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Pseudographies

The revealed writings of Emily Babcock

Pierre Déléage

IN 1825, a two-year-old orphan girl was entrusted, together with her four older brothers, to the Shaker community of New Lebanon, in the state of New York. This Christian sect, established in the United States for some fifty years, arose in England from the encounter of a dissident branch of the Quaker Church with exiled prophets from the Cévennes region of France. The prophetess Ann Lee, a textile worker whose four children had died in infancy, joined this Quaker Church in 1758 and, twelve years later, had become its leader following a revelation in which she witnessed the original transgression of Adam and Eve. In that moment she grasped the full horror of carnal generation and concluded that celibacy was an absolute necessity. The Shaker Society was born and rapidly became a sort of monastic community. In 1774 Ann Lee came to America with eight followers, and there she died ten years later. In 1843, at the very peak of this community, the Shakers numbered five thousand.¹ The orphan Emily Babcock was too young to have known the sect's founders. She grew up in a community where chastity was obligatory, where property was held in common, where musical instruments and non-religious books were banned, and where the members were divided into Families of Brothers and Sisters living according to a regimen of strictly regulated activities under the exclusive authority of an Elder or an Eldress. Emily Babcock was a member of the Second Family, which enjoyed less prestige than the First Family in the central house of the New Lebanon settlement.²

1. On Shakers, the work of reference is still that of Stephen Stein (1992).

2. On Emily Babcock, cf. Daniel Patterson (1983: 90-94, 2000 [1979]: 125-126) and Sandra Soule (2014).

The Era of Manifestations and Emily Babcock's visions

II

When she was fourteen, Emily Babcock witnessed a decisive event in a neighboring Shaker community. During a worship service, three girls of her age fell into a trance and one of them, Ann Maria Goff, saw the spirit of Mother Ann Lee appear to her and teach her a religious song. This miraculous revelation, accepted, verified and then made public by the Elders, was the start of a ten-year period known by Shakers as the Era of Manifestations or Mother Anne's Work: the young generations entered *en masse* into communication with the dead, in particular with the sect's founders, becoming "instruments" or "seers," conduits for messages from the spirits (here it should be remembered that "Spiritualism" as such had not yet come into existence). These young instruments deeply changed the Shaker liturgy as they received a continuous stream of new visions, songs, dances and rituals – all validated by the Elders, happy to see a revival of religious feeling. This was not restricted to the Shakers themselves; the whole state was swept up into countless meetings organized by traveling preachers or charismatic prophets like William Miller or Joseph Smith.

At fifteen, Sister Emily Babcock was a peerless seer, frequently receiving new revelations. In 1842, the spirit of Mother Ann dictated a new Gospel to Brother Philemon Stewart, a forty-year-old man who was not yet an Elder but who belonged to New Lebanon's First Family (Meador 1970). The book, entitled *A Holy, Sacred and Divine Roll and Book* (Stewart 1843), set out a doctrine, in a supposedly archaic English similar to that of the *Book of Mormon*, in which Adam was both man and woman, and where Christ the King was the counterpart of Queen Mother Ann Lee: a dualist theology rather well-suited to the radical separation of the sexes in the Shaker community. Emily Babcock was one of the first Sisters to certify the authenticity of this new gospel by way of a series of three visions, all proving the divine nature of Philemon Stewart's revelation. The first vision occurred on 6 October 1842:

On the Sabbath, the sixth day of October, eighteen hundred forty two, as I came out of the meeting house, after attending solemn worship, I heard the sound of a mighty trumpet, which caused me to raise my eyes to see from whence the sound proceeded; when I beheld an Angel standing on the top of the center dwelling, holding in his right hand a trumpet, and in his left, a Roll or Book.

