



· *Introduction* ·

The invention of printing in Western Europe during the mid 15th century was a revolution which immediately catalyzed and enabled an immense output of literary material and of this output a sizeable part consisted of books of symbols and books on theories of symbolism. Amongst the most celebrated examples of this symbolic genre were the *Hieroglyphica* of Horapollo, the *Symbola of Pythagoras* by Ficino, the *Emblemata* of Alciato, the *Iconologia* of Ripa, the *Adagia* of Erasmus and the *Hieroglyphica* of Valeriano but this selection represents only a tiny fraction of the whole. Henri Estienne, in his treatise *L'Art de faire les Devises*¹ of 1645 expressed the belief that one should distinguish between devices, hieroglyphics, enigmas, symbols, fables, parables, emblems, sentences, reverses of medals, arms, blazons, cimiers, cyphres and rebuses.² Other of his contemporar

¹ Estienne 1645 trans. Blount 1646. These categorizations appear as the subtitle to Blount's *The art of making devices*, his translation of Estienne's work. This Estienne should not be mistaken for his namesakes, the Henri Estiennes, who were members of the illustrious French publishing family of the previous century.

² I describe all these literary species in more detail later. An enigma was a short phrase or sentence the meaning of which was particularly obscure and had to be teased out by the reader, a cimier a motto which was placed on the crest of a helmet in a coat of arms,

ies delineated many more such categories each of which required careful definition, exposition and illustration in their treatises and collections. La Perrière in the introduction to his emblem book, *Le Theatre¹ des Bons Engins*, the Theater of Fine Devices, first published in 1539 said that “it is not only in our times that Emblems are causing a stir, and are held in extraordinary respect, but this has been true since remote Antiquity and almost since the world’s beginning.”² This may have been somewhat of a puff for his own work but it was certainly true in his own times. As we shall see, the total output of the emblem books, just one of these genres, is estimated to consist of more than six thousand separate titles and editions.

The aim of the present study is to investigate the reasons for this extraordinary popularity and examine what it was for contemporaries that made these books best-sellers, why it was thought desirable to distinguish these genres and what was their common theme? In answering these questions, we begin to see that these works were the culmination of many threads of classical, medieval and Renaissance philosophy and literature: the realism of the neoPlatonists, the symbolism of the kabbalists and the alchemists, the mysteries of magic and hermetism, the literary disciplines of the classical art of rhetoric, the allegorical stories from the Greek myths and classical writers and the moralizing aphorisms from collections of fables and proverbs and from the writings of the Christian fathers.

It goes without saying that this literary phenomenon would never have been possible without the invention of printing and yet, paradoxically, printing contained the seeds of destruction of the genre. The printed books of emblems, devices, enigmas, sentences and others together with the festivals, processions and theatrical works which some of these books described was the first and the last opportunity for many in society and especially literate society to express and to appreciate the symbolism which was the fundamental cultural characteristic of the age and had been for the previous two thousand years. At the same time, the diffusion of knowledge enabled by the invention of the printing press accelerated the changes in thinking which brought on the modern age of

a cyphre what we would call a secret code and a rebus was a poem or piece of prose which was structured in some way to present a verbal puzzle.

¹ The original title of this book did not have the accents attributed to the modern French word *Théâtre*.

² La Perrière *Theatre des Bons Engins* Introduction A-iiiiv cited and trans. Jerome Schwartz *Emblematica* 1987 2, 2, 294

empiricism and the supremacy of what now we call the natural sciences and in so doing effectively stifled and swept away the age of symbolism.

Symbolism had been a focus of western European culture since classical times. Art and literature in the Middle Ages resounded with symbolism and, during the Renaissance, interest in this universal mode of expression was extended; the revival of classical knowledge made available new material to work with and confirmed much of the old. The dominant and unifying feature of both secular and religious literature of the period, and one which particularly distinguishes it from our own age, appears to be this love of symbol and allegory. I shall review the history of this obsession and show that it originated in the dominant spiritual and philosophical theme of the age; quite simply, that every aspect of nature and of man was an expression or symbol of God Himself. As Johann Huizinga, the modern historian of medieval manners, put it in his customarily poetic way,

