NARRATIVE ILLUSTRATION
TECHNIQUES AND THE MUTE BOOKS OF ALCHEMY*

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As the ear is older than the eye, so is the story the father of the picture. In every picture there resides a tale, the telling of which, to credit the adage, would cost many words. When sequences of pictures are put together to form a narrative, each image in the sequence takes on a kind of verbal function; it makes sense by fitting into the sequence, much as a word depends for its sense upon the syntax of the utterance. Narrative illustration may therefore properly have a literary as well as an artistic dimension, a point well proved, if proof be needed, by the irrepressible caricaturist Johann Heinrich Ramberg, who in 1827 presented the *Iliad* to the world in an uncaptioned series of etchings.¹

Narrative illustration has a long history of use in religious and patronage biography, political satire, and moralizing and topical propaganda of every sort, and survives vigorously today in the so-called comic strips, whose ancestry counts some of the noblest names in art and letters.²

Presented here are some examples of special uses of narrative illustration developed by a group of artists associated more or less closely with the Frankfurt publisher and engraver Theodore de Bry (1528-98).³

A new chapter in the history of book illustration had begun in 1531, when Andreas Alciati invented the emblem

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book in Augsburg. Following him, there came an effusion of devices and conceits, pictorial puns and rebuses, the delight of esthetes who collect them, the despair of estheticians who would disentangle the arts from unholy cross-pollinations. The emblem per se was not narrative in the sense I use here; quite the reverse. It was most effective at capturing and distilling the essence of a proverb or virtue or synopsizing an entire metaphysical cosmos in a single, still image. But it formed an important point of departure for the development of narrative illustration, as we shall see.

Among the thinkers of many sects and persuasions who seized on the emblem during the early days of printing were the alchemists. Accustomed as they were to expressing themselves in the most figurative of terms, they put the emblem to work with such success that pictorial works of alchemy generally give us a better view of the state of that art than do the verbose alchemical tracts and anthologies, which were as a rule much corrupted by constant plagiarism and conflation. Many illustrated alchemical works, and most of the really fine ones, were published by de Bry or his heirs. Plates engraved in his shop were also reprinted or copied and published by others. He was responsible for introducing the techniques of narrative illustration into alchemical literature, an innovation which put new life into a stagnating tradition and resulted in some very celebrated and beautiful books. Alchemy, after all, dealt not only with metaphysical principles, but also with processes, which were of course most apt (pace Lessing) for rendition by pictorial narrative.

De Bry was a virtuoso of that genre, having begun his career with a remarkable funeral book for a fellow Protestant, Sir Philip Sidney, killed in 1586 at Zutphen while trying to support the Dutch against the Spanish Catholics. This series of 30 plates (published in London in 1587) unrolls the entire parade to the tomb, presenting the mourners platoon upon platoon. Even bound in book form, they constrain the reader to leaf through the sequence from beginning to end, as though he were standing in review of the procession. However, de Bry is best known for his monumental volumes on the exploration of the Americas and the Orient, the so-called grandses et petites voyages,