With his trumpet he sounded aloud, turning to the four quarters of the earth; and it was made known unto me, on my return home from meeting, by that power which is not of mortals, but of the Supreme Being, who is God of all, that a Roll should yet be revealed and spread abroad to all nations of the earth, that they might be forewarned of his judgments, and prepare for the same. (Stewart 1843: 303)

In the month of January 1843, the angel appeared again:

I saw no more of the Angel after that time, until the month of January, eighteen hundred forty three, when I again saw him bearing the Roll in his hand; and he spake unto me in a loud and mighty voice, saying; I am a holy Angel of power, from the throne of my God; and I have come before you at this time, in power and in truth; and I speak unto you of things very few of which ye shall understand now; but the time shall come, when you shall know the meaning of my sayings.

Although the meaning of my words are unknown to you now, yet shall they bear with weight on your mind, until I shall see fit to reveal them to you, in a language that you can understand: so remember ye my word and forget it not.

This and this only did I understand at that time. (Stewart 1843: 303)

On 5 April 1843, four days before her twentieth birthday, Emily Babcock received one final vision:

April fifth, eighteen hundred forty three, an Angel spake unto me, saying; I come, I come again at this time to make known unto you the meaning of the words which I before did speak, which you did not understand. So hearken and hear my word, and write the same; for I have now come to fulfill my promise.

I am the Angel that you, and many more mortals, have seen within a short time; I hold in my right hand a trumpet; and in my left, a Roll. *Se to're ca'lo vèrin de lè'ri*, my time has come. For thus saith the Lord your God:

... I am the only true and living God of Heaven and earth; and not one word that I have spoken, or shall hereafter speak, or cause, by my power to be written, shall ever fall or fail. So beware how, and in what manner ye treat my word, O ye children of men; consider, well consider, and seek to understand these my sayings. (Stewart 1843: 305)

Emily Babcock's revelations served purely to validate the supernatural origin of Philemon Stewart's new gospel. All three accounts emphasized the conditions in which the revelation was communicated, almost never addressing its content. The angel, messenger of the word of God, was described as holding a book in one hand, the virtual precursor of Philemon Stewart's book. He first spoke in a language that was incomprehensible and it was not until the final vision that, following a short glossolalia, "*Se to're ca'lo vèrin de lè'ri*," the angel translated the divine words and commanded that they be written down. The new revelation stemmed from a text invisible to the uninitiated that had materialized through the pen of Philemon Stewart. Stewart meanwhile had learned to understand a mysterious language, the tongue of the angels which, when transcribed as it was received, appeared as a string of meaningless syllables. Visions of this kind were common in the New Lebanon community —and indeed the religious fervor upset many longstanding principles.

The Shaker worship service was held in the Meeting House: it had always begun with repetitive dances in which men and women, separately,

I. Representation of a Shaker meeting (1843–1844)
(in Lamson 1848: 85)

slowly turned, singing choruses of praise for Mother Ann. These dances were now regularly interrupted by a cry announcing a supernatural presence: “I feel that the Lord is here.” An instrument would then suddenly fall into a trance, disrupting the orderly lines of dancers, and an Eldress or an Elder would come to their side, listen to the account of the revelation and have the words of the song or the instructions for a new dance taken down. Subsequently, the instruments would have these revelations carefully drawn in calligraphic writing and then keep them as personal treasures, sometimes in heart-shaped booklets. Certain texts duly selected by the Elders were even widely circulated and a few were sometimes read in public.³

The Indians

Beginning in early 1842, worship services were closed to community outsiders. Some Elders became uncomfortable with the direction these events were taking. When the first tribe of Indian spirits entered the bodies of the young instruments, they rolled on the ground, crying out and making such a row that the Elders were hard put to channel their fervor and to once again separate the Brothers and Sisters. In the meetings that followed, the Indian spirits, still quite agitated, were instructed in orthodox Shaker

3. David Lamson (1848) provides a testimony that gives a concrete idea of everyday life in a Shaker community during the Era of Manifestations.

theology. Many converted, and it is said that some spirits left to spread the good word to other tribes (Andrews 1940: 29–30).

