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Depicting One’s Self: Imprese and Sonnets in La Virginia overo la dea de’ nostri tempi by Ercole Tasso

In Studies in Seventeenth-Century Imagery Mario Praz states that La Virginia overo la Dea dei nostri tempi by Ercole Tasso, published in Bergamo in 1593, is “one of the most attractive books of the late Renaissance” (163). Praz also wonders why scholars have completely overlooked it. Critics might have shied away from this text because of its complex structure, its combination of sonnets, imprese, and the so-called “misterii,” a series of cabalistic meditations concerning the name of the poet’s beloved. La Virginia is certainly a difficult but also an involving one. In this text verbal language and visual expression merge, creating a complex metadiscourse whose goal is the “narration” of the author’s identity.

As a premise, it is important to remember the fundamental difference between emblem and impresa. Whereas an emblem expresses a universal concept, an impresa conveys the feelings and thoughts of its author. An impresa is a private expression, combining a succinct motto plus an often enigmatic image. My essay will investigate the relationship among the above-mentioned three forms of expression: images, sonnets, and “mysteries.” After highlighting the thematic and linguistic structure of the book, I will explain how Ercole Tasso relates to his text. La Virginia is nothing but Tasso’s enigmatic and complex self-portrait. As we will see later, the poet is in so far as he depicts himself in relation to his beloved Virginia. The poet needs the Other, Virginia herself, in order to investigate his own subjectivity; he exists as long as he posits the Other.

Tasso introduces the first sonnet by saying that it conveys the meaning of the whole book (“Propone in generale ciò che egli intende di dire”):

| Idolo altier, verace, unico, et solo; |
| ver cui tutte mie voglie et pensier ergo; |
| per cui lo Ciel m’è vile, il mondo a tergo |
| lasciai felice, et me medesmo a un volo: |
| ecco ch’io canto, ecco ch’io scrivo, et vergo |
| non morti acerbe, o lai, non pianti, o duolo; |
| non d’ardenti sospiri accesso stuolo; |
| di ch’Amante volgar vien fatto albergo; |
| non fero cor, non fedi infide, o dure |
repulse, onde talora incontro Amanti
donne s’armar con proprio, et altrui danno:
ma voi ben sommo, voi Virginia, e i santi
effetti vostri (o cose rare) ond’hanno
i miei, Corpo, Alma, et Spirti, alte venture.(4)

As the first stanza explains, Virginia is the poet’s sole idol. In his love for her he rejects both the Sky, i.e., God, the world, and himself. Virginia requires total dedication. The poet’s own life becomes secondary to his submission to his beloved. However, unlike any “vulgar” lover, Tasso stresses that in this text he will neither weep nor mourn. His verses will not revolve around Virginia’s absence or cruelty, the trite themes of any collection of Petrarchan poetry. The actual topic of his sonnets will be Virginia’s beneficial “effects” both on the poet’s body and his soul. In other words, La Virginia recounts a completely different sort of love. Unlike the topos of the beloved according to the Italian tradition, Virginia is not a distant, cold, and ruthless creature who ruins the poet’s existence; she is rather a constant and nurturing presence which molds and sustains his identity.

The above sonnet is followed by the first mystery, in which, using the Cabala, the poet examines the name “Virginia” in order to prove its divine origin and thus that of his woman. According to the poet, the eight letters of “Virginia” refer to the “ottonario,” that is, to the “cubo” (cube). Virginia is the “image,” Tasso says, of that “ottonario” that will be “the glory of the world” (5). In the following mysteries the name “Virginia” will be repeatedly analyzed according to its single letter. Two mysteries will be dedicated to the so-called “Cabala Notariaca,” which is, as Johann Reuchlein says in De arte cabalisticæ, “the placing of a letter in the place of an expression” (299). Later, a specific “mistero” will focus on the relationship between the letters of this name and numbers. According to a well-established tradition of “Cabala mathematica,” Tasso points out that “Virginia” has “l’unità divinitade, il senario perfettione, et l’ottonario beatitudine con eternità congiunta” (15; Reuchlin 317). In another “mistero” Tasso makes use of the “Cabala methatesi,” which means, as he says, “transposition.” Referring to Pico’s De ente et Uno, Tasso plays with the letters of “Virginia,” creating new significant words, such as “VIGNA VIVA . . . RAGGI RARI, ARIA VAGA . . . IRRIGA, AVVIVA . . .” (29; Pico’s Heptaplus 374-441).

