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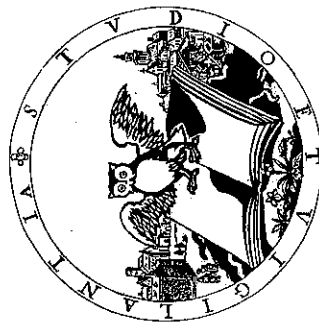
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MUNDUS EMBLEMATICUS

Studies in Neo-Latin Emblem Books

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Occult Semiotics and Iconology: Michael Maier's Alchemical Emblems

GYÖRGY E. SZÓNYI

Introduction: Emblem, Emblematics, Occult Emblematics

According to Schopenhauer's last century definition, emblems are a step toward poetical allegories; they constitute simple patterns accompanied by an explanatory motto and their purpose is to convey moral teaching through an act of recognition.¹ The didactic function of emblems has always been emphasized, but there are other theories which underline the multiplicity of meaning and their strong revelational character, resulting from the condensed and high-powered interplay of words and pictures. Bypassing now the huge scholarly literature on emblems proper as a Renaissance literary genre,² let me concentrate now on the notion, 'emblematic'. This term has been used to referring to the whole wide landscape of early modern visual culture.

To understand 'emblematic' not only as a label of a specific genre, but as a whole way of seeing and describing the world, has its roots in the thinking of Francis Bacon, who in the *Advancement of Learning* equated hieroglyphs, emblems and gestures, thus radically widening the term's range of reference.³ Clearly, Bacon defined gestures and emblems as such forms of communication which are sanctified by tradition but at the same time have some similitude or congruity with the notion they signify. This understanding may have derived from the fascination of Renaissance Neo-Platonists with the emblematic ways of expression.

Philosophers, such as Ficino, distinguished between the human mind as capable only of sequential comprehension of propositions, as opposed to the divine Mind, which would accommodate the totality of propositions

¹ *Die Welt*, vol. I, Book III., par. 50. Quoted in Mario Praz, *Studies in Seventeenth Century Imagery* (Rome, 1964) 14-15.

² Cf. Peter M. Daly, *Emblem Theory: Recent German Contributions to the Characterization of the Emblem Genre* [Wolffenbütteler Forschungen 9] (Nerdelt, 1979) and Daly, *Literature in the Light of the Emblem. Structural Parallels between the Emblem and Literature in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (reprint of 1979 with a new introductory chapter, Toronto, 1998) *passim*, including further bibliography.

³ Francis Bacon (Hartmut Krech, ed.), *The Advancement of Learning* (1605) (Bremen, 1998). <<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~bear/adv2.htm>>, access: 1999-05-10. Ch. 16, par1-3; also referred to by McClelland, 'Emblematology', in: Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.), *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics* (Berlin and New York, 1994) I, 220-221.

simultaneously. Symbolic images were thought to contain a mass of propositions in a condensed, synthetic mode that evoked intuitive and revelative awareness in the human soul. This awareness would then lead one's mind toward participation in the divine *Mens*. Thus, the intuitive and mystical *exaltatio*, at least for those Renaissance thinkers, was a major goal to be achieved through emblematic expression.⁴

From the above it follows, that occult emblematics must have played an important role in the early modern career of the emblem, and indeed, not only the traditional emblem collections used sometimes esoteric motives for their didactic-allegorical themes, but occult discourse also employed the means of emblematic representation. The most famous emblem book belonging to the latter group was Michael Maier's *Atalanta fugiens*, a fascinating, multimedial collection of alchemical emblems.

Recently, Urszula Szulakowska has called attention to the fact that previous studies of Renaissance alchemical imagery rarely involved a discussion of its semiotic aspects, 'yet, without such an analysis it is difficult to establish the exact role of visual illustration within a particular context'.⁵

In the present essay I am going to examine Maier's alchemical emblems by the help of a combined semiotic and iconological approach. Prior to this, I shall sketch the biographical and cultural contexts in which Maier emerges as an outstanding practitioner of occult cultural representation. The following part will survey his alchemical discourse together with its various ideological and political subtexts. In the last part I shall examine the *Atalanta fugiens*, demonstrating how two functions of the pragmatics of images, the 'revelational' and the 'didactic' mix and melt in that work.

Biographical and Cultural Contexts

Who was Michael Maier? A German humanist, a small town medical doctor, a key figure in the history of the Rosicrucians, Emperor Rudolf II's favourite physician, a mysterious aristocrat who devoted his life to the study of the occult, or a 'poeta doctus' with a sharp pen, who wrote spicy satires about the

⁴ On the changes from the vertical to the horizontal world model, which contributed to the demitosis of reality and subverted transcendental semiosis see Juri Lotman, 'Problems in the Typology of Cultures', in: D.P. Lucid (ed.), *Soviet Semiotics* (Baltimore, 1977), the same process was described within an iconological framework by E.H. Gombrich, 'Icones Symbolicae. Philosophies of Symbolism and their bearing on Arts', in: *idem*, *Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (Oxford, 1972) 123-199.

⁵ Urszula Szulakowska, *The Alchemy of Light. Geometry and Optics in Late Renaissance Alche-*

late-Renaissance lure with magic and alchemy? All these opinions can be found in the scattered literature on Maier. His significance is best summarized in Robert J.W. Evans' magisterial study of early modern Central European intellectual history, *Rudolf II and His World*:

The most mysterious of the court physicians was Michael Maier (1568-1622), an enthusiastic Paracelsian, alchemist, and reformer who served Rudolf during the years before 1612, then moved to Holland and Germany, and apparently paid more than one visits to England where he had friends in Robert Fludd and King James's doctor, Sir William Paddy. Between 1614 and 1620 Maier produced a series of remarkable emblematic works on alchemical subjects, and all were published in the Rhineland, either at Oppenheim or at Frankfurt. Little is known of Maier's life beyond what he himself reveals in the prefaces to these books and it is far from clear why all appeared almost simultaneously, for the labour of inventing and preparing them must have occupied him through his Prague years and earlier.⁶

The classic study on Maier – Craven's book of 1910⁷ – gives more details but does not solve any of the mysteries about him. It is known that he was born in Holstein, that is Northern Germany, and studied medicine in this region at the University of Rostock. He received his degree rather late, at the age of 29, then he lived there until 1608, when he moved south and finally ended up at the court of the esoterically minded Emperor Rudolf in Prague.⁸ It would be interesting to know how he attracted the attention of Rudolf who was surrounded by hordes of physicians and alchemists,⁹ especially since at that time Maier had no publication record whatsoever.