Nonetheless, the Indian spirits brought the possessions during Shaker worship to a new height of “wildness.” They were characterized in particular by their language. Sometimes they communicated in rudimentary but rhyming English: *Me love come meety learn to tand / Like whities trait and fold de hand / Me tink dat dey look so pretty / Dat me like dem want be goody*. This was an imitation of what was then known condescendingly as the Indians’ “broken English”. But in most cases the Indian spirits would speak in their own tongue. “*He haw tallabo tallabo / He haw tallabo haw / Tinkaty addleum ididle addleum*.” These glossolalia were a string of meaningless syllables (Ibid: 42–43, Patterson 1983: 31–34). They had nothing to do with the languages of the few Amerindians still living around New Lebanon. At best they suggested what the instruments vaguely imagined an “Indian’s language” might be. Shakers were certainly not the only group to “speak in tongues” during this period of religious fervor that swept through the whole state of New York, but they assiduously wrote down their songs, and their manuscripts have sometimes come down to us.

Emily Babcock, scribe

Emily Babcock, a gifted calligrapher, became one of the principle secretaries of the Era of Manifestations (Sellin 1962). Unfortunately, we do not know much about the conditions in which she wrote. Nevertheless, given the care and application with which the texts were written out, it is very unlikely they were taken down in a state of trance. The accounts of visions, the songs, the dance steps must have been written down the day after their revelation, once calm had returned. Furthermore, these transcriptions gave rise to a veritable Shaker “artistic” tradition: some two hundred drawings have come down to us, all using a ruler and compass (Andrews & Andrews 1969). The Elders, guardians of the Society’s iconophobic orthodoxy, did not regard these productions as “drawings” but merely as texts (Patterson 1983: 5), sometimes enriched by “hieroglyphs,” shown by historians to originate in the Pennsylvania Dutch tradition of Fraktur iconography or in the symbols decorating local masonic temples (Kirk 1997: 1967–168).

The spirit glossolalia were also sometimes transcribed. We saw that, in her third account of her visions, Emily Babcock had written down a sentence in the “inaccessible” language of the angel: “*Se to’re ca’lo vèrin de lèri*.” The problem was to try to note as faithfully as possible, using the English alphabet, a series of meaningless syllables. The glossolalia were

2. Joanna Kitchell's vision transcribed by Sarah Bates (1845)
(in Patterson 1983: 22)

indeed sometimes “transcribed” using a special writing system, very different from the alphabet, an indecipherable writing that was itself revealed by the spirits. In January of 1843, Brother David A. Buckingham, from the Watervliet community, thus received a “spirit message” designed to render the glossolalia.

But it was Emily Babcock who was most adept at calligraphy in the service of the Indian spirits’ glossolalia. A complex and fairly stable “writing” system, also indecipherable, was revealed to her, which can be found in several of her writings: in three tiny booklets of religious teaching cut into strange shapes (Soule 2014); in one long manuscript, entirely in “Indian’ writing”; in a curious drawing featuring a ewe alongside a calligraphic text; and finally in a semi-circular notebook bearing the date June 1843. This last features both the text in English of an account a vision in which Mother Ann gives a short description of Zion and samples of a written text revealed by an Indian spirit, Carrifick P.

3. Spirit message by David A. Buckingham
(in Patterson 1983: 30)

Glossolalia

Emily Babcock only used her revealed writing to transcribe the glossolalia of the Indian spirit Carrifick P. Before coming back to the young Sister's written invention, a word on what is now known about glossolalia might be useful here. Linguistic study of these improvised "languages" has shown that all of their sound components come from the glossolalist's mother tongue (May 1956; Samarin 1972; Goodman 1972; Dubleumortier 1997; Pozzo 2013). Indeed there is almost never importation of phonemes from other languages: the cases of xenoglossia, i.e. imitation of foreign languages, for example an "Indian" language, depend on the unusual repetition of sounds taken from the mother tongue and unconsciously associated with a form of foreignness – velar occlusives thus seem perfect for evoking the impression of clicking or "choppy" sounds of a language we don't understand. We find them, for instance, in this "Indian" chant taken down by

the Shakers: *Hock a nick a hick nick / Qwine qui quo curn / Jac a ling shack a ling / Hick a chick a loreum.*”