It is important at this point to understand why Tasso feels compelled to insert Cabalistic reasonings in his work. Before Tasso, other writers had claimed that their beloved’s name had a sacred connotation. For instance, in a letter Giulio Camillo tries to prove the divinity of his beloved’s name, Lucretia (300-8). La Virginia has however a much more complex structure. On the right page Tasso always places a sonnet, while on the left he inserts either a mystery or an impressa. The poet makes these three components “converse” with each other. On the right side, the sonnets recount central moments of his relationship with his beloved.
In *La Virginia* poetry has, in fact, an ambiguously narrative connotation. On the one hand, Tasso’s devotion to Virginia is immutable, unchanged and unchangeable by any external event. On the other, however, his submission to his beloved is frequently questioned and almost jeopardized by certain negative occurrences. For instance, people are hostile to the poet’s love; they attempt to convince him to desist from his obsession for Virginia. Even dreams disturb Tasso’s faith in her. In a sonnet he recounts a dream in which his woman appeared as if she were dead. In another text, finally, Virginia unexpectedly becomes ill, and Tasso fears that his entire existence will fall apart. One might say that, whereas on the right page the poet, reinterpreting the topoi of Petrarchan poetry, narrates the dangers his love for Virginia constantly faces, on the left, he is forced to re-instate the untouchable, unquestionable divinity of his beloved. The act of narrating his obsession for Virginia necessarily entails the recognition of its frailty. To “expose” his love to language, one might infer, means to bring to the fore its mortality. For Tasso narration is synonymous with ambush, trap, risk. He is aware of the fact that “the world,” and thus also the readers of his book, cannot share his worship for Virginia. As we will see later, Tasso constantly stresses that Virginia discloses her divinity, and thus also the beneficial effects of it, only to a chosen few. What Tasso thus expresses in his text is a totally private experience, what Wittgenstein characterizes as “inexistent” because of its inability to be shared. What cannot be shared through language does not exist. Why, then, does Tasso write? I will address this crucial question in the final part of this essay.

In the analysis above on the relationship among poetry, mysteries, and *imprese*, it was noted that the text unfolds a dialogue between the left and the right pages of the text. The right narrates and thus questions, the left confirms, reassures, and restates the perfection of Virginia. Since he cannot communicate the “enlightment” he has received from Virginia, Tasso uses various forms of the so-called “practical” Cabala in order to prove that Virginia is divine. Images, which appear exclusively on the left page, play a role more articulated than that of the mysteries. The first *imprese*, starting on the front page, establish Virginia’s superior nature. Emblematic is the picture of a rising sun with the motto “Virginia exemplar” (9). Similar to the sun, Virginia enlightens, nurtures, and supports her worshiper, Tasso himself. Later, *imprese* take up a different role. The images of the central and most important section of this book acquire a dialogic nature. Tasso himself is depicted in his relationship with his beloved. An *imprese* is a more private kind of language, through which the lover communicates with his beloved in a complete silence.

What does Tasso say without actually speaking? Whereas the mysteries aim at confirming Virginia’s divinity, the *imprese* express the poet’s unflinching dedication to her. Particularly interesting are two *imprese*. The first shows a horse with the motto “Illa mihi Alexander” (25). The second depicts a yew-tree with the motto “Itala sum quiesce” (49). Tasso explains what these images mean in *Della realtà e perfettione delle imprese*, a well-known summa on the art of *im-
pres. In this book Tasso discusses the nature and the goal of emblems and *imprese* and he also interprets some of his own *imprese*. In the above two images, the poet reassures Virginia of his complete dedication to her. The first picture shows Bucefalus, the mythic horse with bull-like horns, which could be mounted only by Alexander the Great (35). In other words, Tasso wants to reassure Virginia of his perfect love. In the second one Tasso uses a yew-tree, whose leaves according to Pliny were very poisonous. However, the motto “Itala sum quiesce” refers to the fact that this tree lost its dangerous qualities once transplanted to Italy (50). Virginia, Tasso says, can trust him completely.

