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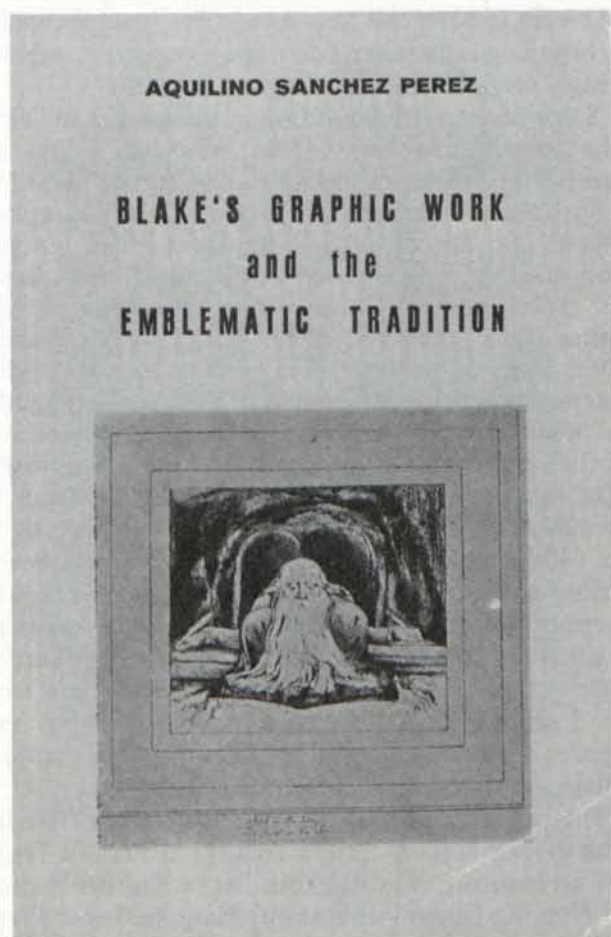
R E V I E W

Aquilino Sanchez Perez, Blake's Graphic Work and the Emblematic Tradition

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Aquilino Sanchez Perez. *Blake's Graphic Work and the Emblematic Tradition*. Murcia: Univ. of Murcia, 1982. 175 pp. and 82 reproductions.

Reviewed by Joseph S. Salemi

Emblem literature, for those who are unfamiliar with the subject, is a curious mixed genre of illustration and poetry that flourished in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. An "emblem" was an engraving or woodcut with an allegorical or figurative meaning (sometimes originally conceived, sometimes taken from classical sources) which was elucidated by an aphoristic motto and some simple verses. The 1531 *editio princeps* of Andrea Alciati's *Emblematum Liber* was the first of many books of collected emblems published in almost every European country. Some collections had a common theme (love, piety, mythology), while others were eclectic; many were popular enough to go through several editions. A good deal of the emblem book's popularity was due to its

usefulness. For the writer it was a ready source of topics and artificial arguments; for the moralist it was a didactic catechism with easy-to-remember lessons; for the artist it was a convenient design book containing stock depictions of common notions, motifs, and stories. The vogue of the emblem book waned in the eighteenth century, and one of the last was published in 1772, when Blake was a young boy.

One problem facing the critic who considers Blake's art in relation to emblem literature is that of determining to what degree he worked within emblematic traditions, and to what degree he transcended them. It is not an easy question to resolve, for several reasons. If we err in making Blake too dependent on the earlier emblematicists, we run the risk of underestimating his unique genius and inspiration. But if we dismiss the emblematic parallels as essentially unimportant, then we may overlook possible keys to some of his more cryptic designs. In addition, the extent and complexity of Blake's canon, both poetic and pictorial, cannot be reduced to manipulable categories of comparison. Emblem literature, though perhaps more susceptible to such reduction, comprises a vast corpus of material spanning two centuries. Therefore the critic who wishes to study Blake's debt to the emblematicists is faced with a formidable task of research and cross-referencing. Less palpable a difficulty, though perhaps a more subtly discouraging one, is the fact that whatever points of similarity may emerge from such a study are bound to trouble some of Blake's admirers, who will instinctively resist evidence that shows their hero to be less shatteringly original than they are accustomed to believe. For this reason most critics who discuss Blake and emblem literature take a conciliatory line—they balance every discovery of influence or relationship with a strong insistence on Blake's superiority to his sources.

