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**Figurative Thinking and Mystical Experience in the
Baroque Age**

Mystical Theory and Emblematic Practice in Sandaeus's Works

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By way of introduction, I would like to recall some now well-known facts about the historical and epistemological basis of emblematic literature. Emblematic literature belongs to or is based on figurative thinking – *pensée figurée*, *imago figurata*, and, as a process based on the functioning of the *figura*, it implements and organises what should be termed a “work of figurability” (travail de la figurabilité). This means that emblematic representations contain and transmit to the reader/spectator much more than what they show or say. In order to deploy the full consequences of this functioning and to understand how it is related to mystical discourse, we need to go back to the definition and the evolution of the *figura*, and follow the path from *figura* to figurability.

I will start from there and then move on to Sandaeus and his works, and finally identify a kind of mystical figurability in one of his texts.

As a legacy from the medieval *figura* (Auerbach), reinvented in the Renaissance, “figurative expression” (“expression figurée”, Klein), developed into the various genres of the *imago figurata*, that were widely spread throughout Europe during about three centuries. Designed from the beginning as a form of expression and thought, embodied in a considerable number of genres and media, it became one of the major modes of representation during the early modern period. It flourishes extensively in spiritual literature, which is due to the initial theological root(ing) of the *figura*, first an interpretive principle to understand Holy History then transformed by transfer into a mode of representation (Auerbach). However, – to make a long and complex story short – from the beginning of the 16th century, in the context of the humanist renewal of biblical exegesis, this theological figure/*figura* was soon conflated with the rhetorical figure (allegory mainly). As a consequence, moving from a

deciphering framework that makes sense of a Creation invested of a meaning *a priori*, the figure became a tool for designing persuasive representations in order to give a meaning *a posteriori* to the world. In other words, one could see the theological figure as if “contaminated” by the rhetorical figure from within, a fact that induced an alienated representation of the content of the theological figure, deploying all its imaginary and fictive virtualities, eliciting new images beyond literal representation, or rather beyond the “obvious meaning” (*sens obvie*): the work of the rhetorical figure within the theological figure makes appear latent images (“images en latence”), and, I would already add, latent images that God may well have placed there, in a way described by the Jesuit Maximilian Vander Sandt, in his *Clavis mystica*, as we shall see a bit further.

Considering this historical and epistemological context, we will argue that the way in which meaning emerges out of the figurative process in emblematic literature and how its efficacy acts upon the reader are key elements to understand how the process of figurability at work in mystical discourse was renewed in the early modern period, and especially from the beginning of the 17th century, when mysticism reached a breaking point in its history.

As a “modern” device, the by-product of a deep transformation in the conception of verbal representations and language, and as a mode of thought shaping early modern mindsets (both as a testimony to and as an operator of this transformation), the functioning of the emblem, of the figurative process at work in emblematic literature constitutes the basis for the reconfiguration of spiritual discourse, and especially mystical discourse. At the same time, Christian mysticism encountered a crucial but also fatal evolution, which first took the appearance of a controversy over the legitimacy of mysticism and second which consisted in the empowerment of mysticism as a theology in its own right, that is mystical theology, distinct from the other mainly positive and scholastic theologies. This empowerment is characterised by an implicit restructuration of mysticism in the terms of a language experience marked by a strong emphasis, even an obsession, from both the supporters and the opponents of mysticism on their language and their use of figurative language. This has been clearly shown in several recent studies, mainly for France.

In this respect, Maximilian van der Sandt’s works stands as a meeting point of both worlds, emblematic and mystical. This has already been established mainly through the study of his *Theologia*

symbolica, and only partially of his *Theologia mystica* and his *Clavis mystica*. However, the consistency of his writings still needs to be fully elaborated. Sandaeus stands among the great Jesuit theoreticians of the *ars symbolica*. Born in Amsterdam in 1578 and deceased in Cologne in 1656, he joined the Society of Jesus in 1597. He is the author of a copious work whose richness and originality have been largely neglected so far. His writings pertain to the fields of controversy, devotional literature (mainly Marian devotion) through several emblem books and theology. Our interest lies in particular in the connection between his symbolical theology and his mystical theology, from both of which a fascinating image theory emerges. This connection seems to be implemented in his emblem books, all dedicated to the Virgin Mary and produced for the benefit of Marian sodalities in Cologne. On the one hand, Sandaeus adapts the scholastic and mystical medieval legacy to a new cultural and epistemological context. This form of cultural integration consists, on the other hand, in the invention of a language that is not inscribed any longer in the Creation but that is still to be invented, created. This is the common ground for mysticism and symbolism, the former striving to express an experience, the latter to persuade, both fields feeding one another. From this combination emerges a new way of conceiving language in the spiritual experience, a new *modus loquendi*, as Sandaeus states in the preface of his *Clavis mystica*:

