum compositione*, On the Composition of Images, Signs and Ideas of 1591[3] confirms this in his obscure but endearing way when in his definition of twelve types of symbol, he reserves first place for the image which "embraces a greater energy, emphasis and universality." This idea of image as representation is another explanation of the Renaissance obsession with the relationship and tension between the arts of poetry and painting. On the one hand, poetry seemed to take pride of place for the ancient historical reasons I have referred to. On the other, painting gave greater scope for direct mimesis or representation and thus exposition of the natural signs of God which were revealed in the elements of the natural world. It was this tension between the two arts which powered the fascination of contemporaries with the concept of the 'image'.[4]

Since at least the time of Aristotle it was understood that the first step in making an analysis of any subject was to collect and compare examples of it and to undertake a classification of its elements. There are four ways we can classify the literary symbol: the form of expression of the signifier such as the device or enigma, emblem or hieroglyph; the

[1] This was originally written in Italian under the title *Studi sul concettismo* (Milan 1934) and translated into English by the author himself who gave it its English title.
[2] The Oxford English Dictionary gives as an example of this meaning from the period with a Shakespearean extract: "this play is the image of a murder done in Vienna". *Hamlet* iii, ii, 248
[3] Bruno 1591 14. Anyone who is obstinate enough to allow himself to be burned alive for his beliefs and yet can end the introduction to this book with the injunction to the reader "Stay well, and love anyone who esteems you" deserves our sympathy.
[4] See for further discussion Krieger 1992

signifier or outward and apparent sign; the concept that is signified by the sign or its interpretation; and the relationship between signifier and signified. A complete analysis of the literary symbol requires recognition of each of these classifications and although contemporary commentators glimpsed these differences they did not always pursue their analysis to its full conclusion, their chief interest being in defining and distinguishing the many different expressions of literary symbolism such as emblem, sentence or hieroglyph.

Modern commentators have also concentrated on one only of these classifications and their focus has been almost exclusively on the emblem. In one of the classic comparative studies of early emblem books, the *Emblemata* of Henkel and Schöne of 1967, forty-one principally sixteenth century emblem books are reviewed and the motifs or signifiers of all the emblems are categorized under thirty-four distrinct heads. However, in the German Art Encyclopaedia *Reallexicon sur Deutschen Kunstgeschichte* of 1959, emblems are categorized by what is signified, with three principal heads, Heroic, Ethical-Moral, and Didactic and some fifty subheadings. Peter Daly differentiates according to the 'mode of thought': typological, hieroglyphic or allegorical. In the typological category he includes not only the Christian variety of type and antitype but any symbol which had a spiritual or metaphysical signification. The hieroglyphic category covers those emblems "where a strange or inorganic construction of individual motifs is assembled to represent a general notion."[1] The allegorical category similarly "employs an existing pictorial generalization such as a personification to illustrate a general truth." However, even Daly admits that his three categories by no means accommodates all emblems and "the art form of the emblem may be used for a variety of contexts, serve a variety of purposes and embody a variety of modes of thought, however it reaches its highest development in the interpretation of reality when working within typological patterns of thought."[2]

I shall follow the approach of the seventeenth century theorist, Jakob Masen, who in his *Speculum Imaginum* attempted an analysis of the whole field in an admirably lucid hierarchical classification although the number of expressions he uses as illustrations is limited. Menestrier also attempts a multi-dimensional classification but perhaps because of his prolific output is not so precise in his definitions.

We should remember that the first problem for these early commentators was semantic since there was no general agreement on the defini-

[1] Daly 1979 82
[2] Daly 1979 72

tions and even the names of the various literary species. The European languages were evolving into their modern form and many of these genres such as the emblem book were written in the vernacular but were not necessarily given the equivalent name in different languages. We saw, for instance, that Spanish emblem books were often called *Hieroglificos*. Adding to the confusion, some of these expressions had no translation in Latin, still the common European literary language, so a name had to be invented or borrowed. As an example we can take the word symbol itself which already had multiple meanings. Guillaume Budé in his *Commentarii linguae graecae*, Commentaries on the Greek language, published in 1529, described its various classical uses.[1] The original meaning seems to have been as we have already noted two halves of a dice or piece of bone which could be used in primitive commercial or legal situations where two parties to an agreement could be identified by joining the two disparate pieces. Budé quotes Plato's *Symposium* that "each of us is but a *symbolon* of a man…and each is ever searching for the *symbolon* that will fit him."[2] As time went on, the word took on related meanings: a collision or clash as in the clash of armies and a donation or contribution these deriving from the element of the bringing together of the two pieces of the symbolon. Then it came to mean what we now understand, a symbol, one thing representing another. Aristotle uses it in this sense in his definitions of words and ideas and over time it also assumed a mystical element so that by the time of the Renaissance we have, as a literary example, the collection of mystical adages known as the *Symbola* of Pythagoras of 1497 edited by Ficino himself. Another significant meaning given both by Budé, Estienne and Minos was as a ring or military insignia or decoration. We saw in the discussion on the relationship between art and decoration (page 127) that the Greek word *kosmos* and the Latin synonym *decor* was the equivalent of the symbol in this context. Estienne also gives several other definitions – a contribution to a feast, a seal for letters, an order given to soldiers, a token of some future event, a pictorial inscription on a grave.[3]

Thus, in the introduction to his editions of Alciato's emblem book, referred to above, Minos uses symbol in at least two senses. According to the rules of Rhetoric, the process of definition should begin with the more general meaning, the genus, and the particular or specific should be

[1] For both the original and a translation by Denis L. Drysdall of the extract from the *Commentarii,* see *Emblematica* 8, 2, 1994 339

[2] *Symposium* 191 D-E trans. W.R.M. Lamb.