⁶ Robert J.W. Evans, *Rudolf II and His World. A Study in Intellectual History 1576-1612* (Oxford, 1973; new, amended edition London, 1995) 205-206.

⁷ J. B. Craven, *Count Michael Maier. Doctor of Philosophy and of Medicine, Alchemist, Rosicrucian, Mystic, 1568-1622. Life and Writings* (Kirkwall, 1910; reprint London, 1968).

⁸ Craven, *Count Michael Maier*, chapter 1 (pages 1-11): 'Life of Maier'. See also the biographical summary in H.M.E. de Jong, *Michael Maier's 'Atalanta Fugiens': Sources of an Alchemical Book of Emblems* (Leiden, 1969) 1ff.

⁹ On Rudolf's court – beside the basic monograph of Evans' *Rudolf II*, see the following, more recent works: E. Fučíková and J. Bradburn (eds.), *Rudolf II and Prague. The Court and the City* (London-Prague, 1997) with, among others, Paula Findlen's 'Cabinets, Collecting and Natural Philosophy', 209-220; György E. Szónyi's 'Scientific and Magical Humanism at the Court of Rudolf II', 223-231, etc.; and the English summaries in Vladislav Zadravský, *Opus magnum. The Book of Sacred Geometry. Alchemy, Magic, Astrology, the Kabbala, and Secret Societies in Bohemia* (Prague, 1997); Vladimír Kuncic, 'Alchemy in the Czech Lands', 276-279; Luboš Antonín, 'Magia Naturalis and the Aristocratic Society of Bohemia and Moravia in the 17th and

Maier nevertheless became one of the body physicians ('Leibartz') of the Emperor and remained in that capacity in Prague till Rudolf's death in 1612. What is more, he was appointed to the post of private secretary to Rudolf and honoured with the title of Count Palatine. It appears that the baroque splendour of the Prague Habsburg court and city did not shatter Maier's northern Protestantism; his later writings show him to be a firm – although esoterically oriented – Lutheran, who always thought of practising science within an orthodox religious frame of thought.

His Protestantism may be one reason why he decided to move on from Prague in the direction of Holland and England. It seems curious, that after such a distinguished career, his first work to be published came out only in 1614 when he was already 46 years old. This publication, the *Arcana arcanissima*, is dedicated to Sir William Paddy. This first *opus* already clearly showed the characteristic angles of Maier's interest: a combination of scientific and hermetic research with a particular sensitivity to literature, humanistic rhetoric and classical mythology, often treated satirically.

In this respect, he seems to be an intellectual kin of Giordano Bruno, but it is also very interesting to recall the comparison the Reverend Craven offered, placing him between Robert Fludd and Heinrich Khunrath:

Fludd, no doubt, was as deeply learned as Maier – more extensively so, perhaps. But his studies were different. They were anatomical, cabalistic, in Jewish and Christian theology. Maier again, excelled in classical and profane learning. He had a thorough knowledge of all ancient mythology, particularly of Egypt as then known, and of Greece. [...] Maier did not profess to be a theologian. Fludd was one. Both types were united in a third, Heinrich Khunrath, whose *Amphitheatrum* and *Chaos* deserve more study than they have received.¹⁰ [...] There is no treatise which breathes more love, warm and devout, to Jehovah, Greatest and Best, than the *Tractatus Theologo-Philosophicus* of Robert Fludd. The same devout spirit may be seen, though perhaps in a stiffer form, in Maier's *Ulysses*. There appears to have been little learning then known which was not studied and assimilated by Maier. Fludd's

World (Prague, 1998): Václav Bůžek, 'Zwischen dem rudiolnischen Prag und den Höfen der Magnaten mit dem Wappen der fünfblättrigen Rose', 75-81; Jürgen Müller, 'Arcana Imperii', 184-192. See also Jan Svíták's trilogy, *John Dee in Bohemia: Sir Edward Kelley; Elizabeth Johanna Weston* (Chico, Cal., 1980-1989); Petr Vágner, *Theatrum Chemicum: Kapitoly z dějin alchymie* (Prague: Paseka, 1995); Václav Bůžek (ed.), *Dvory vělmožů s erbení ruže* (Prague, 1997); etc.

¹⁰ Irena Szulakowska has done justice to Khunrath in her recent, excellently contextualized

reading, perhaps is more restricted, and Khunrath's mostly Scriptural. Yet these three completed the circle, and reveal to us eager souls, determined to master antiquity – Classic, Jewish, Christian.¹¹

A century later, Ursula Szulakowska's comparison is equally enlightening:

The classical erudition of Michael Maier's alchemical treatises are a world apart from the passionate intensity of Khunrath's embattled theosophy. Maier's main source for his alchemical symbolism was classical legend, while his impeccable literary style is modelled on the best ancient authorities. His work, in fact, emerges from the context of courtly humanism, rather than out of the academic discourse of the Protestant universities. In contrast, Khunrath's work was written primarily for a pietistic, local German community, while Fludd addressed a learned, international audience of natural philosophers and theologians.¹²

The years between 1614 and 1618 must have been the most exciting and inspiring period in Maier's life. This was the time when the so-called 'Rosicrucian craze' stirred up Central and Western Europe, the excitement having religious, scientific, and political implications alike.¹³ A great many of Maier's works were published during these four years, several of them being apologies of the Rosicrucians. His publishers were Lucas Jennis in Frankfurt and the famous Theodor de Bry in Oppenheim, who also published the monumental works of Robert Fludd. In fact, Fludd's *Utriusque cosmi historia* [...] appeared in the same year as Maier's *opus magnum*, the *Atalanta fugiens* (1617).