Symbolic thought causes the continuous transfusion of the feeling for God's majesty and for eternity into everything that can be perceived and thought. It permeates everything with heightened aesthetic and intellectual value.... It is a true polyphony of thought. In a completely thought out symbolism each element reverberates in a completely harmonious chord of symbols. Symbolic thinking yields to that intoxication of thought, leads to that pre-intellectual obscuring of the definition of things, that muting of rational thought, which lifts the intensity of the feeling for life to its very peak.¹

In this quotation, Huizinga summarizes several of the themes I shall address: the importance of the role of symbolism in medieval man's quest for the understanding of God, the close relationship of symbolism to mysticism and the contrast of symbolism with rationalism. But Huizinga's implication that symbolism is an adjunct of the developing thought of primitive man tells us merely that symbolism is a necessary component of the mystical appreciation of God and if the imperative for that appreciation becomes unfashionable then so will religious symbolism.

Naturally enough, this atmosphere of spiritual symbolism led to an intense theoretical interest in literary and philosophical theories of symbolism, in the nature of language, in the relationship of words to images and of words to the ideas that they represent. It was acknowledged that words, St. Augustine's "choice and precious vessels", are symbols which, as they are manipulated, form our means of communication one with

¹ Huizinga 239

another and we shall see that philosophers, poets and theologians from Aristotle to Horace to Aquinas struggled to perfect an interpretation of these symbols and a comprehensive theory of poetics and language. This task was complicated by the fact that not only were names, words, letters and numbers themselves generally thought, in some contexts and in some way, to be representations of God Himself but that for the Christian the words of the Bible and for the Jew the words of the Old Testament were His literal revelation and thus the final authority in spiritual matters.

We read in *Proverbs* that “a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver”¹ but despite the beauty of this picturesque simile, it is apparent that words are not always adequate for satisfactory communication or understanding. The description of the meaning of a word eventually becomes circular and there are many words the meaning of which cannot be described but can only be experienced. St. Augustine commented on the self-referential nature of language in a happy passage. “To handle words with words is to interweave them - like interlaced fingers: rubbing them together makes it hard to tell, except by each finger on its own, which is doing the itching and which the scratching.”² Where words are insufficient, pictures can help and they too can be a species of symbol.³ An image can convey more information at a glance than the written word but the obvious tradeoff lies in the greater difficulty of creating the image and copying it, a serious obstacle before the time of the printing press. One of the topics I shall discuss is the superior spiritual authority of the visual image over the written word during our period since the image was supposedly higher on the path of the mystical ascent towards God. However, an image of its own cannot represent qualities which are the province of the other senses. How, for instance, do you draw the scent of a rose? Furthermore, a picture by itself cannot represent abstract ideas or as Socrates pointed out, the inner qualities of a man.⁴ In these cases, for the representation and the communication of that representation to be meaningful, there has to be a twofold process: the creation of the symbol and conventional acknowledgment and acceptance of what the symbol signifies. This circularity of definition, recognized by Augustine, indicated to contemporaries that something other than logic or ra-

¹ *Proverbs* 25, 11

² St. Augustine *Teacher* 14 cited in Wills 98.

³ As Jakob Masen points out in his *Speculum Imaginum* of 1650, the principal division in the hierarchy of images is between the symbolic image and the representational image, i.e. that which merely mimics its object.

⁴ Plato *Cratylus* 423D

tionality must inspire our acceptance of the basis of modes of communication.

Central to this interest in the symbolism of words was the primacy of metaphor as a literary device in its function of extending, embellishing and even creating meaning in a text. From the time of Aristotle, it was recognized that employing metaphor to create ‘wonder’, as he put it, for the reader or viewer was the principal objective of the artistic process but by the end of the Renaissance it was accepted that metaphor itself was a mechanism for the inspiration and validation of new ideas. This view of metaphor has survived the age of symbolism, has been revived as a feature of modern theories of language and anchors the literary symbolism of the Renaissance within the history of the development of these theories.