We also know that all glossolalia impoverish the stock of the mother tongue. Some sounds disappear, others become more scarce. This largely unconscious phonological simplification apparently corresponds to a principle established by the linguist Roman Jakobson: the first sounds of the mother tongue to disappear are those last acquired by the child and that occur the least frequently in the world’s languages. That is why glossolalic speech has fewer closed syllables, consonant groups or nasal vowels than in naturally occurring languages spoken by adults. From a phonological standpoint, they also tend to resemble baby talk (Jakobson 1969; Yaguello 2006 [1974]: 192–205).

It is true that glossolalia have a number of features characteristic of baby talk: in addition to phonological simplification, there are numerous repetitions, frequent repetition of syllables and fairly systematic use of assonance and alliteration.

Among the Shakers, where it seems that the glossolalia were primarily sung, the process sometimes went as far as to borrow the tunes of children’s songs. For instance, this inspired song, “*E ne me ne mo de e / Sane to luro lu ra lee*” was a simple adaptation of a popular nursery rhyme “*Eeney meeny tip te te / Tina dinah domine*” (Andrews 1940: 43).

4. First page of a semi-circular notebook of Emily Babcock (June 1843)

New York Public Library, Shaker collection, October 2013 (photo: Pierre Déléage)

The writing system revealed to Emily Babcock was designed to “transcribe” glossolalia of this sort. It was deeply different from the alphabet taught at school, for its functioning – of supernatural origin – remained a mystery. That is an important point. Shakers did not think the songs they received were meaningless: they merely considered them incomprehensible. They believed the Indian spirits entirely capable of understanding the inspired words they communicated to the instruments. Likewise, Emily Babcock’s writings were indecipherable only for Shakers. The spirit of the Indian Carrifick P. obviously knew their semiotic functioning. It was therefore impossible to know if the writing indicated sounds or even words of the “Indian” language, or even if it obeyed one of the semiotic principles governing all of the world’s languages. At best it could be presumed that it was the kind of writing that allowed transcription of the Indians’ incomprehensible language. Emily Babcock’s indecipherable writing, designed to take down only glossolalia, was therefore a pseudography.⁴ But it was not only an indecipherable graphic code, a simple linear imitation of ordinary written characters;⁵ it was also seen by its users to be a supernatural means of transcribing equally supernatural occurrences of glossolalia.

Emily Babcock’s or David A. Buckingham’s pseudographic writings were not an isolated phenomenon. And if linguists have managed to identify features common to all glossolalia by comparing them, it seems to me it should be possible to do the same with pseudographies – by extending the field of comparison to Africa, Asia, and South America. So, my first example comes from Africa, and dates from 1927. In Southeastern Nigeria, in the province of Calabar, numerous Ibibio people, converted since the beginning of the century to various Christian denominations, experienced an exceptional summer that year. A wave of religious fervor, which came to be called the Spirit Movement, swept through the Protestant villages of the region. According to the historian Monday Abasiattai:

The services also encouraged deep spiritual and emotional experiences and sometimes lasted all day and into the morning hours. Some converts became ‘possessed’ by ‘the spirit’: their bodies shook violently, they ‘spoke in tongues’ or prophesied; and they sang, shouted and clapped ‘wildly’ ‘like mad people’, stared with their eyes, and shouted ‘Yes, Yes’ – according to eye witnesses. Because ‘shaking’ was the most

4. I have borrowed and repurposed the term from a 19th century edition of the dictionary of the Académie, in which it means “counterfeit writing,” the “art of the counterfeiter.”