Aquilino Sanchez Perez, the author of *Blake's Graphic Work and the Emblematic Tradition*, is not immune to these difficulties—in fact it was inevitable that his book should reflect them in a major way. A distinguished Spanish scholar in the field of emblem literature, Sanchez Perez has the advantage of also being a close and sympathetic student of Blake's work. He has given himself the job of analyzing all of Blake's graphics from an emblematic point of view, for the purpose of determining exactly in what sense the word "emblem" can be applied to Blake's art. It is no small task, but Sanchez Perez has undertaken it with considerable energy and skill. He has examined every design in Bindman's exhaustive catalogue of Blake's graphic work, searching for parallels, similarities, or anything at all suggestive of emblematic influence in either theme or composition. That he is somewhat hesitant in his conclusions is due to no lack of exertion or ability, but rather to the formidable nature of the problems mentioned above, and the necessarily tentative nature of a wideranging, comparative study.

Sanchez Perez rightly emphasizes the foremost point

of similarity between Blake's art and emblem literature—the interdependency and mutual illumination of picture and word. However, he is not content to point out that design and text are essentially inseparable in Blake's work and in emblems. He couples this observation with a subtler understanding of their connection when he distinguishes "emblematic structure" from "emblematic procedure." The structure of an emblem comprises its component parts (picture, motto, epigram), whereas emblematic procedure refers to "the internal relation between picture and text" (p. 20). Sanchez Perez describes this relation in the traditional emblem:

The picture is the visual substratum of the text, which first strikes us and appeals to our senses. The text represents a further, sometimes only supplementary, elucidation derived from a visual impression. In other words, the allegory or image which is potentially or silently present in the picture is further "revealed" and transformed into speech by means of the written word. (p. 20)

This formulation is useful not only for what it tells us about emblems, but also for the light it can cast on Blake's art. Whether or not Blake's designs have specific emblematic antecedents, and whether or not he produced genuine emblems of his own, his artistic procedure is emblematic in that it conjoins the visual and the verbal for the sake of an immediately vivid revelation. Although Sanchez Perez notes only one instance where Blake produces a traditionally structured emblem (Bindman, 5), he finds emblematic procedure so pervasive in the illustrated *Book of Job*, for example, that he calls the work "well within the mainstream of emblematics" (p. 119).

However, if this admittedly vague similarity were all we had to go on, there would be little point in talking about Blake and the emblematisers. The fact is that there are many emblematic antecedents for Blake's designs, and not just in the usually accepted places such as *The Gates of Paradise* and *A Small Book of Designs*. Sanchez Perez has demonstrated that emblems are important prototypes for designs in many of Blake's more ambitious works as well. *The First Book of Urizen*, *Milton*, *America*, *Europe*, the *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, and *Jerusalem* all have plates that can be compared with earlier emblematic engravings or woodcuts. There is no longer any doubt that Blake knew and used Geoffrey Whitney's *A Choice of Emblemes* (1586), and in the case of other less popular emblem books there are places where a specific emblem coincides, in both design and thematic meaning, with a Blake plate. In such instances we must assume Blake's familiarity with the emblem in question, or else posit a Jungian collective unconscious into which he was plugged. Sanchez Perez has noted parallels not only in English writers such as Whitney, Peacham, Wither, Quarles, and Ayres, but in continental emblematisers such as Alciati, Camerarius, and others. (To these I would add Perrière's *Le Theatre des bons engins*.) I am particularly impressed by his discussion of the

emblematic parallels for human beings riding birds in flight, a motif much used by Blake. Urizen and his compasses, circumscribing the bounds of the world, are purely emblematic, appearing in several early emblem books. Even "The Sick Rose" finds its original in Whitney's book.

Let me add here that Blake would be partial to emblem books for the simple reason that they were produced in woodcut or line engraving. Whatever their limitations as an art form, at least emblem books satisfied Blake's consistent demand for the clean, sharp line. "It is only fumble and Bungle which cannot draw a Line," he growls in his *Notebook*.

Sanchez Perez does recognize Blake's essential independence of the more rigid requirements of the emblematic genre. He points out that Blake's "artistic and poetic imagination would have found itself somewhat constrained in a tradition which is characterized by such narrow and austere formalism" (p. 53). Sanchez Perez prefers Blake the engraver to Blake the poet, and sees a stronger emblematic link in those works where Blake's graphic design overshadows his poetry. His analysis of *The Gates of Paradise* and the illustrated *Book of Job* is instructive, for he sees the latter work as emblematic because of its didactic purpose, and the former as such because of its deliberately enigmatic character. Here is a curious paradox that holds true for both Blake and the emblematisers—a didactic impulse is veiled in figurative fiction. Blake and the emblem writers desired to teach, but they did so hieroglyphically, like the divine finger writing on the wall at Belshazzar's feast. A Daniel can read the hieroglyphs, for he is in touch with the numinous force that has made them. But unfortunately, a prophet's gift for illuminating the obscure is not given to all of us.