One of Maier's books published in 1616 was *De circulo physico quadrato* which was dedicated to another esoterically oriented prince, the Landgraf of Moritz of Hessen-Kassel who seems to have carried on the cult of

¹¹ Craven, *Count Michael Maier*, 10.

¹² Szulakowska, *The Alchemy of Light*, 153.

¹³ On the Rosicrucians see Carlos Gilly, 'Der Rosicrucianum. Auf der Suche nach unbekannten Quellen der frühen Rosenkreuzer', in: F.A. Janssen (ed.), *Das Erbe des Christian Rosenkreuz. Vorträge gehalten anlässlich des Amsterdamer Symposiums 18-20 November 1986* [Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica] (Amsterdam, 1988) 63-90; and Carlos Gilly (ed.), *Cinella Rhodostaurótica. Die Rosenkreuzer im Spiegel der zwischen 1610 und 1660 entstandenen Handschriften und Drucke*. [Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica] (Amsterdam, 1995); the whole collection of Janssen's mentioned publication (*Das Erbe des Christian Rosenkreuz*); Adam Maclean, 'The Impact of the Rosicrucian Manifestos in Britain', in: Janssen, *Das Erbe*, 170-180; Hans Schick, *Die geheime Geschichte der Rosenkreuzer* [Documenta Rosicruciana 1]

the occult, encouraged and patronized by Rudolf II.¹⁴ Whether this publication earned him the invitation to be Moritz's court physician is not known, but by 1619 he stayed in Kassel in the service of the Landgraf whose nickname was 'the Scientist'.

His last years sank in oblivion, just like his years of formation. From scattered evidence it seems that he in fact lived in Magdeburg and practised medicine there, instead of taking up residence with Moritz. He published yet two more books, both in Frankfurt, one in 1620 (*Septimana philosophica*, dedicated to the Archbishop of Magdeburg) and one in 1621 (*Civitas corporis humani*). He died in Magdeburg in 1622, rather unexpectedly, and left one posthumous work behind (*Ulysses*) which was published by one of his friends in 1624. According to Craven, this one is his highest intellectual achievement,¹⁵ however other, more recent literature has not paid too much attention to this work.

Alchemical Discourse with Ideological-Political Subtexts

Turning now to the contents of Maier's works, a statement by De Jong can serve as a suitable introduction. She argues, that his work 'should be seen against the background of the biographical data. His medical-philosophical training defined the level of his education; the surroundings in which he lived – the courts of Rudolf II and Moritz of Hessen – formed a matrix for developing his interests; and the people with whom he mixed and to whom he dedicated his books, stress the fact that Maier was an alchemist, a medical man and a Rosicrucian'.¹⁶

Following De Jong's train of thought, one could also suggest that – as opposed to many other thinkers associated with esotericism (such as Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, John Dee or Johann Valentin Andreae) – Maier's works show a relatively great coherence, as if they elaborate various aspects of the same central theme. Maier's works are also characterized by a syncretic ambition, which constantly juxtaposed and merged religious, scientific and humanistic-classical-mythological ideas. A particular feature of this ambition

¹⁴ On the magical contexts of some German courts cf. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*; Evans, *Rudolf II*; and recently specifically on Moritz of Hessen-Kassel Bruce T. Moran, *The Alchemical World of the German Court. Occult Philosophy and Chemical Medicine in the Circle of Moritz of Hessen (1572-1632)* (Stuttgart, 1991). See also Jost Weyer, *Graf Wolfgang II von Hohenlohe und die Alchemie. Alchemistische Studien in Sloss Weikersheim, 1587-1610* (Sigmaringen, 1992); and Debra L. Stoudt, 'Probatum est per me': The Heidelberg Electors as Practitioners and Patrons of the Medical and Magical Arts', *Cauda Pavonis* 14,1 (1995): 12-18.

¹⁵ Craven, *Count Michael Maier*, 10, 156-163.

was that Maier in all his works combined verbal and visual discourse, using emblematic pictures as well as a strong figurative language to complement his discursive argumentation. This strong pictorialism connects him to certain intellectual trends (Neo-Platonism) as well as the stylistic developments of mannerist and early baroque expression.

As I have mentioned, his first published work, the *Arcana arcanissima* (1614) immediately manifested these characteristics, being a treatise comparing classical mythology and alchemy. The subject matter of the book is the occult-emblematic world of the Greco-Egyptian hieroglyphs which Maier interpreted as derivations of a most ancient Egyptian alchemical lore. Here he of course referred to the wisdom of the *Corpus hermeticum* and suggested that classical as well as Arabic mythology were nothing else but a figurative language about alchemy.

As De Jong remarks, this concept was not Maier's unique invention, rather a commonplace in Renaissance iconography which itself relied heavily on the Hellenistic and medieval alchemical tradition.¹⁷ His next work, *De circulo physico quadrato* (1616), concentrated on gold as the most central and perfect metal in the elemental world and developed this theme along the theory of correspondences by comparing it to the Sun as the central, 'golden' planet and the human heart as the 'fiery' center of the body. Still in 1616 Maier published another treatise on Mercury and its alchemical as well as allegorical importance, under the title *Lusus serius* (1616).¹⁸ In all the three above mentioned works one can find a strong religious subtext pointing toward an emblematic-allegorical interpretation of alchemy. This is especially apparent in *Lusus serius* where Mercury is equated with Christ.