[3] Estienne 1645 trans. Blount 1646 6

defined by enumerating the differences between the species. Today, the only context in which genus and species is in common use is in botany and zoology and this use originated with the taxonomy initiated by Linnaeus in his *Systema Naturae*, Systems of Nature, of 1735. Linnaeus did not however invent the principles behind his taxonomic scheme. It was standard practice throughout the classical period and after for any kind of classification including those of semantics. For instance, we can go as far back as the *Legum Allegoria* of Philo Judaeus, where he gives the example of man or woman as the genus or the Platonic form and Adam the actual man being the species.[1] Minos uses the word *symbolum* for the generic meaning of symbol as a sign, any word or object which signifies another, and he also uses it in the specific sense of a device and indeed an emblem since there was no other word available. Masen does the same, using the word symbol when he wished to refer to the device.

Literal and Symbolic

The word symbol came to be used by most writers to characterize the generic form of the symbolic literature. Thus Emanuele Tesauro distinguishes between the symbolic and what he calls the lapidary art, the latter, as he describes it, consisting merely of words and characters.[2] Jakob Masen does the same; at the top of his hierarchical classification he distinguishes between symbolic species and those which are *propria* that is literal or without significance.[3] This distinction between the symbolic and the literal would seem to be basic to any definition of the symbol but in his definition of lapidary art Tesauro appears to be confusing a purely descriptive non-signifying literary expression with the word or character as symbolic of thought. Words, names and hieroglyphs can also be symbolic in the full sense as we have seen; the names of God were seen as mystical symbols of His divinity as in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius and Llull but neither of these two senses was what was meant by Tesauro who intends to distinguish, like Masen, between the symbolic and the literal. Hieroglyphs and the Names of God were also a special case which may account for the fascination they had for contemporaries. They were deemed by some actually to embody the things they represented in the same way that icons were understood and feared by the iconoclasts. In this sense they are a third class beyond the symbolic and the literal.

---

[1] Philo *Legum Allegoria* II, 13

[2] Tesauro 486. Elsewhere in his book Tesauro does define lapidary as referring to inscribed writing such as epitaphs, dedications and epigrams but his use of the word is not consistent.

[3] Masen 1650 209

Masen's use of the adjective *propria* is also worthy of comment since in its meaning of proper or appropriate it has the overtones of propriety, the place of which in the art and literature of the time I have emphasized and which has a long history going back at least to Quintilian's own categorization of the meaning of words.[1] In this view even the Art of Rhetoric itself was a symbolic expression since it was an art of persuasion, of saying one thing when meaning another, thus making an improper use of words. We will need to address this use again when we come to consider the difference between natural and artificial signs.

We have seen that Alciato himself in an apology for his pioneering emblem book refers to the distinction between words and things (page 259).

> Words signify, ideas are signified. Although at times things likewise signify, as for example the hieroglyphs in the writings of Horus and Chaeremon, a motif [*argumenti*] we have also used in a book of poetry titled Emblemata.

Alciato was of course not original in his remarks on the distinction between words and ideas. It had been discussed by Plato in his *Cratylus* and formulated by St. Augustine in his book *On Christian Doctrine*, where he pointed out that objects could also be signs, and he distinguishes four elements: the thought, the word expressing the thought, the word itself as an object naked of meaning and the *res* or actual object of thought located in the outside world.[2] It is this latter which can also be a sign of yet a further object. The position is restated by Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae*.

> That God is the author of Holy Scripture should be acknowledged and he has the power, not only of adopting words to convey meanings (which men can also do) but also of adapting things themselves. In every branch of knowledge words have meaning, but what is special here is that the things meant by the words also mean something.[3]

The difference between Augustine and Aquinas was not so much in their understanding of the distinction between words as symbols of thought and the thing expressed as symbolic of some other thing but in what was the authority or origin of the relationship between sign and signified. For Augustine it was still the Platonic theory that the sign reflected the universal Forms while for St. Thomas Aquinas it was God's word expressed in Holy Scripture.

---

[1] Quintilian *Institutes Oratorio* VIII, i, 2. For a full discussion see Drysdall 274

[2] See Drysdall 289 and note 50

[3] Quoted in Bath 1994 222 and see his further discussion of the topic.