5. What Stephen Houston dubs “pseudo-Scripts” in an article in the present issue: “Writing that Isn’t: Pseudo-Scripts in Comparative View.”

distinguishing characteristic, the Spirit Movement became known as *Mbon Spirit nyek idem* ('people who shake because of spirit'). (1989: 500)

X

Some of these possessed and illiterate “spirit men” began to write down the strange words they received from the Holy Spirit. On paper, leaves or even pieces of tree bark, they formed “strange characters” without comprehending their meaning. Several years later, when the movement became organized under the name of the Church of Oberi Okaime, some spiritual leaders claimed to be capable of comprehending the meaning of the glossolalia and deciphering the pseudographies. Two of these men, Michael Upkong and Akpan Akpan Udofia, even went into seclusion for four years and four months, according to the legend, in order to formalize the “spirit language” and invent a new script, based on the alphabet this time, strangely termed “hydrographical” (Adams 1947: 24).

5.
Example ofw
pseudographical
Kyangyang
script
(in Callewaert
2000: 266)

Among the Balanta of Guinea-Bissau, a religious movement called “Kyangyang” is attended each Friday by numerous believers dressed in white. The cult was born in 1984 when a young woman, Ntombikte, received a divine revelation and began to practice miraculous healings. Few converts to Kyangyang know how to write, yet all have a notebook in which they claim to take down the messages received while in a trance-like state from their ancestors and even from God himself. These pseudographical texts, which sometimes resemble the Arabic script used by their Fulani and Mandinka neighbors, are then “read” in tongues during the worship services (Callewaert 2000: 243–244, 264–267; Temudo 2009: 55; Sarró 2010).

Among the Shakers, the Ibibio and the Balanta, we thus find, at different periods but in a context of similar religious enthusiasm, ritual ceremonies during which supernatural entities (spirits, ancestors, deities) take hold of instruments and communicate through their medium glossolalia supposedly transcribed in pseudographies. The originality of the Kyangyang movement is that it seems to have continued the ritual use of pseudography, whereas, for the Ibibio and the Shakers, more familiar with alphabetical writing, this use lasted only a few short years.

In 1929, Melville and Frances Herskovitz were in Paramaribo, capital of Surinam, where they encountered a maroon diviner who claimed his familiar spirit came from Africa. In the course of his trances, the spirit would take possession of the man, who then would hear him speak in an “African” language. It was in this state and only in this state that he was capable of writing the “spirit language.” The diviner, who was literate,

believed that this pseudography also came from Africa. He did not understand its semiotic functioning, which remained opaque to him. He professed to grasp only the general sense of the message transmitted (Herkovits & Herkovits 1936: 82–83). It is perhaps no coincidence if, in the same country some twenty years earlier, another maroon diviner named Afaka Atumisi also received a revealed script, this time a genuine script whose syllabic semiotic structure was used to write the Ndjuka language (Dubelaar & Pakosie 1999). It is not impossible that this precedent of a revealed script may have inspired the diviner encountered by the Herskovits.

Among the Laotian Hmong, diviners known as *shau* would also fall into a trance-like state and “write” on paper series of marks whose shapes varied from one writer to another. These lines of pseudography would be “read” by the medium when he regained consciousness: they purportedly contained the predictions requested by the client. The characters were also reminiscent of a virtual language, the language of the supernatural entities who would take possession of the diviners and which he alone could hear and then translate to the general public (Smalley, Vang & Yang 1990: 97–99).

The pseudographic scripts of the mediums of Surinam and Laos were thus sensibly different from those of the Shakers, the Ibibio and the Balanta. While it was still a question of “transcribing” a supernatural language heard in a trance state, the diviners’ practice was stable over time; it was not part of a wave of religious fervor. Furthermore, the pseudographic writings of the diviners were not considered to be the transcription of messages in tongues, they were the mysterious transcription of a silent language that the diviners alone could hear. They claimed to be capable of “reading” in natural language, in other words of “translating,” the pseudographic texts and thus of deciphering the messages communicated to their clients. The diviners, those of Laos at any rate, would thus transmit the practice of pseudography vertically, from one generation to the next, while in the new religious movements this use spread horizontally, each person possessed being subject to receive the revelation.