Today, in the twenty-first century, the visual symbol with which we are most familiar is the *logo*, the corporate and political symbol in which all mystical overtones have been lost in the materialist obsessions of our own age but in which in a way we have come full circle. Our word Logo is derived directly from the Greek *logos* and one of the principal themes of this present work and of the whole age of symbolism is the origin and development of the *logos* as a spiritual symbol. The word symbol itself also comes from the Greek, from *symbollein* meaning to unify, to bring together, and the *symbolon* was originally one of two pieces of broken bone or dice used in legal or commercial transactions so that each party who held one of the two could identify the other.¹ By the time of the Renaissance, the word had acquired a number of additional meanings,² most of which have now become obsolete. Perhaps the most frequently cited at the time were the *symbola* of Pythagoras, a selection of moral adages supposedly handed down by the great philosopher.

I also examine in this book traditions of education in medieval and Renaissance times and in particular training in discourse and writing, the arts of grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, logic and memory with their precise and constricting definitions and forms of usage. These classical traditions endured throughout the period and informed the literature of the time with advantage and disadvantage from the modern perspective. On the one hand there was discipline and precision and on the other an over-emphasis on form and categorization. We shall see that this obsession

¹ The Greek god of the dice was Hermes whose place in the history of western symbolism we shall discuss later.

² Guillaume Budé, a celebrated jurist of the 16th Century, in his *Commentarii Linguae Graecae* written around 1521 and first published in 1529, described the various uses of the word symbolon in antiquity (page 224).

with categorization was another universal literary feature of the age which went back to the proposals of Aristotle and Cicero that successful composition should be founded on ideas derived from the works of earlier authorities and that these ideas should be collected and arranged in students' notebooks called commonplace books. This tradition goes some way in explaining the origin of the body of medieval and Renaissance literature of collections of stories, poems, aphorisms and sayings by the classical and Christian authors, genres which culminated in emblem and device, the final and the most sophisticated of these collections of symbolic expressions. But the Art of Rhetoric was also seen as important to the wider question of how we ascribe meaning and how meaning becomes accepted in communication. Rhetoric was the art of persuasion and therefore the elements of Rhetoric took their place alongside faith, logic and intuition as authorities for the validation of meaning.

Throughout the whole of the period I am considering, during classical, medieval and Renaissance times in Western Europe, if anything can link the different threads of metaphysics, semantics and aesthetics of the time, it is this use of the symbol as the basis of theological and philosophical speculation and, in this present work, to emphasize its homogeneity and to provide a convenient descriptive shorthand, I characterize the whole period as the age of symbolism. This philosophical system was attractive and enduring because it encompassed all matter and all experience in one coherent metaphysical theory. First described by the early Greek philosophers particularly Pythagoras and Plato, the theory proposed that the only true reality lay in heaven close to God and that all material and earthly things were representations, reflections or symbols of God. The basics of western medieval culture and thought during the age of symbolism including Christian theology stemmed from this belief, namely that an understanding of God could be achieved by examining and interpreting the material world all aspects of which were symbols of His nature.

The unique contribution of Christianity to this culture was the imperative to good behavior without which there could be no individual redemption. Christ died to atone for the sins of mankind and mankind was in turn obligated to strive for moral excellence to achieve salvation. This imperative translated into a Christian literature dominated by moral exhortations and this moral literature meshed neatly with the older classical poetic traditions which included proverb, fable and epigram.

During the age of symbolism, theologians and philosophers continued to debate the nature of God, their arguments and investigations ranging along the spectrum between rationalism and mysticism but the

ultimate authority for the Christian in this debate were the Scriptures which for the Church were the revelation of God. Scripture, however, was also susceptible to allegorical interpretation and it took its place alongside the classical texts as a source of the symbolism which was understood to be a necessary part of the approach to God. The philosophical paradigm remained the realism of the Platonic forms tempered, at least in poetics and aesthetics, by Aristotle's theory of metaphor. Gombrich, in an extract from his classic essay, *Symbolic Images*, sums it up: "the tension between neoPlatonist mysticism and Aristotelian intellectualism .. their interpenetrations, conciliations and divisions make up the history of religious philosophy."¹

The end of the age of symbolism was catalyzed principally by the invention and rapid spread of the use of printing at the end of the Renaissance which loosened the control of the authorities particularly the Church authorities over the dissemination of knowledge. The literature of symbolism, product as it was of the printing press, was nevertheless an expression of and witness to the universal acceptance of the beliefs of the symbolic age.

¹ Gombrich 1978 179