Natural and artificial signs

A discussion of language brings us conveniently to the next level of Masen's classification, below that of the literal and the symbolic, and that is between the natural and the conventional or artificial sign a division which for all contemporary and modern commentators was and is a principal focus of their analysis.[1] Natural signs were those whose form was naturally related to its object or what it was intended to signify. Natural in this context took on both meanings of the word: natural as an expression of the natural world and natural in the sense that the relationship between signifier and signified was inherent or self-evident. By contrast, artificial or conventional signs were those where the relationship between form and object, signifier and signified was arbitrary and purposive.[2]

A typical example of a natural sign as Augustine pointed out is lightning: this is a sign of thunder. Another is a footprint: this is a sign that someone has passed by.[3] Some theorists distinguished between those natural signs which signified a past event, footsteps and those which signified a future event, lightning. Viewed in these terms we can see that the concept of the omen, portent, augury or prophesy and the act of divination are not so outlandish as we might have thought. Even today we make forecasts of the weather based on present signs. The sight of seagulls flying inland is assumed to presage a storm. From this it is not a big step to consider the possibility of a causal link between sign and its effect and this is the beginning of scientific inquiry. But we saw that what was central for the age of symbolism was the insight of Plato that the natural world with its multifaceted and changing appearance does not constitute an objective reality but is a reflection or symbol of the Forms or Universals which have real existence only within the divine world of the Creator or the One. The Christian fathers, adapting this concept to their own ends, posited that the elements of nature were representations or symbols of the essence of God. The symbols of God revealed in the natural world were thus also natural in the sense of inherent; their meaning was validated by the enduring premise of the Platonic system. Christianity also possessed, in the Scriptures, an alternative for the symbolism of the Book

---

[1] See for instance Bath 155 "The distinction between natural and conventional signs is fundamental to emblem theory."

[2] There is a difference between the description artificial and conventional although they tend to be used indiscriminately in the context. Artificial refers to the nature of the sign and conventional means that the signified is generally accepted by society and has thus become conventional. This could thus equally apply to the natural sign.

[3] Augustine *De Doctrina Christina* Book II

of Nature. Scripture mandated a self-evident authority which could not be gainsaid. Scripture was the word of God and Nature was the symbol of God although it was only a symbol and no more. The trap of pantheism which sees God as actually embodied in the elements of nature was always difficult to avoid. The iconoclasts saw this in their opposition to the depiction of the physical images of God and the mystics came close to it in their identification of the image as the object most nearly approaching the otherwise ineffable nature of God. We saw (page 21) how even St. Bonaventure could not wholly avoid this ambiguity: "like through a mirror, we can contemplate God with the sensible things, not only since they are signs but by themselves as his essence, presence and power."

To describe Nature as a book is anomalous in this context since a book consists of words and a word is the archetypal conventional sign. Aristotle was the first to characterize them as such in the opening words of Chapter 2 of his *De Interpretatione*: "By a noun we mean a sound significant by convention" and again it was Augustine who defined the conventional sign by process of elimination as that with which there was an intention to signify, the emphasis being on the intention. Conventional signs are deliberately created, created for the purpose of communicating meaning and thus can be characterized as language. But despite the authority of these writers, there was continuing discussion through out the period as to how the conventional sign acquired the meaning that it did and how language might be given the authority of the natural sign. We saw that it was believed that language was God-given and through the symbols of language, it might be possible to approach His essence. In this context, letters, numbers, words and names, the *Logoi,* were to be regarded with mystical reverence and we saw that both Christian and Jewish mystics (the Kabbalists) used the Names of God as the starting point in their speculations. In the Renaissance, the hieroglyph was seen as embodying this natural language and as having a relationship with the original Adamic language, the language with which Adam named the animals and which God had given to the world before the diaspora of Babel. The pictographic elements of the hieroglyphs were enough to settle any question of the natural relationship between *verbum* and *res*, the word and the thing depicted. In other languages, where there was no pictographic relationship, theorists still thought that they might trace origins back to the protolanguage by establishing a natural onomatopoeic

connection despite the fact that this theory had been derided by Plato in his *Cratylus*.[1]

In spite of the continuing emphasis on the distinction between the two systems, it was accepted that artificial or conventional signs, could be and were continually transformed into natural signs by traditional and common usage. Rhetoric, the art of persuasion, assisted by the universal deployment of the commonplace book, encouraged the notion of *auctoritas* or authority. An idea or saying which originated with the classical or Christian authors, as well as the proverbs, myths and adages of ancient times, was validated by tradition as an authority. There was no need to inquire further, to go behind the curtain of these ancient authors in order to analyze the origins of their dicta; tradition and reputation promoted valid, self-evident premises. Even now Barthes, the modern French semioticist, notes "the tendency for signs to appear natural; that is signifiers present signified as if they had some real rather than arbitrary existence."[2]

The importance of the distinction between the two systems may seem to us today artificial, exaggerated or even casuistic but they embodied the two paradigms of the age. Platonism was the cultural kernel of the age of symbolism but over the whole period a parallel investigation into the nature of meaning, understanding and communication was undertaken by Aristotle and his successors. In a way, these latter had the more difficult task. They were not able to rely on faith or metaphysical dogma as the premise for their beliefs but had to define the sign in terms of itself and rely solely on the materials at hand: the human imagination and the nature of language. We saw that from the beginning the difficulties of this problem of definition were reflected in the inconsistencies of early poetic and semantic theory. Poetry should be mimetic, descriptive of the natural world and this was consistent with Aristotle's primary aim, an investigation into the nature of man and his environment. At the same time, artistic content was supposedly channeled from an external divine source through the medium of the craftsman whose contribution to the process depended solely on the level of his technical skill, his *techne* or Art. There was no place for human imagination in this schema. But although this remained the theory, the contribution of the human mind could not be ignored in practice and *inventio*, invention, the discovery of new material, was adopted early on as one of the five principal elements of Rhetoric. However, as we have seen the make-up of the liberal arts curriculum was quite fluid and by the end of the period *inventio* had been

[1] For example in the work of the German theorists Harsdörffer and Schotellius.
[2] Cited Gill 177

absorbed into Dialectics and Rhetoric was becoming increasingly concerned with style and presentation.