XI

6. Pseudography of a Paramaribo medium (in Herkovits & Herkovits 1936: 82)

7. Pseudography of the Hmong medium Dia Lor (in Smalley, Vang & Yang 1990: 98)

On 12 March 1950, Ekang Ngoua, from Gabon, an initiate of the Bwiti Fang cult, heard the Holy Angel Gabriel order him to unify the different Bwiti sects and to create a single religion. While the prophetic project does not seem to have experienced any real posterity, it did spawn a “special script”, which Ekang Ngoua used to codify the elements of the complex theology given him by the spirit. He claimed moreover, in spite of being illiterate, to be the only one capable of “reading” this pseudography (Świdorski 1984). According to Julien Bonhomme, the writing thus completed the array of techniques for showing the secret nature of an initiatic cult; it “served more to hide, or rather to suggest a hidden knowledge, than to set it down publicly to be preserved and transmitted” (2006: 1949–1950).

8.
Pseudography of
the Gabonese
prophet Ekang
Ngoua
(in Świdorski
1984: 630)

9.
Page from
the notebook
containing
James
Hampton's
pseudographic
writings
(in Hartigan
1994: 56)

In this, Ekang Ngoua's method closely resembled that of another pseudographer: James Hampton, a night watchman for the General Services Administration in Washington DC. At his death, Hampton left a notebook of some one hundred pages written in a secret script. The text purportedly transcribed a series of mysterious divine revelations (Hartigan 1994).

These last two examples do not concern glossolalia or ritual possession, or even the propagation of pseudography. The only thing that makes the writings of Ekang Ngoua and James Hampton different from simple imaginary cryptographies was that, to their mind, these strange writing systems

were supernaturally inspired. The very existence of the pseudographies appeared as an additional proof of the authenticity of their revelation.

What general principles can we draw from these very different examples of pseudographic practices? I will answer this question by trying to see to what extent it is possible to say that pseudography is to writing what glossolalia is to natural language. To be considered as a language, the glossolalia must differ from the simple inarticulate cry by exhibiting the properties of the sound surface of a language. Likewise, pseudography, in order not to be confused with simple scribbling, must resemble lines of writing. Looking at the samples I have collected allows us to identify a set of minimal elements inherent both to written texts and to pseudographies: the linear organization of the characters, their discontinuous nature, their formal redundancy, their aniconicity and the fairly limited number of strokes per character.⁶

We saw that glossolalia stems from an impoverishment of the speaker's language. Certain pseudographies, too, also look like simplifications of scripts known to the scribe. This simplification is strongly correlated with the degree of literacy: The pseudographies produced by illiterate scriptors are rudimentary, the characters often repeated and never comprising more than one or two strokes (as among followers of Kyangyang, the Laotian seers or Ekang Ngoua). Those invented by literate scriptors, however, are more complex with characters less often repeated and comprising more strokes (as with Emily Babcock, the diviner from Paramaribo or James Hampton). The pseudographies of illiterate scriptors look similar to the "lines of writing" observed among the members of societies that have only an external, visual, knowledge of writing – and which, unlike the inventors of pseudographies, sometimes do not even know how they function semiotically (Déléage 2017). The pseudographies of literate subjects, on the other hand, appear superficially much more like alphabets, even to the extent that some think it should be possible to decipher James Hampton's writing.