After the first group of purely theoretical alchemical books, Maier started publishing works which involved alchemy in a social and

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 8ff. The Renaissance interest in hieroglyphics was treated in detail in Wittkower's 'Hieroglyphics in the Renaissance' (see his *Allegory and the Migration of Symbols* (London, 1977) 113-128; and in other pertinent studies on Horapollo. The relationship of literary emblematics and hieroglyphics was highlighted by Peter Daly (*Literature in the Light of the Emblems*, 17-27) and Daniel Russell, 'Emblems and Hieroglyphics: Some Observations on the Beginnings and Nature of Emblematic Forms', *Emblematica* 1 (1986) 227-243. On the symbolic language of alchemy see also Eugene Canseliet, *Alchimie. Etudes diverses de Symbolisme hermétique et de pratique Philosophale* (Paris, 1964); H.M.E. De Jong, *Les symboles spirituels de l'alchimie* [Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica] (Amsterdam, 1988); Stanislas Klossowski De Rola, *The Golden Game. Alchemical Engravings of the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1988); John Reed, *The Alchemist in Life, Literature and Art* (London, 1947); Alexander Roob, *The Hermetic Museum. Alchemy & Mysticism* (Cologne, 1997); and F. Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists. Founders of Modern Chemistry* (London, 1953).

¹⁸ Interestingly, this was one of the two works by Maier published in English in the early modern period: *Lusus serius*, or, *Serious dulle-time a philosophical discourse concerning the superiority*

cultural-historical context. Thus, *Symbola aureae mensae duodecim nationum* (1617) offered a history of alchemy in the format of a symbolic banquet where the representative alchemists of twelve nations were invited. The senior among them was Hermes Trismegistus of the Egyptians but the list – through the Greek Democritus and Roman Morienus – stretched to medieval authorities (the Arabic Avicenna, the German Albertus Magnus, the English Roger Bacon) and near-contemporaries, such as the Hungarian Melchior Cibirensis, author of the famous 'alchemical mass'.¹⁹ The book consists of twelve emblems, each devoted to one of the twelve representatives of alchemy, arguing for a continuous presence of the 'golden art' in cultural history. Maier soon wrote a sequel to his *Symbola aureae*, that time treating the fools who had brought disgrace to the noble art of alchemy (*Examen Fucorum Pseudo-Chymicorum*, 1617).

The year 1617 meant the peak of his publishing output. The different works, coming out from more than one printing presses, represented all the directions of Maier's interest. On the one hand he returned to theoretical questions of alchemy which he explained through mythological and emblematic imagery. For example in *Jocus severus* (1617) he represented a colloquium of various emblematic birds (owl, crow, phoenix, goose, crane, raven, etc.) whose tribunal lead to the emergence of the bird of wisdom, Minerva's owl and the phoenix as vital for the successful elemental as well as spiritual transmutation. Similarly, in *Atalanta fugiens* (1617) he also used mythological emblematics to talk about the deep secrets of hermetic alchemy. Another group of the same year was heralded by *Silentium post clamores* (1617), belonging to Maier's reflections on and apologies for the Rosicrucians. This treatise tries to explain why the Frates decided to keep quiet against all accusations and why they demand silence from the members who join them. The question gives Maier a good occasion to sketch up a genealogy of Rosicrucianism, reaching back to ancient Egyptian alchemists:

The author asserts that from very ancient times philosophical colleges have existed among various nations for the study of medicine and natural secrets. The philosophical colleges referred to are those of old Egypt, whose priests in reality were alchemists; of the Orphic and Eleusinian mysteries, of the Samothracian Cabiri, the Magi of Persia, the Brachmans of India, the Gymnosophists, Pythagoreans, &c. He

¹⁹ The text of the 'alchemical mass' is known only in Andreas Libavius' transcript. On Melchior see László Szathmáry, (Iván Fónagy, intr., István Gazda, ed.) *Magyar alkémisták* (Budapest,

maintains that one and all of these were instituted, not for the teaching of exoteric doctrines, but the most arcane mysteries of Nature.²⁰

In 1618 Maier's series of RC apologies continued with *Themis Aurea*, *Das ist Von dem Gesetzen und Ordnungen der löblichen Fraternitet R.C.* It contained the laws of the Rosicrucians and was published both in Latin and German, later to be followed by an English edition, too.²¹ The work consists of twenty chapters, the first beginning yet again with mythological meditations, explaining the meaning of *Themis*, who is the representation of the idea of Justice and the universal notion of true Virtue. Then follow the famous rules of the Rosicrucians which are also known from the Manifestos. Maier's text emphasizes the strong religious character of the movement, they obey first and foremost the King of Kings. The following chapters elaborate on the details of the principal laws. Mention is made of the famous book of 'M' from which the Brethren take most of their knowledge. This knowledge is of divine origin but one should be aware not to abuse it through diabolical practices. Much of this knowledge is expressed through hieroglyphical signs, just as the hierarchy among the Brethren: they have orders, each with its coat of arms and emblems to cover their mysteries. Maier treats the legend of Christian Rosencreutz as historical fact and describes the medical practices of the Brethren as follows:

The Brethren look chiefly to the constitution of the Patient, and do accordingly prescribe. They have in all things experience to confirme their knowledge; they use very choice Vegetables which they gather when they are impregnated with heavenly influences.²²

The above quotation recalls Ficinian stellar magic and Paracelsian pharmacy, propagating the efficacy of simple medicines as opposed to Galenic compounds. However, it is not only the advanced techniques, but also their magnanimity that differentiates the Brethren from all other physicians: 'Is not this a rare Society of men who are injurious to none, but seek the good and happiness of all, giving each person what appertains to him?'²³

In the same year, in 1618, Maier published yet two more books on the theory of arcana. His *Viatorium*, *hoc est, De Montibus Planetarum septem seu Metallorum* was an introduction to the theory of metals and their astrological

²⁰ Quoted by Craven, *Count Michael Maier*, 65–66.

²¹ *Themis Aurea: the Laws of the Fraternity of the Rosie Crosse* (London: N. Brooke, 1656;

Wing catalogue number: M287). The translation is dedicated to Elias Ashmole, renowned

alchemist and antiquarian of the occult, also one of the first initiates of the English Freemasons.
²² *Themis aurea*, chapter V (London, 1656) 31–32.

as well as alchemical correspondences – again by the help of elaborate mythological imagery. Already the title abounds in those, comparing the work to Ariadne's thread in the Labyrinth of Nature, or a Polar-Star, guiding the traveller on the immense sea of chemical errors. Complementing this publication, Maier also acted as editor by publishing three basic alchemical texts, the 'Twelve keys' of Basil Valentine, Norton's 'Ordinal of Alchemy', and Cremer's alchemical 'Testament' under the title *Tripus aureus, hoc est, Tres Tractatus Chymici Selectissimi* [...] (1618).

