

Poetry as Emblem: A Habit of Mind
in La Ceppède's *Théorèmes*

by
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In the early part of the seventeenth century a French magistrate composed a series of five hundred twenty sonnets to depict the New Testament account spanning from Jesus' last hours to his Ascension and the sending of the Spirit at Pentecost. These *Théorèmes sur le sacré mystère de notre rédemption* of Jean de La Ceppède came to light as a result of Henri Bremond's early twentieth century appreciation of them in his study of religious literature in France (347-57). Not until the Droz publication of 1966 did the public have access to the complete collection of the *Théorèmes* which in the form of a facsimile remains to date the only integral publication.

One striking characteristic of the *Théorèmes* is the abundant naturalistic detail and pictorial realism which La Ceppède uses to draw a moral or a personalized spiritual meditation from his re-creation of New Testament scenes. This is quite in keeping with the post-Tridentine baroque esthetic of appealing to the sensorium in order to better teach the populace the Church's newly reaffirmed truths and thus move them to assent. What is unusual in this poetry, though, is La Ceppède's skill in adapting to the verbal medium a visual medium which was already very well established as a vehicle for instruction. That vehicle was the emblem, a stylized and often enigmatic visual design whose allegorical meaning and moral import are made explicit in an accompanying verse. It has been shown elsewhere how La Ceppède did indeed transpose this visual medium into "word emblems" with respect to various images (Marsh, "Emblematic Representations;" "Water and Blood"). It is my purpose here to show that La Ceppède's *Théorèmes* exhibit a habit of emblematic thinking, a habit that is nurtured on the Horatian *ut pictura poesis* and manifested in modes of expression germane to painting, heraldry and engraving.

The correspondence between poetry and picture was not a Renaissance or baroque phenomenon. Desirous to capitalize on the esthetic principles enunciated by classical theoreticians, the Renaissance humanists found in Horace the support that would raise poetry to the prestigious position occupied by painting. It was the catch phrase *ut pictura poesis* in Horace's *De Arte Poetica* that gave them the support which led them to exploit these two arts so uncritically that they became, as Robert Clements has noted, "not only sisters, but twin sisters" (174). What Horace had conceived as the equal powers of ideation and imagination shared by poets and painters alike was extended by the Renaissance poet/artist to include every phase and function of the work of art as well, especially narrating and teaching (Clements 173). It is no surprise then that La Ceppède, arriving on the heels of Renaissance theoreticians, should characterize the poetic image as a "speaking picture" with didactic power: "Le fabuleux crayon des vieilles peintures parlantes nous a pourtrait ceste verité en mille & mille tableaux . . ." (I, i, Avantpropos). enter now the vogue of the emblem with its visually laden history as an inlaid mosaic (fr. Lat. *emblema*) accompanied by its historical affinity with Egyptian hieroglyphs, which Renaissance humanists took to be cryptograms concealing divine wisdom, and we have a vehicle which became for the baroque artist/poet an excellent conductor of religious teaching.

Of the Jesuit emblem books Mario Praz says that "the fixity of the emblematic picture was infinitely suggestive; the beholder little by little let his imagination be eaten into as a plate is by acid" (170). Perhaps one of the earliest Jesuit emblem books was Louis Richeome's *Les Tableaux sacrés* in which the author states the value of the picture and its import for moving the will. clearly Richeome sees the visually attractive as the pathway to the will:

Il n'y a rien qui plus délecte et qui fasse plus suavement glisser une chose dans l'âme que la peinture, ni qui plus profondément la grave en la mémoire, ni qui plus efficacement pousse la volonté pour lui donner branle et l'émouvoir avec énergie.

(7)

Certainly, it will be noticed that in Richeome's mind the sense appeal of the "peinture" has the capability of an engraver's *burin*, much like Praz's image of acid eating into a plate. Thus, the "peinture" has the highly visual and tactile quality of a hieroglyph or a mosaic *emblema*. But Bremond, using Richeome's terminology, notes that the "peinture" need not only be the "peinture muette" of painters or engravers; it can also be a "peinture parlante," a literary description, or a "peinture de signification," a verbal vehicle whose purpose is to extract a moral lesson from the "peinture muette" (33). Such is the "peinture" we find in La Ceppède and we find it embedded in a world of engraving and painting.

Now when we turn to La Ceppède's *Théorèmes*, we meet a quite conscious habit of mind which tends to see in the physical world signs bearing hidden meaning much as the emblemist uses his cryptic designs to convey a moral message. We also see striking evidence of an emblematic habit of mind that we may call subliminal. This is manifested in the abundant use of terms normally reserved for engraving, heraldry and painting, as will be shown later. La Ceppède's conscious emblematic habit of mind is not limited to the passive reception of signs in the physical world and their subsequent interpretation. It also seeks to create its own signs and to endow them with meaning. Thus, La Ceppède will interpret arcane signs offered by the physical world and will also fabricate his own signs by associating physical objects and by recalling typological, mythological and biblical figures to convey meaning. We may thus speak of La Ceppède's two dimensional world-view: a vertical dimension in which he "perce le sens obscur des figures et des symboles

mystiques que l'Esprit divin a accumulés devant nous" (Ruchon 16) and a horizontal dimension in which he accumulates figures and endows them with mystical significance.