By the time of the late Renaissance the old order was beginning to collapse, the tradition of allegory and personification exemplifying Christian moral symbolism finally gave place to the metaphorical products of the individual imagination. It began to be appreciated that the allegorical view of nature was inappropriate as a view of reality and more particularly that some of the natural signs taken for granted for a thousand years, such as the unicorn or the phoenix, did not after all even exist. The dilemma of theorists in this transition was validated by Henri Estienne in his *L'art de faire les devises* of 1645. "It is lawfull to use the propriety of a natural subject …..according to the general approbation or received opinion of ancient authors, though the Modernes have lately discovered it to be false."[1] The emasculation of the conceptual aspects of Rhetoric was a factor in the breakdown of the old order and the increasing emphasis on literary form and conceit in the Baroque. Metaphor, the product of the human imagination, was at first a figure of speech describing the old symbolic forms and then, in the art of wit and the mannerist conceit, an expression of the symbols themselves, both signifier and signified as one.

One point of contact between the two traditions was the symbolic importance in these systems of the relationship between body and soul. On the one hand this relationship was an essential feature of the Platonic schema. We saw how the Platonists proposed that the soul of man returned after death to the perfection of the One and how this concept was adopted with modifications by Christian theology. In the Aristotelian tradition, as perfected by Aquinas, the soul, *Anima*, conflated with mind, is the Form of the body and images are the medium of communication between the two. The relationship between body and soul was discussed by the 16th and 17th Century device and emblem theorists starting with Giovio and reaching its fullest expression in the work of Tesauro and Menestrier who outlined complete semiotic theories for device and emblem to the effect that each instance of the genre was the Body or signifier of the Soul or Form or signified of the concept expressed in the totality of the literary ensemble.

In their expositions of the nature of poetics and literature, 17th century theorists made wide-ranging attempts to reconcile the two traditions and provide a general explanation of the phenomenon of the sign. Scaliger does so in his *Poetics* as does Menestrier in his *Philosophy of Images* in which he says that "the device is a body comprised of natural and artifi-

[1] Estienne 1645 trans. Blount 1646 46

cial figures."[1] Estienne also confirmed in his treatise on the device that there were two types of legitimate symbol in emblems and devices, the one intrinsic where the symbol could be related to the meaning and the other extrinsic where it was unrelated.[2] No doubt, one attraction of both emblem and device was the potential to blur the distinction between the natural and the conventional. The signification or interpretation of the natural sign was by definition traditional and transparent and thus not able to produce the 'wonder' which was Aristotle's criterion of the successful work of art. The format of emblem and device with multiple components of the signifier, with the capacity to combine or play off the individual components against each other and of including multiple symbols and references in all elements proved an ideal vehicle for promoting new spiritual and moral insight.

The signified or interpretation

Figure 65 Emblem 132 from the Minos edition of Alciato's *Emblemata*. See the text for the four classic interpretations of this emblem.

In his next level Masen reverts to the interpretation of the sign or what is signified, and distinguishes the three modes that we are familiar with: the allegorical, the tropological and the anagogical using the example of the Sun in Heaven with three different biblical quotations to illustrate each mode of interpretation. As another example to illustrate the same three modes we can take Alciato's Emblem 132[3] which Boas, following Minos' commentary, expounds as follows. "Allegorically the beast is the God Triton blowing a conch. Tropologically the conch is fame and the serpent eternity. Anagogically, the message is in the motto. 'Fame is acquired from the study of literature.'"[4]

Menestrier opens his chapter on the origin of emblems with a restatement of Platonism: "emblems are as ancient as the world, since the

[1] Quoted in Loach *Emblematica* 12, 31
[2] Estienne 1645 trans. Blount 1646 41
[3] Alciato 449
[4] Boas 21

world is, one can say, an Emblem of the Divinity."[1] Then he tries to categorize the emblem as a genre the sole purpose of which was to point a moral. He emphasizes this in several places but he is inconsistent since the facts cannot fit his theory. Later in his book he proposes that emblems are "Moral, Political and Academic information put in images" and eventually finds that the genre cannot be satisfied with any less than eight categories: spiritual, moral, doctrinal [teaching], political, heroic, satirical, emotional and alchemical. Modern commentators on the emblem speak to the universal applicability of the literary sign. According to Schöne: "every emblem is a contribution to the elucidation, interpretation and exposition of reality"[2] and Jons says the same: "the emblem is the last attempt to grasp spiritually the world in its totality in an exegetical manner."[3]

The seventeenth century was certainly wonderful time to be investigating the nature of reality. The breakdown of the old order laid the field wide open. A vast range of new literary material had become available through the revival of classicism. Nothing seemed to be settled or dogmatic. Many philosophical and spiritual problems remained to be resolved. Was poetry or painting the superior Art or were they both governed by the same aesthetic? How could this aesthetic be both divinely inspired and mimetic? What was the relationship of poetry to philosophy? What was the relationship of beauty to order? How did decorum lapse into decoration? To what extent did rhetoric as persuasion provide a premise for authority? Was the image superior to text as a mode of communication? What was the relationship of reason to intuition? How did metaphor provoke new ideas? How did the senses communicate with the mind? To what extent should the answers to any of these questions still be expressed in terms of Aristotle's categories or causes? Was the natural sign a valid expression of reality? The literature of symbolism with its commentaries and theoretical treatises provided tentative answers to these questions.