After these golden years the number of publications started decreasing, but still, up to his death in 1622, he published at least one work each year. In 1619 he issued a 'little book of Nature's marvels'²⁴ under the title: *Tractatus de volucris arborea*, and also a mytho-historiographical work about the ancient past of Germany, treating famous historical figures such as Charlemagne as well as the theological and philosophical treasures of that land (*Verum inventum, hoc est Munera Germaniae ab ipsa primitus reperta*). Since this latter work was dedicated to Moritz of Hessen-Kassel, its pronounced national pride may result from the occasional nature of this historical summary.

His last major philosophical-speculative work was published in 1620, under the title of *Septimana philosophica* in which he devoted over 230 pages to the discussion of the traditions of ancient mystic sciences, beginning again with the Egyptians, then discussing the magical architecture of Hiram of Tyre (supposed designer for Solomon's Temple), and later arguing that all experimental sciences derived from this hermetic lore. Reading Maier's argumentation one recalls the much debated thesis of Dame Frances Yates, who asserted that in the backdrop of the scientific revolution one should also look for the Rosicrucians and other early modern occultists.

Among his posthumous works I have already mentioned his *Ulysses* (1624), but one also finds a previously unpublished little treatise in the second, enlarged edition of the *Musaeum hermeticum* (1678) entitled *Subtilis allegoria super selecta chymiae Perspicuae Utilitatis et lucundae meditationis Michaelis Maieri*.²⁵

An analysis of Maier's alchemical discourse shows that it was heavily built on esoteric and classical symbolism. In it the chemical processes are dressed in an emblematic language that often uses the imagery of classical mythology. Another layer is his moral-didactic message wrapped in

²⁴ Craven, Count Michael Maier, 117.

²⁵ *Musaeum hermeticum reformatum et amplificatum* [...] continens tractatus chymicos XXI praestantissimos [...] (Frankfurt, 1678). English translation in A.E. Waite, *The Hermetic Museum restored and enlarged* (London, 1893) II, 201–223. I am quoting the English text from an offprint of Waite's translation, published in 1984 by The Alchemical Press, Edmonds, WA (*A Subtle*

cultural-historical references. These are often nonsensical if we want to take them literally. For example one can hardly understand how could somebody, having lived for many years in Central Europe, seriously claim that in Pannonia men lived in compact stone houses under water? Or that the hot springs of Carlsbad are hardened into stones?²⁶ The only sensible way of approaching such statements is that they were part of a long cultural tradition, having been repeated invariably since the time of ancient authorities, such as Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* or Plutarch's cultural anecdotes. In such discourse the important thing was not its realism or factual truthfulness, rather that it could suitably be used in moral allegories and emblematic expressions.²⁷

Considering Maier's figurative language, we should remember how earlier interpretative practice tried hard to find a synthesis of meanings, a final, ultimate, all-embracing reading of iconographically loaded works. The last few decades of post-structuralist theory, however, have taught us that there may be totally incompatible symbolic systems coexisting within the same work. What is more, we cannot help realizing that almost every work is incongruous and is a composite of sometimes antagonistic and hostile elements.²⁸ This is a particularly important lesson to bear in mind when we set to the interpretation of occult emblematics, such as the *Atalanta fugiens*.

Atalanta fugiens: Occult Semiotics and Iconology

Earlier scholarship has agreed that Maier's collection of alchemical emblems has various layers of meaning and reference as well as a complex, multimedial expression. To start with the latter: the book contains fifty emblems, complete in the technical sense of the term, that is being constituted of *inscriptio* (motto), *pictura* and *subscriptio* (poem). Following the custom of a few elaborate emblem books, Maier also added learned commentaries to his epigrams in which he revealed some of his allegorical meanings and also cited

²⁶ *A Subtle Allegory*, 11.

²⁷ On emblematic discourse see Daly, *Literature in the Light of the Emblem*, 181–188; John McClelland, 'Emblematology' 220–221; Praz, *Studies, passim*; György E. Szónyi, 'Semiotics and Hermeneutics of Iconographical Systems', *Semiotische Berichte* [1995] 1–4 (*Bildsprache, Visualisierung, Diagrammatik*) 283–312, etc.; on the alchemical use of emblematics cf. De Jong, *Les symboles spirituels, passim*; Taylor, *The Alchemists*, 158, etc.

²⁸ On some more aspects of these theoretical concerns relating to occult symbolism see my papers, 'Semiotics and Hermeneutics of Iconographical Systems'; 'The Powerful Image. Towards a Typology of Occult Symbolism', in: G.E. Szónyi (ed.), *Iconography East & West* [Symbola et Emblemata 7] (Leiden, 1996) 250–263; and 'Architectural Symbolism and Fantasy Landscapes in Occult Discourse', in: Alison Adams (ed.), *Emblems and Alchemy* [Glasgow Stu-

many of his predecessors in alchemy and the hermetic philosophy. A significant difference as opposed to the majority of emblem books is that the combination of text and picture is complemented by yet another medium, that is music. Maier composed fugas, each corresponding to the emblems and his purpose with this was on the one hand to show that the complexity of his philosophical meaning could only be expressed in such a sophistication of expression, while on the other hand the music was to lure the listener to a special meditative trance, in which his/her discursive logic could give way to a more immediate, intuitive understanding.²⁹ Beyond the variety of the employed media, the work's layers of meaning and reference are equally multiple. The main discourse is alchemical but it is told in mythological garb, and the oscillating tension between the technical and figurative languages shifts the emphasis in the direction of spiritual, philosophical and religious directions in a natural way. In relation to this spiritual discourse, then, the alchemical terminology itself becomes something like a metaphoric-allegorical slang.