The point is an important one, for emblematic procedure in Blake is not limited to the simple juxtaposition of visual and verbal elements, nor the recasting of old emblems into new forms. Sanchez Perez is quite correct in pointing out that the complexity of Blake's art is similar to the studied obscurity of the emblem; both keep themselves aloof from a too-easy reading. He (mis-)quotes Blake's letter to Dr. Trusler: "I want to elucidate my ideas. But you ought to know that what is grand is necessarily obscure to weak men. That which can be explicit to the idiot is not worth my care." Quite so—the truly great artist does not dilute his work's strength for the sake of a wider audience. *Odi profanum vulgus et arceo*. Though Blake would not have been as explicit as Horace was in warning off the profane rabble, he knew and understood what Christ meant by the words "Unto you is given the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all things are done in parables: that seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand" (Mark 4:10-12). All true wisdom belongs to the elect, simply because the ma-

jority of those to whom wisdom is offered either reject it unthinkingly or fail to comprehend it. Nevertheless, the fact that Blake was heir to this Biblical tradition of prophetic utterance (with its own built-in obscurity) makes for one important difference between his work and emblem literature. Whatever the ingenuity of their conceits, the emblematisers were concerned with an extractable meaning, one which was more or less cryptically embedded in their text and pictures. But Blake's art derives much of its force from the controlled frenzy inherent in prophecy, and the energy of vatic possession. Its "obscurity" is a side-effect of its impetuous movement, and not the deliberately crafted crypticism of a symbolic collage.

In fact, it is this prophetic heritage that provides us with the historical connection between Blake and the emblematisers. Sanchez Perez points out that long after emblem books ceased to be a part of the intellectual mainstream, they remained popular among the literate Puritan middle class from which Blake took his origin. This class of conscientious nonconformists—strong among the London artisans—was heir to the vaguely millenarian dissenters of the seventeenth century. Raised on a diet of Milton's sonorities, Bunyan's vision of the Celestial City, and topical, alarmist readings of the Book of Revelations, they were by nature predisposed to the allegorical, visionary discourse of emblem literature. For them allegory was second nature, trained as they were in relentless typological interpretation of the Old Testament, and continuous anticipation of "signs" of the Final Days. This is Blake's tradition too. He is a creature of the Bible, Milton, and apocalyptically-tinged Dissent. He represents a Puritan-allegorical tradition that stems ultimately from Spenser, and which was mediated through Bunyan and the emblematisers.

Much of the foregoing paragraph is my interpretation, not necessarily that of Sanchez Perez. He is content to point out the strong connection that undoubtedly exists between some of Blake's graphic work and emblematic literature. The evidence that his book amasses is extensive and, to my mind, convincing. However, there are sure to be objections to his conclusions, precisely because of the theoretical possibility of coincidental similarities, and the impossibility of proving an artist has been decisively "influenced" by something. Sanchez Perez wraps up his discussion by saying that "the evidence in favour of influences from the emblematic tradition on the graphic work of Blake is sufficiently strong that it cannot be disregarded" (p. 169). But he is quick to add that "[t]here is no standard by which to measure that influence in a clear and precise manner" (p. 170). His book has over eighty illustrations, both from Blake and emblem literature, and some of the parallels are compelling. Yet he warns us that "we must bear in mind that some motifs, in fact, constitute commonplace topics of didactic literature" (p. 164). Prudence has dictated this politic hedging, and I would be the last to blame it.

So in the final analysis, Sanchez Perez steps back from the body of material he has gathered, as if unwilling to make too strong a connection between Blake and his putative sources. His caution is sensible, for the one thing that every student of Blake and the emblematisers agrees upon is Blake's absolute transmutation of the earlier tradition. What had been in the hands of lesser men a mere device for didactic moralizing became in Blake's hands a powerful instrument for visionary statement. No one who looks upon the graphics of Blake can deny that they are of an entirely different order than the emblem books. But it is good to take note of the debt, however slight, that a great artist owes to his humbler predecessors. And as for those who dislike admitting that Blake was anything other than *sui generis*, they should recall that originality in itself has nothing to commend it, and an overly self-conscious individuality can be a positive hindrance to substantial achievement. What matters in any art is obedience to creative energy—the spirit of Los. Sanchez Perez has shown that, whatever debt Blake owed to the emblematisers, he never disobeyed that spirit.

Jean H. Hagstrum. *Sex and Sensibility: Ideal and Erotic Love from Milton to Mozart*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982. 368 pp., illustrated. Cloth, \$30.00; paper, \$9.95.

Reviewed by Alicia Ostriker

That man must have a heart of stone, says Oscar Wilde, who can read through the death of Little Nell without laughing. This has always been my sentiment about the death of Richardson's *Clarissa*; *Clarissa* as a whole has always struck me as the greatest, most sustained piece of soft-core pornographic soap opera in English. That such a fuss should be made over the deflowering of a not otherwise interesting bourgeois young lady; that *Clarissa* herself, her abductor, everyone else in the novel, and ap-