The vertical dimension of La Ceppède's world-view is clearly shown in his perception and interpretation of the Gospel account (John 18:10) of the apostle Peter's severing the ear of Malchus, slave of the Jewish High Priest. The action, although done in rage, is seen as a God-sent sign with meaning and signifying Peter's authority in the Church:

Vous n'avez pas frappé ce coup à l'estourdie,
L'Esprit de l'Eternel va sans doute estalant
Quelque profond secret en ce coup violent . . .
Marque presageux que Pierre doit oster
Le sceptre, & la Prestrise au peuple Judaïque.
(I, i, 60, vv. 5-8, 12-14)¹

La Ceppède reflects on the emblematic significance of the action and then interprets it. Malchus is the slave of the Jewish religious leader. Peter is the follower of Jesus, the Messiah and new religious leader. Peter's removal of Malchus' ear is the emblem of his removal of the sceptre of priesthood from the Jews and his own assumption of the royal priestly power. Jesus then heals Malchus' ear to show that He has power over those who wish to overpower Him. La Ceppède regards this healing as one of the many inexplicable miracles provided as hieroglyphics for man: "De miracles divers l'éternelle intendance/ A lambrissé les murs de ce grand univers" (I, i, 63, vv. 1-2). It is not without reason that La Ceppède chose the image of wall paneling to express the mysterious signs sent by God to man. According to Robert's authoritative dictionary, the word "lambrisser" dates from 1538 and indicates a "revêtement en marbre, en stuc ou en bois, formé de cadres et de panneaux, sur les murs d'une pièce, d'un appartement." Such is also the mosaic composition of the original *emblema* with its characteristic plastic element and block arrangement. Thus, for La Ceppède the universe is paneled with

signs of truth, like a mosaic or *emblema*. this use of the word "lambrisser" is also one piece of evidence showing an emblematic habit of mind that is subliminal. It remains for La Ceppède's to take these heavenly sent signs and to decipher their hidden meaning.

The horizontal dimension of La Ceppède's world-view is found in his explanation for his choice of various comparisons gleaned from the physical world of human experience to represent a spiritual reality or to figure an inexplicable event:

Nous usons licitement des noms & des comparaisons des choses prophanes visibles, pource que c'êt par elles que nous sommes portez à la cognoissance des invisibles.

(II, iii, 24, n. 2)

Thus, La Ceppède feels free to use the eagle as an emblem of Christ ascending to heaven: "Cêt Aigle est le Sauveur, rien ne le marque mieux./ Son Pere le rappelle, il s'en revole au Cieux" (II, iii, 23, vv. 9-10). Using the eagle as emblem facilitates our understanding or appreciation of this mystery and is thus justified:

Nostre raison ne peut cete voye comprendre: La nature ne peut la sousmettre à nos yeux.C'êt de cêt Aigle donc qu'il nous la faut apprendre. (II, iii, 24, vv. 12-14)

The flight of the eagle is parallel to that of Jesus' ascent to heaven and thus La Ceppède uses it to emblemize the Ascension.

The preceding examples may be considered as evidence of a conscious emblematic habit. Evidence of a subliminal habit of mind that is emblematic surfaces in the *Théorèmes* with the use of terminology and images which pertain to heraldry, engraving and painting. the art of heraldry is related to emblematics in that, like the emblem, the blazon is a composite of signs in abstract space produced by the engraving process. The *gravure* and its technique, so popular and

widespread in La Ceppède's time, is related to emblematics in that it was the process by which emblems were produced on paper. Painting is related to emblematics in that both are visually pictorial. All three processes are, like the emblem, sensorially oriented. Appeal is to the visual in all three and to the visual and the tactile in the blazon and the *gravure*. The maker of blazons, the engraver and the painter show themselves in the art of La Ceppède through the widespread use of terminology specific to these arts.

La Ceppède uses heraldic terminology to portray Jesus tried before the High Priest Annas. Jesus does not answer the questions on the doctrine He is teaching because He knows Annas has asked the questions only to mock the doctrine: "Anne est indigne d'entendre/ Ce, dont il ne s'enquiert que pour le blasonner" (I, ii, 8, vv. 13-14). The literal meaning of "blasonner" is, of course, a heraldic one, namely to form a coat of arms, a blazon. Its figurative meaning, now obsolete, is to mock. In another instance the whiteness of an angel's robe is called "le riche blazon de ce victorieux" (II, ii, 14, v. 10). In the sonnet in which La Ceppède addresses prelates he advises them that charity is "L'enseigne par laquelle on cognoit le Pasteur" (II, ii, 90, v. 11). The note to this verse expands on its heraldic content:

Comme les Princes, & les nobles ont leur [sic] armoires pour marque de leur noblesse: ainsi Jesus-Christ aujourd'hui establissant S. Pierre Prince de la noblesse divine, luy donne les armoires, les enseignes ou marques d'icelle, cét à sçavoir l'insigne charité, qui le doit faire cognoistre, & recognoistre à tout le monde.

(II, ii, 90, n. 4)

La Ceppède's subliminal emblematic habit of mind is also shown in several instances by the use of images of imprinting and engraving. La Ceppède recounts a story in a commentary on one of his Ascension sonnets (II, iii, 19, n. 1). A certain devout chevalier visits the Holy Land where he expires on the still preserved last

The poet's pen is the painter's brush and his feeble poetic performance is the insufficient vividness of the painter's colors. Lacking the literal brush and colors to depict a visual scene, La Ceppède substitutes evocation of the tactile in "froide insolence" to represent Jesus's death and "vives chaleurs" to represent His resurrection.

If to the Renaissance humanist poetry was like a painting, then to the baroque *poète dévot* La Ceppède his sonnets were more than painting. They were also verbal emblems collected in his "emblem book" to be looked at, considered, as proofs and demonstrations of post-Tridentine religious truths. After all, with a logician's mind the magistrate author does call them "théorèmes" (fr. Greek *theorein*, to look at, consider) and as such even the title is emblematic.

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Note

¹References to individual sonnets of the *Théorèmes* appear in the text and will follow the three figure system. The first figure in upper case Roman numerals indicates the Part; the second figure indicates the Book; the third figure in Arabic numerals indicates the individual sonnet.

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