The title-page of the English edition is a good summary of the work: it is complex and multimedial itself to anticipate what follows, at the same time calls attention to the multiple layers of meaning:

The Fleeing Atalanta

which means

New Chemical Emblems regarding the secrets of nature

partly suitable for the eye and the mind,

by means of copper plates and the mottoes, epigrams and annotations accompanying them,

partly suited to the ear and the refreshment of the soul,

by means of fifty musical fuges for three voices, of which two correspond to a simple melody,

which is suited to be sung in strophes of two lines;

emblems, which lend themselves to being looked at, read,

contemplated, comprehended, judged, sung and listened to

with particularly great pleasure.³⁰

²⁹ One of the fascinating modern editions of the *Atalanta fugiens* compiled by Joscelyn Godwin and Hildemarie Streich actually includes a cassette with modern reconstructions of Maier's fuges (see *Atalanta fugiens. An edition of the Fugues, Emblems and Epigrams*, translated from the Latin by Joscelyn Godwin, int. Hildemarie Streich [Magnum Opus Hermetic Sourceworks 22] (Grand Rapids, MI, 1989).

³⁰ For the English quotations I am using De Jong's edition (*Atalanta fugiens*, 1969) which also

The above text (with the impressum) is entirely framed by a picture populated with mythological characters. At the bottom Atalanta and Hippomenes represent volatile mercury and firm sulphur reminding the reader how Hippomenes with trick as well as charm managed to win the running race against the swift amazon. On the right side Venus is presenting the golden apples to Hippomenes by means of which he manages to distract the attention of Atalanta. Below them one sees the round temple of Cybele where the young couple made love thus infuriating the gods who turned them into wild animals. The pair of lions leaving the temple commemorate this, at the same time recalling one of the most important pictorial metaphors of alchemical transmutation.

On the left side of the page there is Hercules, accomplishing his eleventh labour: that is gathering the golden apples from the Garden of the Hesperides. On the top of the frontispiece, this ideal 'garden of beauty' can be seen, recognized after the characters of Arethusa and Hesperusa who are watching a dragon and an eagle, two other important symbolic animals of alchemy. So Maier on the title-page depicted the alchemical process in a nutshell, and De Jong also meticulously documented how this particular mythological fable had been used by generations of alchemists before him to refer to transmutation.³¹

The emblems of the *Atalanta fugiens* do not intend to render a fixed succession of various alchemical processes, beginning with looking for the primary matter, and ending with finding the Philosophers' Stone', De Jong observed.³² Rather, as if following the humanist principle of 'varietas delectat' – which was also the logic of rendering most Renaissance emblem books –, Maier revisited in his emblems and commentaries various themes connected with the alchemical processes as well as general hermetic wisdom. It seems, that his main purpose was not so much to give a new comprehensive system as to offer new interpretations of well-known and much discussed themes and topics.³³ Perhaps the most characteristic *inventio* of Maier's treatment is his providing a classical-mythological framework and emblematic visualization based on this figurative frame of reference.

One should not think, however, that the *Atalanta fugiens* does not offer any novelty in its philosophical concepts, although it is true that by and large

³¹ Cf. De Jong's detailed analysis of the title-page, *Atalanta fugiens*, 314-329.

³² De Jong, *Atalanta fugiens*, 333.

³³ Maier's main sources, especially for selecting the mottoes, were Morienus' *De transmutatione metallorum*, Senior's *Tabula Chimica*, the *Turba philosophorum*, the *Tabula smaragdina*, Petrus Bonus' *Margarita pretiosa novella*, the *Rosarium philosophorum*, and the works of Nicholas Lembsinck (*Shellus de lanide philosophico*). Bernard of Treviso (*Aurifontina chimica*).

the work is traditional.³⁴ In any way, it provides an excellent test case to study the semiotics of occult representations. Applying Jonathan Goldberg's suggestions, Urszula Szulakowska concluded that the stylistic conflict between the naturalism of the emblems and the abstraction in their meaning produces an ambiguous space which in case of the alchemical emblems can be seen as filled by visual metonymies, or, in Peirce's terminology 'an indexical affinity between reality and the illusionistic world of the picture'.³⁵ Szulakowska recalls Peirce's distinction between 'index' and 'symbol': while indexes point to their referent by means of some organic or causal connection (natural signs), symbols are arbitrary and conventional representations. Peirce's third famous category is the 'icon', which is 'a sign which stands for something merely because it resembles it'.³⁶ Peirce, however, understood 'resemblance' in a liberal way and thus also introduced the notion of 'iconic openness' which for him meant that 'the icon does not stand unequivocally for this or that existing thing, as the index does. Its object may be a pure fiction, as to its existence'.³⁷

Using these differentiations, Szulakowska suggests that 'it would initially appear that most alchemical visual signs should be termed 'iconic' since they signify irrational concepts, such as 'the union of opposites'.³⁸ However, in the case of sixteenth and seventeenth-century 'naturalistic' alchemical illustration the case becomes different, since the realistic aesthetics of the Renaissance added an indexical element to the iconic signifiers. I would add to this, that these 'naturalistic' illustrations, then, at the same time, function as Peircian 'symbols', being invariably conventional, 'metaphoric' signs calling for (figurative) interpretation.

The emblems of the *Atalanta fugiens*, in fact, show a variety of hybrid signs which oscillate between different signifiatory orders. Since there is no room here to analyse the whole complex collection, let me illustrate this feature by three examples.

Emblem XXIV represents a metaphoric-mythological scene presented in a naturalistic style. The motto says: 'The wolf devoured the king and after the wolf had been burnt, it returned the king to life'.³⁹ This is a reference to a

phase of the alchemical work: the King is the Philosophers' Stone. He has to be killed by the wolf (antimony, or *prima materia*) and be purified by fire, after which he resurrects. The Epigram and the picture are in harmony, the picture actually faithfully illustrates the happenings related in the poem:

Make sure that you catch the voracious wolf,
By throwing the king's body before it.
[...]