For Plato reality lay in the Forms which were represented by the natural and visible world. For the Christian, nature also represented the mysteries of the divine but it was reluctantly recognized by theologians from Augustine to Pseudo-Dionysius, Aquinas and Cusanus that the nature of God could not be fully grasped by the human mind. So, if His nature was mysterious then the symbols which represented Him were also myste-

[1] Menestrier 1684 5
[2] Schöne 1968 trans. and quoted Daly 1998 45
[3] Jons 1966 trans. Daly 1979 77

rious and the culture of symbolism itself was invested with secrecy, mystery and reverence. The mystery of the sign was for the Renaissance its essence and its paradox.

> 'Symbolic forms' … seems to imply that they are all modes of spiritual formation, going back to an ultimate primal stratum of reality which is perceived in them only through a foreign medium. It would seem as though we could apprehend reality only in the particularity of these forms, whence it follows that in these forms reality is cloaked as well as revealed.[1]

The symbol acted both to conceal and reveal since the essence of God would never be known, could never be known and, at best, in the words of Plotinus, the human mind could only circle around the ineffable "seeking to interpret in speech our experience of it."[2]

Modes of expression

Masen's fourth level of classification for the literary symbol is the mode of expression but he confines himself to comment on four only, the symbol or device, the emblem, the enigma and the hieroglyph although his contemporaries give many more examples. Tesauro, in the last chapter of the *Cannochiale Aristotelico,* not only shows the wider scope of the field but also succinctly demonstrates the difference between signifier and expression. His master-work is an exposition of elements of the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics* of Aristotle that he, Tesauro, believed could be appropriately extended to all forms of art and in this final chapter he uses some twenty literary expressions to illustrate the same signifier, the myth of Ganymede being carried off to heaven by an eagle while his dog powerless to help watches from the ground. He signifies a theme (as he calls it) or object of the symbol, the signified, which is that "a wise and prudent man who seeks to the highest and most honorable goals is not deterred by the gossip of the jealous." He illustrates this single object or signified with many of the different literary genres we have already reviewed, including enigma, emblem and hieroglyph and a number of other such as tessera[3] and scomma[4] which were obscure expressions even for contem-

---

[1] Cassirer 1957 III, 1

[2] Plotinus *Enneads* VI, ix, 3. See page 24

[3] The original meaning of *Tessera* was as individual pieces of mosaic. The word then had a semantic development similar to the symbol coming to mean a password or token indicating for instance membership in a secret society.

[4] Skomma or scomma is a Greek word meaning a taunt or jibe with a double meaning "which is figuratively expressed since it often has a veil of guile or politeness so that the words used appear to say one thing but mean another." Macrobius *Saturnalia* Bk VII, Ch III trans. Davies 450

poraries. Tesauro also mentions in other parts of his treatise at least another ten different symbolic species with which he illustrates the different types of metaphor he has defined.

Other commentators described yet other expressions. We have seen that Menestrier who was heavily influenced by Tesauro as he himself acknowledges was especially prolific. He makes an initial division of his examples into four categories. First was what we would call mental images, ideas and their relations with language; the second included primarily decorative or performance art such as festivals or theater; the third was what he called works of imagination, such as poetry and works of "persuasion" and the fourth is the group we have focused on in this book, enigmas, emblems, devices etc of which he distinguishes ten types.[1] Henri Estienne in his *Art de faire les Devises* of 1645 distinguishes and describes symbols, emblems, enigmas, parables, reverses of medals, coats of arms, heraldry, cimiers, codes and rebuses. Balthazar Gracian enumerates most of the above as possible sources for ingenuity or the act of wit and adds apologues,[2] allegories, épopées, novels, metamorphoses, tales, jokes and paintings.[3] Giordano Bruno, that maverick mystic, in a moment of lucidity, identifies twelve categories of the forms of matter and thirty-two processes for denoting signs.[4] Addison, the English essayist, said, quoting John Locke: "True wit consists of this resemblance of Ideas….it includes Metaphors, Similitudes, Aenigmas, Mottos, Parables, Fables, Dreams, Visions, dramatick Writings, Burlesque and all the methods of Allusion." In this case we can note that he is enumerating not just expressions of symbolism but also examples of the mechanism of symbolism, 'all the methods of allusion' including metaphors and similitudes.

It is clear that many of these expressions are not primarily literary although sometimes the dividing line is difficult to draw. Reverses of medals, heraldry, dreams, ballets, festivals are hardly literary expressions although as we have seen in most of these cases there were books which listed, described and theorized on these subjects. Indeed one of the distinctions between emblem and device is that the former was primarily a literary genre which was subsequently used for decorative purposes whereas the device was the opposite; it was initially non-literary but soon became the subject of innumerable theoretical treatises. I shall not make much of this distinction; my primary focus has been on the literary spe-

[1] Introduction to the second part of *Les Recherches du Blason* Menestrier 1673 excerpted in Laurens 2000 299

[2] An apologue was a synonym for a fable and an épopée a synonym for an epic poem.

