Optical Illusions and Verbal Emblems in Sir Philip Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella* and *Arcadia*

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Frances Yates, Stephen Greenblatt, Lina Bolzoni, and other scholars have clearly shown the importance of analyzing the philosophical and visual culture of a certain historical period to understand the meaning and implications of its literary products. In a similar way, Jurgis Baltrušaitis in his essays about anamorphoses and visual “aberrations” has occasionally compared actual paintings with their literary descriptions. Even though his main purpose was to prove the historical importance of visual artifacts that have rarely survived into our own age, he has provided a stimulating comparison between sister arts where visual, philosophical, and literary materials came to cast light on one another. Following the tradition of these and other scholars, this essay explores the influence of anti-canonical paintings such as Arcimboldo’s portraits on the literary works of Sir Philip Sidney. Sidney’s images, sometimes regarded as excessively extravagant and artificial, may be interpreted as creative interactions with a cultural environment in which they were widely appreciated.

On one level, these passages are representative of the 16th century tendency in England towards an ideal of *ut pictura poésis*, a representation of pictorial images through poetical words. Interestingly enough, this tendency wasn’t affected by religious iconoclasm, which focused its attacks on actual paintings. Whereas the English iconoclastic culture disapproved even of Renaissance perspective and shadowing as morally ambiguous (Gent 22), the censorship against paintings curtailed neither the taste for pictures among writers and common people, nor the mental patterns normally connected to our mind’s reception of images. In fact, it could be argued that the repression of actual paintings pushed the pictorial out of its natural expression (as painting) into a large range of different contexts (Patey 472). In other words, the hostility towards physical images resulted in a blossoming of pictorial phenomena in other artistic media and into a widespread poetic style where frequent *ekphrases* and descriptions are meant to activate visual images directly in the mind of the reader.

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In this period, therefore, the words of the poet can draw and paint no less accurately than the painter's brush, and for this reason Sidney opens his *Astrophil and Stella* with Astrophil saying that his words are meant to "paint the blackest face of woe" (5). Quite similarly, in sonnet 2 of the collection Astrophil states, "I paint my hell" (14); in sonnet 3 the face of Stella is described as a book in which Nature writes the verses that Astrophil copies down (14); in sonnet 5 we learn that "what we call Cupid's dart / An image is, which for our selves we carve" (5-6); and in sonnet 6 the poet-speaker describes his condition as "the Map of my state" (13). Hardly coming by chance, these repeated references to visual images at the very beginning of Sidney's sonnet sequence make readers aware that what they are about to read is not only a series of verses but also a gallery of verbal paintings they will have to visualize via their mind's eye (Heninger).

Moreover, unlike continental Europe, Elizabethan England did not have a strong pictorial tradition and a large numbers of pictorial models. Since writers who decided to create verbal pictures in their texts didn't have to concern themselves with well-established canons of visual beauty or proportion, poets were free to create verbal images in the way they found most appropriate for their purposes. Whereas continental poets like Ariosto mainly cared about creating "nice" pictures, the Elizabethans could experiment with a broader variety of esthetic options and, for example, borrow heavily from the emblematic tradition, where communicative power prevails over the beauty and proportion of the final image (Strong 29-30; Gent 30). The lack of a strict canon of pictorial proportion, moreover, allowed the English poets to pursue with ease the Aristotelian idea of creating art by means of the skillful representation of unpleasant subjects. In sonnet 34 of *Astrophil and Stella*, for instance, Sidney writes, "Oft cruell fights well pictured forth do please" (4).

Another justification of non-realistic and non-classical representation is found in Sidney's *Defence of Poesie*, where he states that a poem is a "speaking Picture with this end to teach and delight" (9), and that this picture is based on a kind of "imitation" that means to "borrow nothing of what is, hath bin, or shall be, but range onely reined with learned discretion, into the divine consideration of what may be and should be" (10). In this Neo-Platonic perspective, the poet is free to break the rules of realistic representation any time the resulting image can express higher and more relevant concepts than those to be inferred from mere common-day perception. This passage also shows Sidney's ability to capitalize on the artistic situation of his time to develop original strategies of poetic and philosophical expression.

The artificial and bizarre images resulting from Sidney's standpoint