Both Virginia and Tasso are firm poles of a love relationship. As Virginia never loses her superior qualities, so Tasso never refrains from his love for her. In *La Virginia* different time levels interact with each other. Whereas poetry recounts love’s complex process and unavoidable risks, images and mysteries provide the poet with that certainty which verbal language cannot offer. To speak one’s love means to expose it to death. Language never speaks of the present time; it rather expresses, as Giorgio Agamben underscores in *Language and Death*, a past sense of lack (38). Tasso is aware of the fact that, being exposed to time, his love for Virginia is transient. His sonnets actually convey what he perceives as a danger. Cabala and *imprese*, on the other hand, are repeated attempts to restore the poet’s conviction in his eternal condition as lover.

In order to clarify the above relationship among different kinds of language, one must turn to the actual text. On page 14 Tasso wonders why everybody does not enjoy looking at Virginia’s divine features. The poet explains how he is overwhelmed by Virginia’s divine beauty in the first two stanzas of the sonnet:

Senza alcun prò mirando, (et ben convenne
mentre non scevro ancor dal volgo, poco
dentro i scernea, da superficie, o loco)
amor in voi, com’altri, anco me tenne.
Ma poi che, mercè vostra, entrar sostenne
mia mente inferma, e’l guardo, a poc’a poco
donna purgati al gentil vostro foco;
fin là, dov’ir ad uom rado adivenne.

Virginia accompanied Tasso’s sight through a sort of intellectual purification. Following a well-known Ficinian tradition, mind and sight merge in this work. To see and to understand fully are one concept. This is a crucial aspect of Renaissance theory on the *imprese*, which was developed for the first time by Marsilio Ficino in his *Theologia Platonica*. As Ficino says in a seminal page of this text, emblematic images are more than images; they are expressions of a mystery. Tasso goes through Virginia’s “gentle fire” (“gentil foco”) in order to “purge” himself. We will see later how Tasso reuses this image of a man burning in a mystical fire at the very end of this text. Because of Virginia’s inner flames, the poet is capable of perceiving “another beauty” (“altra beltate”), very different
from what the world can see and appreciate ("altro valor, che'l Mondo ancor vede, et ammira"). On the following page (15) the poet goes back to affirm once again that his beloved's name has an intrinsically divine character. In "misterio quarto" he gives each letter of this name a specific number, as he could have found in several Cabalistic works, such as De arte cabalistica by Reuchlin. The term "Virginia" corresponds to 186, and Tasso goes on to explain in detail the mystical meaning of its single figures. In other words, since he cannot show the "world" Virginia's divinity, Tasso attempts to demonstrate it rationally. The following sonnet reiterates that we can discern Virginia's superior nature, and thus be led by her toward our spiritual enlightenment, only if she decides that we deserve it. Virginia disclosed her divinity to the poet through her "firm look":

Che immediatamente un vostro fisco
guardo in maggior di quel ch'ella perdeo
stato la riporrà quando cadeo
in Lete, altier di sé fatta Narciso.
Ma s'ella quel non fa, questo non sperì:
che chi non lo prevenne, unqua nel degni
di don cotanto ALTA VIRGINIA altero. (16)^3

Virginia has the power either to grant or to refuse her beneficial enlightenment. Like a mystical experience, Tasso's passion cannot be conveyed through language, because what Virginia helped him "see" is beyond language. It is important at this point to note that La Virginia is based on a fundamental contradiction: on the one hand, Tasso feels compelled to praise his beloved and the spiritual gifts she gave him; on the other, Tasso understands that his experience is not communicable. Unlike any other text of the Petrarchan tradition, La Virginia refrains from describing the tormenting effects of love, the only aspects of the love experience which can actually be shared through poetic language. Denying that Virginia has ever caused any feeling of discontent, Tasso writes an "impossible" text, in which the act of writing neither sustains the poet's feelings, nor helps him share them with others, but rather undermines the poet's faith in his own love experience. Writing is synonymous with doubt.