[3] Ruiz 242

[4] Bruno 1591, 1, 8

cies but it is clear that there was a continuum of these genres from literary to decorative. [1]

Signifier

Masen moves on to the level of the signifier or the material that the literary symbol is derived from. He defines these in two categories, the true and the fictitious, and these into two more each; true: histories and fables and fictitious: parables and apologues. Again he is quite restrained; other commentators find many more. Menestrier states that the proper material of the emblem is "Nature, the Arts, Fables, Metamorphoses, Proverbes, Apologues, [Fables again], Moral Sentences, Axioms of Science, Examples of History and Fictions of Poets." But even this was an underestimate. Bokuslas Balbinus, a Jesuit from Bohemia, proposed in 1687 that: "there is nothing under the sun which cannot provide material for the Emblem".[2] This generalism is not difficult to apply to the whole field and we need not emphasize it further.

Relationship

Masen's next level differentiates between metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche[3], three types of relationship between signifier and signified and as such this is a continuation of the discussion of the distinction between natural and artificial signs. Assuming that the natural sign is transparent, that is the relationship between signifier and signified is obvious and immediate by definition, he goes on to ask what if anything is or should be the relationship in the case of the artificial sign? What are the rules which govern the creation of the artificial sign?

We have seen that from the earliest times in Western Europe there were two continuing cultural paradigms: the natural sign tradition of Platonic metaphysics and the Aristotelian semantic tradition of the artificial sign. Throughout most of the period the primacy lay with the natural sign, a primacy which was maintained by the authority of both religious and secular establishments. But the investigation into nature of meaning and language initiated by Aristotle persisted throughout the period and focused on the nature of metaphor the power of which in the words of

---

[1] See Appendix 1 for a listing of literary species.

[2] Cited Daly 1979 31

[3] Masen approves of metonymy, the figure of speech by which a word associated with a concept is used in place of the concept e.g. the crown for royalty and for reasons which are not entirely clear other than that the similarity is too close he disapproves of synecdoche where a part of a concept is used to describe the whole.

Cicero in the first century BC "sprang from necessity due to the pressure of poverty and deficiency [in language]".[1]

Metaphor was classified by Aristotle as an enthymeme, a concept which is at the heart of his Rhetoric and is a figure of speech which has been much misunderstood. We hear that the enthymeme is a loose kind of syllogism or a syllogism where one of the terms is implied rather than expressed. But these descriptions are inadequate not to say incorrect. As Aristotle says himself, the enthymeme does the same for Rhetoric as the syllogism does for Logic[2] and only because Logic is more precise than Rhetoric can it be said that the enthymeme is a loose kind of syllogism. A syllogism deals with equivalents, for example and famously: all men are mortal, Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is mortal. Enthymemes use other relationships which are not equivalents but which are nevertheless logically valid even if they are not precise, for instance, the relationship greater than and lesser than. Here is an example: "when two things surpass a third, that which does so by the greater amount is the greater of the two."[3] Each of Aristotle's modes of argument or *topoi* can be employed in an enthymeme and one of these *topoi* is that of rational correspondence or analogy and it is here that we find the origin of metaphor. We can take Plato's metaphor of memory being a wax tablet (page 234); both the impression of the fact memorized and the signet ring impressed in the wax fade in time and are lost. This could be written as an enthymeme: "an event impressed on memory fades in time, as does a wax impression of a signet ring; therefore memory is (like) a wax tablet."[4]

In the *Poetics*[5] Aristotle also emphasizes his principle of *mimesis*, imitation or analogy, as an essential feature in the process of the acquisition of knowledge and he makes a further classification of metaphor into four simple classes including metaphor by similarity between two species or between species and genus and the metaphor of proportion. This classification of the metaphor of likeness was the basis of most theoretical approaches to the subject until the 17th century and the origin of the many treatises of the period on the figure of simile.[6] Later theorists on emblem and device who stressed the importance of metaphor in the construction

---

[1] Cicero *De Oratore* III, xxxix, 155 trans. H. Rackham.

[2] Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1356b 15ff

[3] Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1363b 34

[4] For a further discussion see E. F. Dyck *Topos and Enthymeme* at *//www.wtc.ab.ca/tedyck/top.enth.00.htm* (2/4/2004)

[5] Aristotle *Poetics* xxi

[6] "The similitude is the ground of all emblems, allegories, fables and fictions." Hoskins 10

of the genre, still cited several of Aristotle's *topoi* such as proportion and opposites in addition to analogy as being a basis for employing metaphor and this approach has since continued to expand with the modern realization that metaphor has the seminal role in the origin, development and construction of language as a whole.

Tesauro in his masterwork, *Il Cannochiale Aristotelico,* explored comprehensively and definitively the nature of metaphor and its relationship to the symbol. For example, he saw the device as evolving in three stages, as a sign, a poetic sign and a poetic syllogism[1] thus combining the two contrasting disciplines, rhetoric and logic, the art of poetic deceit and the science of deduction. He tried to distinguish between the simile or comparison and metaphor, the latter being of a higher order in its capacity to produce wonder and he distinguished between eight different types of metaphor. Like Gracian after him, he investigated in relation to metaphor every type of artistic expression including painting, sculpture, architecture and the performing arts as well as literature.