Then throw it on the pile, where Vulcan kindles the fire,
That through this monster may be reduced to ashes.
Do this time after time, and so the king will rise from death,
And he will be proud of his Lion's heart.

As De Jong has identified, the source of this rendering was Basil Valentine's *Twelve Keys* which Maier himself published in his *Tripus aureus*. The text explains the alchemical process through allegorical and mythological images, for example:

But just as a physician cleans and purifies the internal body by means of his medicine, so our matters must be cleaned and purified from all their impurities, so that in our creative work perfection may be attained. [...] Take care that the king's diadem consists of pure gold, and that a chaste wife is united to him. Therefore, if you want to work with our matters, you should take the voracious wolf, which is subject to the bellicose Mars, but which is a son of the grey-haired Saturn, and which is consumed by an unappeasable hunger [...].⁴⁰

We can conclude that in the picture all three Peircian aspects of the sign can be found: strongest is the indexical function which through the naturalism of the style points toward outside reality on the one hand, and on the other it points toward the accompanying texts (motto, poem and commentary) thus creating a contextual frame of reference. Furthermore, the picture has an iconic function, too, namely the way it presents conceptual entities: the 'king', the 'wolf', etc. However, since these elements have to be allegorically-metaphorically decoded according to a conventional cypher, we have to take into consideration a strong symbolic aspect of the etching, too.

Another interesting example from the collection is Emblem VIII the picture of which shows a man cutting through an egg with a sword. The setting is very intriguing, it resembles the perspectival 'city'-scenery of Renaissance

³⁴ Maier's work in fact exercised important influence on a great number of 17th and 18th century alchemical publications. How his themes and topics were continued, cf. Hermann Kopp, *Die Alchemie in älterer und neuerer Zeit. Ein Beitrag zur Kulturgeschichte* (Hildesheim, 1962, [facsimile of the Heidelberg edition, 1886]) 2: 8, 220, 323, 339, 341, 350, 354, 366-70, 375, 381, 384.

³⁵ Szulakowska, *The Alchemy of Light*, 1-2. For reference to Peirce, cf. the following footnote.

³⁶ Charles S. Peirce, (Charles Hartshorne a.o., eds.), *Collected Papers*. (Cambridge, Mass., 1931-1958) 3: §362 (reference is made to vols. and paragraphs).

³⁷ Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 4: §531.

³⁸ Szulakowska *The Alchemy of Light*, 2.

stages with two perplexing elements: on the left side there is an open fireplace with fierce flames in it and on the backside city-wall there is a square-shape opening which leads into a very long perspectival tunnel demonstrating how parallel lines meet only in infinity.

The motto is very laconic: 'Take an egg and pierce it with a fiery sword'.⁴¹ The short poem alludes to the phoenix whose egg must be searched by the adept, then

Attack it cautiously with a fiery sword, (as is the custom);
Let Mars assist Vulcan; the bird arising from it
Will be a conqueror of iron and fire.

The greater part of the commentary is again mythological, reflecting Maier's interests. He unfolds the various stories relating to the phoenix and connects them to the activities of Vulcan, the story of Athene's birth, etc., which all can be interpreted as allegories for the alchemical work. Again, these motives can be found in basic alchemical treatises, such as the *Libra philosophorum*, but Szulakowska points out the novelty of Maier's treatment which is the inclusion of the perspectival tunnel on the picture. Through textual and iconographic analysis she proves that this theatrical setting connects Maier's Pythagorean theurgy to the whole tradition of the alchemy of light which culminated in the late Renaissance in John Dee's Vitruvianism in his *Mathematical Preface*, Heinrich Khunrath's *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae* (1609), and Robert Fludd's 'Theatrum Orbi' in his *Utriusque cosmi historia* (Oppenheim: de Bry, 1617).⁴² As Szulakowska emphasizes, while the *Atalanta fugiens* draws mostly on medieval sources, these are contextualized within a Paracelsian framework centered on the quintessence. Another layer is the astrological framework of reference which includes speculations on the Zodiac, theurgic powers of solar rays, and includes allegorical references to catoptrical magic.

One of Maier's most cryptic emblems is No. XXI which again has a naturalistic surface (a rugged old wall in a northern European Renaissance town on which a scholar is drawing a diagram), however, it is dominated by a mystical cosmogram consisting of circle, triangle and quadrat, and also featuring a naked human couple. The motto suggests that the making of the Philosophers' Stone is connected with the ability to square the circle: 'Make a

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, 95ff.

⁴² Szulakowska, *The Alchemy of Light*, 163ff. For the significance of Vitruvianism in Renaissance occult philosophy see Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London, 1969)

circle out of a man and a woman, out of this a square, out of this a triangle, / Make a circle and you will have the Philosophers' Stone'.⁴³

On Maier's picture the adept acts as a geometer, completing the program of the motto. The first four lines of the epigram are mere verbal comments on that program, the last two lines, on the other hand, refer to reception, understanding on the part of the viewer: 'If a thing so obvious does not come readily to your mind, grasp the principles of geometry, and you will know everything'.⁴⁴ The picture itself calls for a manifold and complex understanding: while it does not contain a narrative-based allegory as the previously mentioned wolf / *prima materia* and king image, it functions rather as a mandala, a sign for meditation and illumination. The interplay of circles, triangle and square, combined with the human couple does not only recall the alchemical process of composition and dissolution of the chemical hermaphrodite, but also opens cosmic as well as moral-philosophical perspectives. Demonstrating, as Heninger summed up, that 'man is indisputably created in the image of deity. And by participating in heterosexual love, he reiterates the harmony and symmetry of the cosmic scheme'.⁴⁵

Like all the other pictures in the collection, this emblem also unites the three Peircean aspects of the sign, but, in contrast to the rest of the book, in this case the indexical function is by far overshadowed by the iconic and symbolic aspects. The viewer has to come to the understanding of it through a very complex decoding program of symbolization, while at the same time the simple and universal geometric elements of the diagram function as strong iconic 'firstness', directly imprinting in the intellectual perception of the beholder by their schematic, abstract nature.