The impresa following the above sonnet shows a bird without legs ("Apodos" or "cisello" in Italian) flying over a rock with the motto "TUI NECESSITAS MI DELIBERO" (17). In Della realtà e perfettione delle imprese Tasso says that the image of the bird constantly flying back to its own nest signifies his loyalty toward Virginia (41-42). The poet cannot help but think about his beloved; the memory of her accompanies him wherever he goes. The impresa is a silent and intimate form of communication and Tasso's devotion is demonstrated without being spoken, as if by voicing his faithfulness he might jeopardize it. Whereas any linguistic interaction is shared among all speakers of the language used for that exchange, an impresa is similar to a brief glance exchanged between two lovers who understand each other without needing to say anything. As a conse-
quence, although the following sonnet essentially reproduces the same content of the above impresa, that is, Virginia’s constant presence in Tasso’s mind, the sonnet and the impresa correspond to two different sorts of communication. Whereas the impresa’s addressee is primarily Virginia herself, because of its non verbal character the sonnet is directed to the readers. Let us read the first two stanzas of the sonnet:

Anco dolce ardo, et pur dal mio bel foco
lunge son tanto, et sin gran tempo stato:
che neve, o ghiaccio esser devrei, mutato
lo stato insieme con cangiare del loco.
Miracol manifesto, ond’io cui poco
alto salir concessa avaro fato,
a te mi volgo amor, tu’l desiate
dubbio mi solvi, ond’è si strano gioco? (18)

As these verses show, the sonnet both unfolds and varies the topic of the device. The bird is Tasso himself, flying to his nest, i.e., to his beloved. The emotion expressed by the image, that is, Tasso’s complete dedication to Virginia, turns into a rational discourse which is constructed according to the usual Petrarchan rhetoric. Tasso explains that, although he should feel like snow because he is far from Virginia, he still burns out of his perfect dedication to her. We might say that the symbolic image of the impresa and the metaphors developed in the verses merge, creating a second-level communication. Tasso is the bird flying back to its nest, but he is also himself burning for his love. Fire, the bird, and the poet become synonyms. Consequently, faithfulness is a bird over the sea, a man burning, a poet expressing his faithfulness through the metaphor of burning, and the image of a bird over the sea. Faithfulness, we might infer, is contained in the images that signify faithfulness and the actual language that expresses faithfulness. The poet himself is a metaphor. His identity is a linguistic expression.

Thus, in La Virginia Tasso depicts himself both in his sonnets and in his imprese through certain symbolic images. Along with words and images, his identity signifies his total, indisputable dedication to his beloved. Tasso is as long as he expresses his devotion to Virginia. Like any other metaphor and emblematic picture, Tasso is a signifier. In the final section of the book Tasso goes so far as to depict his own body in the imprese. After having reaffirmed his complete submission to Virginia in the introduction to the sonnet (“... perché d’immortal radice i rami immortali son, immortal i anch’amori in me ver voi, et l’un, et l’altro...” [44]), on page 45 Tasso presents the image of a body wrapped in a net, meaning that he cannot help but be a slave to his woman. Even more directly, the very last image of La Virginia reproduces the well-kown myth of Hercules burning in a deathly gown (52). This impresa is preceded by a sonnet in which Tasso wonders once again why the world cannot perceive Virginia’s divine perfection:
The world cannot see her divinity because a veil covers their eyes; their sight is actually blindness. The images of the book are intended to teach the reader's eyes how to perceive the "other" nature of Virginia. The *imprese* in the text attempt to lift the veil progressively before the reader's eyes. However, as Tasso admits in the last stanza of this sonnet, the world can only perceive "shadows" of the real Virginia ("... Così non anco altro poter, che l'ombre/ d'essa mia Dea veder...").