The cultural shifts that gathered momentum during the 17th century were both a reflection and a cause of the decline of neoPlatonic symbolism. The authority of classical rhetoric and the commonplace books, the notion of divine frenzy as inspiration and of mimesis and propriety as the basis of their art, began to be questioned. Poets began to seek the source of their inspiration within their own imagination. The theorists, amongst them the Italians, Tesauro, Pellegrini and Pallavicino and the Spaniard, Balthazar Gracian proposed that this source of inspiration was *ingenio*, ingenuity, or *agudeza* (Spanish), *accutezza* (Italian)[2] or wit as it is usually translated in English. The concept of wit as proposed by these writers was a defining element in 17th Century literature and the theories they enunciated were the first original contribution to poetics and epistemology since classical times.

Aristotle had seen wit in much the same terms as we do today, namely as the ability to utter witticisms or lively, clever sayings which enhance or embellish conversation and composition. He included in the genre, epigrams, proverbs, riddles and jokes. According to him the witticism succeeds in its intent by introducing an unexpected relationship between two ideas and this is also a description of metaphor which for Aristotle was a form of witticism. "Liveliness is specially conveyed by metaphor and by the further power of surprising the hearer ….His mind seems to

---

[1] Laurens 2000 275 et seq.

[2] Both these words also have to be contrasted with *argudezza* and *argucia,* meaning fallacious arguments in Spanish and Italian respectively.

say ' Yes I never thought of that'"[1] and also "the more they seem obscure through their use of figurative expressions the more they give pleasure when they have been made clear."[2]

Subsequent classical theorists including Quintilian emphasized the witticism in terms of its humorous aspect where the relationship between the ideas was so tenuous or ridiculous that it could not be deemed serious. "For the more remote the simile is from the subject to which it applies the greater will be the impression of novelty and unexpectedness which it produces."[3] The extension of this line of thinking that was made by the 17th Century writers was that wit was not just the linking of two ideas in a surprising relationship but was also the actual discovery of new ideas, a process which went beyond the fields of literature and art and could be adapted for any intellectual endeavor. In the words of Tesauro, "metaphor is an ingenious Proteus changing from species to species always the same and always different."[4] There was a narrow line between imitation as slavish copying and imitation as invention. Indeed, the rhetorical canon of invention had always had overtones of this second meaning deriving from the Latin word *excogitare,* (to think out or figure out) which referred to the discovery of the truths of nature even if not the invention of something entirely new in the modern sense. It was proper if you were copying an object of nature that you should learn the underlying elements of that object. These two shades of meaning were referred to through out the period; Roger Bacon, for instance, in the 13th Century distinguishes two types of imagination, the cogitativa and the imaginativa.[5]

Gracian also, in his *Agudeza y Arte de Ingenio*, Wit and the Art of Genius of 1649, attempted to overcome the epistemological problem we have already met; assuming that logical analysis and argument is based ultimately on an initial premise, how do we arrive at that premise? For Gracian "a conceptualization was an act of understanding: a concept consisting of the astounding presentation of a thought to the mind for the first time."[6] Thus, understanding did not come by divine inspiration or rationalization, by faith or by mystical means but through the Art which Gracian devised. This Art consisted of rules for comparing objects

---

[1] Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1412a

[2] Aristotle *De Doctrina* 2, 7-8

[3] Quintilian *Institutes* VIII, iii, 74. Quintilian evidently envisaged a spectrum from similar to dissimilar to contraries again echoing Aristotle. See *Institutes* V, xi, 5

[4] Tesauro 490

[5] Roger Bacon *Opus Majus* V (1), I, 4

[6] Ruiz 187 et seq.

so that a relationship could be established which in turn would inspire a new idea. These objects could be things or words or ideas; there was nothing which was not capable of acting as material for the extraction of the new and no field in which the Art could not be used. In literature, much of the material we ourselves have already examined was specifically quoted by Gracian as possible sources for ingenuity or the act of wit including apologues, parables, allegories, épopées, novels, drama, metamorphoses, fables, tales, jokes, paintings, hieroglyphs, emblems, coats of arms, mottos and coins[1] but these literary genres were only part of its scope. For Gracian, the most profound paradoxes were susceptible to his method including those of spiritual mystery: the contrasts between a beneficent God and the existence of evil and of an all powerful God and human free will.[2] To him, Wit was an extension of and went beyond Rhetoric. The latter dealt only with eloquence but Wit was concerned with Beauty which, he said, is "the soul, life and energy."[3]

Few people understood Gracian's method which apart from its inherent difficulty was expressed in deliberately obscure language. Subsequent writers restricted it to the literary field as suggested by Tesauro but were nevertheless exploring new ways to seek inspiration and meaning. Thus, Rosemary Freeman describes the poetry of George Herbert "his aim is to evolve meaning by creating likeness."[4] Of the two writers, Gracian and Tesauro, the former was the more original. Here is a nice illustration of the difference between them. Tesauro repeated the time-worn dogma that "God wrote the book of nature in metaphors, and that is how it must be read." But Gracian put a modern and at the same time witty twist to it: "the fruits of experience are more valuable than the Book of Nature which only has leaves."[5] Gracian in particular was the source of many wonderful aphorisms which have been collected and are published as *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* and it is easy to see how his epistemological theories or his Art have been ignored in favor of his status as one of the leading wits (in the modern sense) of the age.