Observing this reception-mechanism leads us to our last question to discuss, namely the pragmatics, that is the possible handling and employment of these (and other occult-philosophical) emblems. Following some concepts of Erwin Panofsky and Ernst Gombrich I have already proposed a typology of the use of such conventionally coded symbolic images.⁴⁶ Let me briefly recall that typology here, too. While Panofsky tried to establish the stages of understanding an image from the layers of forms through themes to the complex, iconological worldview,⁴⁷ Gombrich classified images according to their

⁴³ De Jong, *Atalanta fugiens*, 166ff.

⁴⁴ As translated by S.K. Heninger, *The Cosmographical Glass* (San Marino, Ca., 1977) 189. For further comments see C.G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* (London, 1980) 125-126; De Rola, *The Golden Game*, 68; and Szónyi, 'The Powerful Image', 254-255.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*

⁴⁶ Cf. my papers mentioned in footnote 28.

⁴⁷ Erwin Panofsky, 'Iconography and Iconology' in: *idem*, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (1955,

function, dividing them into didactic, revelational and magical images.⁴⁸ He associated these with the different attitudes to the two main philosophical orientations of the Renaissance, that is Aristotelianism and Platonism.

I am suggesting that the didactic (Aristotelian) and revelational (Platonic) functions of images were highly relevant and widely exploited in the pragmatics of occult symbolization. Emblem XXIV, for example, seems primarily a didactic allegory which wanted to teach about the alchemical process through a mythological fable. As opposed to this, Emblem XXI seems more suitable to bring the viewer into such a position of reception in which discursive logic is abandoned and the iconic elements of the picture result in an intuitive understanding of cosmic or supernatural truths. Emblem VIII is an interesting mix of the two modes of construction and expression.

The above observations should be completed by a caveat of post-structuralist literary theory. By today it has become a commonplace for scholars of literature and cultural representations, that 'the meaning' is not inherently embedded in the picture or text of an artwork, rather it is generated in the dialogical space between the work and the addressee. Bearing this in mind, it will be impossible to set up once-and-for-all valid categories about the classes of didactic, revelational or magical images, so it will be also impossible to classify Maier's emblems in *Atalanta fugiens*. Much depended, if not everything, on the disposition of the reader of that emblem book. The attitude of the user of the emblems remains a vital factor up to today, demanding totally different techniques of handling, depending on whether one tries to approach them for example as a scholar or as a believer of occult philosophy.

In spite of the difficulties, I argue that it is possible to come to good approximations about the built-in programs of occult emblematics. This can be done by gathering information about the use of these works through available contextual information, and by employing a complex semiotic and structural analysis concentrating on the whole collection and the relationship of its elements to each other. In this respect the inclusion of the musical fuges in the examination will prove to be of vital importance, as it is hinted by the edition of Godwin and Streich (1989).

Taking all this into consideration, one can easily come to the conclusion that a comprehensive understanding of Maier's *Atalanta fugiens* can still accommodate a great deal of research that must also include theoretical aspects of emblem studies as well as cultural semiotics.

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—, *Lusus serius, quo Hermes sive Mercurius [...] iudicatus et constitutus est* (Oppenheim: Lucas Jennis, 1616; English edition: London, 1654).

—, *Atalanta fugiens, hoc est Emblemata nova de secretis naturae chimica* [...] (Oppenheim: de Bry, 1617).

—, *Examen fucorum pseudo-chymicorum. Dectorum et in gratiam Veritatis amantium succincte refutatorum* (Frankfurt: de Bry, 1617).

—, *Jocus severus, hoc est Tribunal Aequum, quo Noctua Regina Avium, Phoenix arboro post varias deceptiones et querelas volucrum eam infestantium pronuntiatur* [...] *Palladi sacra agnoscitur* (Frankfurt: de Bry, 1617).

—, *Silentium post Clamores, hoc est, Tractatus Apologeticus, quo causae non solum clamorum seu Revelationum Fraternitatis Germanicae de R.C. [...]* (Frankfurt: Lucas Jennis, 1617).

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Introduction

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The emblem and the Latin language have been deeply connected since the very start of the genre. Latin is the language of the first printed emblem book which appeared in 1531 in Augsburg.¹ Heinrich Steyner's idea to publish Andrea Alciato's Latin epigrams in combination with woodcut illustrations turned out to be a highly successful invention. What is more, the *Emblematum libellus* had a considerable effect on the European book market. An impressive number of illustrated editions of Alciato's emblems were to appear in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The success of the *Emblematum libellus* in the course of the sixteenth century helped to establish the Neo-Latin emblem as a literary form in the international *Respublica litteraria*. One emblem book after the other appeared, and with each new emblem book the range and potential of the genre increased.

The pioneers who explored the possibilities of the new genre were humanists, each operating within specific historical contexts and social areas. They share, however, a common background, constituted by a profound knowledge of the classics of Latin and Greek literature, and in particular of the Latin poets, such as Vergil, Ovid, Catullus, Statius, Tibullus, Martial, Propertius, and Horace. These texts formed a rich repository of subjects, authoritative quotations, and literary models, which were imitated and emulated in a wide spectrum of transformations. In this way, Alciato's followers, for instance Barthélemy Aneau, Achille Bocchi, Joachim Camerarius, Hadrianus Junius, Johannes Sambucus, Nicolaus Reusner, Gabriel Rollenhagen and many others, created a corpus of Neo-Latin literature that is stimulating and rich both in quality and in quantity.

This situation, however, is not adequately reflected in the present state of research, neither in emblem studies nor in the field of Neo-Latin studies. In spite of the pioneering role of Neo-Latin emblematists and their dominance in developing the emblem into a literary genre in the sixteenth century, Neo-Latin emblem books are still under-represented in modern emblem studies. Since Praz's seminal assessment of the genre, the major part of scholarly attention

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¹Barthel F. Scholz, 'The 1531 Augsburg Edition of Alciato's *Emblemata*: A Survey of