The above verses on the world's inability to understand Virginia's divinity relate to the last *imprese* of the text, Hercules dying in the flames. As already mentioned, in *La Virginia* Tasso has engaged his own image. Whereas in the first devices he describes himself through powerful metaphors, such as a bird flying toward its nest, in the final pictures his body is directly present in the text. In fact, in the last *imprese* Tasso has dramatically modified the meaning of his figurative expressions. Whereas in the first part of the text the images express the poet's complete faith in his beloved and primarily focus on the beloved's superior qualities, the last *imprese* concentrate on Tasso's own physicality; they speak both of his body and from his body. Tasso is first seen as wrapped up in a nest. Later, his body is similar to that of Hercules dying in the flames. Tasso's body is so long as it reminds the poet of his total dedication to Virginia; his body is in so far as it burns.

The last section of the book concentrates on the author's body. In order to clarify the crucial point which concerns the presence of the poet's body within the text, one might refer to what Husserl writes in *Fifth Cartesian Meditation*. Husserl believes that the subject has two "bodies," what he calls *Leib* (Flesh) and *Körper* (Body). *Körper* refers to the body as the object of scientific investigation, the body deprived of conscience; *Leib* indicates the body aware of its own existence. *Leib* is the middle ground where mind and physicality meet, or better yet, the "place" where the mind is aware of its being intrinsically connected to the body. *Leib* is where the mind "listens to" the body's existence and reactions; *Leib* both establishes and limits the subject's individuality. As a consequence, *Leib* is the body in its relationship with the external world. It is the world that makes the subject aware of his or her *Leib* and thus also of his or her *Körper*. In other words, the Other's *Körper* make the subject perceive his or her own *Leib*.

If one applies Husserl's theory to Tasso's *La Virginia*, several issues emerge. Throughout the text the poet stresses that others cannot perceive Virginia's divinity, the sole meaning of his life. His body is "wrapped up" in his devotion to
her divinity; it burns of that unquestioned and unquestionable faith in her perfection. Although the image of the poet’s body burning of his passion for his beloved is a topos of the Petrarchan tradition, Ercole Tasso interprets it in a new manner. Traditionally the poet burns because his woman never responds fully to his request. The poet’s fire is a lack. In *La Virginia*, on the contrary, Tasso’s fire is caused by his beloved’s presence. As Tasso states in the first sonnet, in his verses he does not describe the lethal effects his woman has on him, but rather her beneficial influences on his identity. Tasso burns in Virginia’s vicinity. However, Tasso knows that his faith cannot be shared; nobody can perceive what he perceives. If his whole identity depends on his faith in Virginia’s divinity, his identity is totally isolated. Tasso’s body does not “converse” with others; his body never succeeds in becoming *Leib*, because *Leib* is the gift of the Other. The Other makes us aware of our own body.

However, it is fundamental to understand that in *La Virginia* Tasso converses with two different forms of Other. On the one hand, his beloved is the perfect Other who gives the poet his own identity. On the other, his identity is questioned by the “second Other,” the world and the reader himself, who cannot feel what the poet feels. If the first Other grants life, the second jeopardizes it. We might say that in this text the Other has an ambiguous relationship with the subject. Life and death become two sides of the same coin.

Moving back to the concept of the body, it is clear that in *La Virginia* the topos of the poet’s body set on fire acquires a different connotation. Whereas his woman grants him her divine presence, the poet burns in the absence of the “second Other.” As he underscores in several of his sonnets, Tasso knows that he is composing an unreadable text, in which the audience is missing because his experience cannot be shared. Similar to a mystical event, his love for Virginia transcends human communication. A perfect love is not communicable. A Petrarchan poet shared with his audience his pain, his frustration, his despair caused by his beloved’s absence. Tasso, on the other hand, attempts to convey a perfect unity. Tasso perceives a different sort of absence, that of the “second Other.” The world cannot “listen to” Tasso’s verses, because they are intrinsically devoid of any communicable sense. As a consequence, since we perceive our body, that is, our presence in the world, through the presence of the Other’s *Körper*, in *La Virginia* Tasso expresses the uncertainty of his *Leib*. Tasso burns of the Other’s absence. Tasso’s final *imprese* might be seen then as mirrors in which the poet’s burning body reflects itself. *Imprese* as mirrors, as solipsistic reflections of a fundamental lack. In the *impressa* Tasso’s body “sees” its desire for presence.⁵