The mystics use some new words, never heard of anywhere, such as *egoitas*, *ipsitas*, *meitas*, *velitur*, and many others. They pretend to follow necessity. [...] Whenever the situation obliges, we must, as they say, command the words and not be commanded by them.

This is this linguistic material, even linguistic “matter”, informed by mystical experience, that Sandaeus seeks to inventorise and define in this dictionary, because the *Clavis mystica* is literally a dictionary of mystical language, published in 1640. Given this rather late publication date (with regard to the historical evolution and “decline” of mysticism), this “dictionary” can be viewed both as a synthesis of several centuries of Western mystical tradition and as a marker in a new development of mysticism in Christian spirituality. Michel de Certeau in his *Mystic Fable* has well spotted the significance of this work.

Conversely, in his *Theologia symbolica*, Sandaeus fully absorbs and integrates emblematics into this emerging language, identifying a specific discursive mode which also serves as a basis for mystical

theology. He implemented this emblematic shaping of both symbolical and mystical theology in his emblem books, which should be the next step of the project.

Given that the process of figurability is the connecting part between emblematics and mystical discourse, I will devote the final part of my paper to that notion as it is expressed in Sandaeus's *Clavis mystica*. Through some key elements from the two entries "Experience" and "Vision", Sandaeus sketches what could be identified as a process of figurability.

After expounding the usual scholastic categories of vision, he explains what the mystical vision is, and, doing so, supports his explanation with a long quotation of Johannes Tauler regarding vision in the midst of darkness (*in tenebris*):

This vision is so sudden, so swift that there is no remaining image of what we saw; it is impossible to know or to understand what it is; but one understands with certainty that it is something although one cannot define its nature [...]. [Indeed] neither the intellect, nor the senses could have grasped [this light], because of its great subtlety. **That is why no image of it remains** [...].

In the entry "experience" – a key notion for early modern mysticism since it is the core, the matter itself of mystical theology and mystical knowledge – Sandaeus presents how "experimental knowledge" operates in the soul: "The experience of divine operation leaves in the soul **some traces and impressions**, which are more useful to it than discourse and imagination". He goes on to explain how the intellect can paradoxically (my interpretation) make use of these traces: "The intellect itself concentrates on a number of interior and obscure forms (*species*), which have neither been conceived nor formed by the imagination but which have been **left by the experience of the divine operation.**" He then reaffirms the fact that nothing is left in the intellect "except a certain number of interior forms, traces, impressions, enigmas and ideas of the experience of divine love". Then, "with the aid and the support of these ideas", the will, or the affective part of the soul can act in order "to raise the interior gaze towards God."

After assembling the pieces of this puzzle, one understands that divine discourse – provided there is such a thing as divine *discourse* – leaves traces, impressions, forms in the intellect, but it seems that at the same time nothing (no image) is left that can be used, that can be consciously perceived by the intellect to be used or to be reflected

upon. However, the will can seize these forms and use them to transcend the inner vision of the soul and reach to God, raising its inner gaze. In other words, the intellect obscurely perceives something, of no use for itself, but that the will, short-circuiting the intellect, can transform into a gaze. It makes the "image" of God emerge out of something that is both present and nothing; it reveals the image latent within the obscure form. At the level of mystical discourse, which is Sandaeus's main preoccupation of in his *Clavis mystica*, it leads to literally inform the narrative of the divine experience, that is a theological discourse of some sort, with the "imaginal" by-products, indexical signs (symptoms) issued from the work of the will on this form. In other words, the theological content is re-oriented, re-routed towards a spiritually visual experience. By doing so, Sandaeus has properly sketched a process of figurability.

To conclude, I would like to link these observations to the "emblematic theology" that Sandaeus defines in his *Theologia symbolica*, and suggest that this enables the identification of a new emerging culture of representation since this allows to reconstruct the line that goes from traces left by God in the soul to their representation. These representations are first shaped in symbolical theology and then elaborated to be transferred to mystical theology on the basis of the emblematic process.

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