Both writers saw the emblem as a significant source of material for their Art. Gracian used the colorful metaphor: "emblems, hieroglyphs,

---

[1] Ruiz 242

[2] Ruiz 377

[3] Gracian 1649 trans. Chambers 1962 8

[4] Cited in Daly 1998 44

[5] Gracian *El Criticon II,* 19, 1939. When he wrote this, Gracian may have had in mind Dante's words in the Paradiso: "within its depths I saw ingathered, bound by love in one volume, the scattered leaves of all the universe." *Paradiso* XXXIII, 85-87 trans. P.H. Wicksteed

apologues and devises are the finery of precious stones set in the delicate gold of elegant discourse."[1] And he used emblems from Alciato several times[2] to illustrate his thesis on the Art of Wit although he like other contemporary writers thought most highly of the device describing it as the most sublime genre. Praz, whose focus is on the 17th Century, in the introduction to his classic bibliography of the emblem literature, makes much of wit as a feature of the emblem, confirming Gracian's frequent and complimentary references to Alciato.[3] He also draws attention to the epigram as the principal source of both emblem and wit particularly the epigrams of Martial. Gracian was particularly proud of the works of Martial, his fellow countryman whose style was unique in his own time. It was the fact that the Art of Rhetoric had no classification for Martial's particular brand of biting and pointed (*acutus*) wit that encouraged Gracian to develop his own Art.

The English writers had extensive if sometimes contradictory views on the nature of wit. Many contrasted wit with judgement following the early lead of Quintilian. The fancies of the imagination were always to be tempered by judgement through the application of propriety. Thus Dryden: "the definition of wit …*is only this: that it is* a Propriety of Thoughts and Words: or in other Terms Thoughts and Words elegantly adapted to the Subject."[4]

Thus even to the end of the 17th century authors were expounding their art in traditional terms: it was an act of 'allusion' expressed by means which were 'elegantly adapted to the Subject'. But in spite of this conservatism, other artists and authors began to protest and react against the centuries-old discipline of formality and decorum. Not unnaturally, this reaction could easily go too far in the opposite direction of mannerism where 'ornament was piled on indiscriminately and meaninglessly' but nevertheless originality in the expression of thought suddenly became the touchstone of literary success. This originality often expressed itself in extravagantly metaphorical figures or what was called 'conceit' after the Italian word *concetto* which we would now translate as concept and which was the product of the Art of wit as practiced by Gracian and Tesauro.[5] But it was in the very nature of the Baroque for the epistemologi-

---

[1] Gracian 1649 trans. Chambers 1962 841

[2] He cites Alciato's Emblems 54, 58, 129, 132, 151, 154 and 187

[3] Praz 1964 particularly in Chapter 1.

[4] Addison *Spectator* LXII 1711: Dryden Preface to *The State of Innocence* 1684 both cited in the *Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry*.

[5] Gracian defines a conceit as verbal wit which could be distinguished from other kinds of wit, for example, witty actions. Gracian 1649 trans. Chambers 1962 97

cal concept to degenerate into the extravagant conceit, defined by Schöne as "a figure which with the help of ingenious, penetrating paralogisms connects images and concepts widely different or even mutually exclusive to produce surprisingly pointed comparisons, correspondences or confrontations."[1] This degeneration of the poetic art into word-play, what Hobbes called "the ambitious obscurity of expressing more than is perfectly conceived," was one more facet of the decline of the old order at the climacteric before the modern era. Paradoxically this word-play, with its emphasis on extravagant figures of speech, on form rather than content, was only possible because of the universal grounding of composition in the classical art of Rhetoric.

Nevertheless, modern theories of language and the philosophy of meaning have validated the insights of Gracian. Metaphor is now seen as part of the fundamental structure of language and one of the principal ways that language evolves. As language changes it does so by providing words and phrases with new meaning through metaphorical association and these meanings in turn slowly become part of generally accepted vocabulary. The conventional sign becomes natural. Lakoff and Johnson[2] go as far as proposing a new theory of meaning which they call the experiential theory. According to this, the meaning of abstract concepts is not objective or real as philosophers from the time of Plato have suggested but relative, relative to the experience of the group concerned. The relationships in this matrix of experience are provided by the language of metaphor.

Masen's exposition of the philosophy of representation by symbols is at the same time succinct and comprehensive, the most articulate of the many treatises attempted by his contemporaries including Menestrier, Bruno, Gracian, Tesauro, Schotellius, Valeriano, Ripa and others. 'All these spiritual images'[3] in the 16th and 17th centuries were thus not mindless anthologies but real attempts to categorize data with which they might analyze the nature of symbolism using emblems, devices, hieroglyphs and other literary species as examples or illustrations. These attempts were often primitive, confused, contradictory or duplicative. At times it appeared uncertain as to whether some of the literary forms we have referred to were essential material for the emblem, device or the

[1] Schöne 39 trans. Daly 1979 66

[2] Lakoff and Johnson 1981

[3] Menestrier, *Recherches du Blason*, Introduction to the Second Part cited by Laurens 2000 299

other species or were themselves separate sign systems or perhaps were both. In spite of these uncertainties these works formed a valuable part of the history and development of modern semiotics, a discipline which has yet to achieve its goal of a satisfactory exposition of the substance and meaning of the sign.