To conclude, we might consider the relationship between Tasso’s fictional body and his actual body. How many “Tassos” are in this book? It is apparent that in writing, the subject’s body (his *Leib*) posits its self. His hand takes notes, crosses out, corrects, leafs through previously written pages, chooses and throws away. In the act of writing our *Leib* “becomes incarnate.” Given the metaphor of the mirror, we might say that the page on which we write is a mirror progres-
sively composing the consciousness of our body. How does Tasso see this process? In *La Virginia* the act of composing both the verses and the images is the creation of a mirror which reflects the author’s missing body. When he or she writes, the author is both addressee and addresser of his or her text; he or she sees and is seen. To create is to create a distance between the page and the hand. *La Virginia*, however, recounts a partially failed attempt, in which the poet never comes to “see” his body; he rather becomes aware of the fact that his love, his passion, his devotion for the Other makes his body vanish.

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**NOTES**

1 In transcribing the text I have modernized the spelling, corrected some typographical errors, and included some verses. At the beginning of *Della realtà e perfettione delle imprese* Tasso includes a sonnet by his friend Battista Licino which praises Tasso’s intelligence and innumerable skills and can be used as a sort of brief biography of Tasso himself: “Nacque da sangue illustre, tra fortuna/ mediocre, liber’uomo, in città serva/ desto dal grado, ch’altri in vita serva:/ a più scienze si diè, non queto d’una:/ arsel fiamma d’Amor ben importuna:/ ma ch’anco lo rendè, ch’anco il conserva/ immortale ne’ segreti, ch’egli osserva/ in VIRGINIA, suo ardor che’n sé gl’aduna:/ poco, ma dotto ei scrisse; e/ oprò molto:/ piaquegli il ver, e’s’ suo valor portollo/ a tutti i più sublimi Patrij seggi;/ moglie ebbe, et benché in molti figli involto;/ benché immerso ne’ pubblici maneggi/ mai non si vide d’imparar satollo.” As the sonnet says, Tasso came from a noble family and played a political and cultural role in his city Bergamo. His love for Virginia Bianchi is the most important event of his life, even though he had a wife and several children.

2 Speaking of Egyptian hieroglyphs and in particular of the image of a snake, a symbol of Time, Ficino writes: “Sacerdotes Aegyptii ad significanda divina mysteria, non utebantur minutius literarum characteribus, sed figuris integris herbarum, arborum animalium, quoniam videlicet Deus scientiam rerum habet non tanquam excogitaciones de re multiplicem, sed tanquam simplicem firmamque rei formam. Excogitatio temporis apud te multiplex est et mobilis, dicens videlicet tempus quidem est velox, et revolutione quandam principium rursus cum fine coniungit: prudentiam docet, profert res, et auro. Totam vero discursiones eiusmodi una quadam firmaque figura comprehendit Aegyptius alatum serpentem pingens, caudam ore praesentem . . .” (*Theologia platonica* 1768). See Gombrich 158-61.

3 The term “ella” refers to whoever (“persona”) falls prey to Virginia’s look.

4 I use the well-known French translation by Levinas. See Ricoeur 297-356; Franck 60-75.

5 Alessandro Farra develops a similar concept. According to Farra, the device is a form of meditation. When the subject attains an intellectual purification, he is able to perceive the inner meaning of a device. Moreover, for Farra the device is a sort of mirror in which the subject and the divinity converse with each other. In the device/mirror the subject reflects himself and acquires a divine language. See my essay.

**WORKS CITED**


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**Della realtà e perfettione delle imprese**. Bergamo: Ventura, 1612.