A final feature shared by glossolalia and pseudography, a pragmatic and not a semiotic one this time, is that both are designed to manifest a supernatural presence.⁷ Not only are the "language" and the "writing" themselves considered to be supernatural, but their mere existence, in the context of ritual ceremony, confers on the comprehensible, tenuous, speech, an added value of truth, whether these are spirit messages or seers'

6. These are features found in the "emerging writings" of children of four or five (Tolchinsky 2003).

7. Which differentiates them from the simple imitations of writing studied by Stephen Houston, in the present issue (art. cit.).

predictions. They are additional “proof.” Pseudographies, like glossolalia, therefore have no need to mean anything. It suffices that they merely exist, giving a new, supernatural value to the meaningful activities that come before or after.

That is why pseudographies are always used in combination with other means of expression. In most cases, they add a certain form of authenticity to the ordinary words of an entranced person or to the ritual context in which they appeared. But they can also act as a model for the invention of standard systems of writing, in other words those endowed with a decipherable semiotics, which in that case will also be considered as “revealed” – I am thinking in particular of Oberi Okaime’s writing or that of the Hmong prophet Yang Chong Leu, both of which are said to have been inspired by pre-existing pseudographies. Lastly, pseudographies are regularly used together with figurative drawings: their supernatural essence is then transferred to the drawings produced by the Laotian Shau seers, the followers of Kyangyang, the prophet Ekang Ngoua and of course by the visionary, Emily Babcock.

10. Emily Babcock’s manuscript writing on the last page of the semi-circular notebook (June 1843)

New York Public Library, Shaker collection, October 2013 (Photo: Pierre Déléage)

The pseudography of Emily Babcock revisited

XV

This combination of mixed means of expression is particularly clear in the manuscripts we possess of Emily Babcock. Pseudographic script appears side by side with alphabetical writing, with figurative drawings and even with a unique system of standardized writing. Alphabetical writing is thus doubly present in her productions: sometimes it enables her to write down accounts of visions whose truth value is guaranteed by the pseudography, sometimes it makes it possible to explain the Indian origin of the pseudographic script, as on the last page of the semi-circular notebook from 1843.

Emily Babcock's pseudography can be combined with a figurative image, as in this enigmatic representation of a ewe alongside other calligraphic elements (Wertkin 1995).

Or it appears several times in conjunction with mysterious "hieroglyphic" symbols, "signs" which complete it.

To the best of my knowledge, these hieroglyphs are meaningless. They play the same role with respect to the Shaker graphic repertory as pseudography with respect to alphabetic writing; it could be said that they

11. Pseudography of Emily Babcock combined with the representation of a lamb
(in Wertkin 1995: 61)

GRAPHIC ACTS AND ARTIFACTS

Pseudographies

12. Example of so-called “hieroglyphic” characters drawn by Emily Babcock
New York Public Library, Shaker collection, October 2013 (cl. Pierre Déléage)

are a pseudo-iconography. Yet on at least one occasion, Emily Babcock exploited the figurative value of these hieroglyphic signs. In a manuscript that is often reproduced, she transcribed the virtual steps of a new ceremony, revealed to an instrument in 1840 and known as “Walking the Narrow Path.” The ritual consisted of walking heel-to-toe along a straight line while intensely visualizing the precepts that would make it possible to follow the path to God and reach Zion.

On a long strip of paper, Emily Babcock drew the “narrow path,” the walls of Zion and a series of “hieroglyphic” tools which can be imagined to symbolize the virtual physical mortification necessary to attain the spiritual elevation supposed to result from the ritual. These tools were, in order: a lamp, a rifle, a tomahawk, stones, tongs, a broom, a gallows, a lance, an ax, a snake, a shovel, a hatchet, a hammer, a whip, and tongs (Kirk 1997: 179–182 and 2002). This was very probably not a piece of selective writing: it does not seem that the characters were meant to transcribe elements of speech (Déléage 2013). The value of this standardized graphic system (Déléage 2016), like that of speech and ordinary texts, was certainly enhanced by its co-existence with its author’s pseudography.

Pseudographic writing is thus to writing more or less what glossolalia is to natural language. One lacks semiotics, the other semantics. Both are imitations and simplifications or a superficial graphic or acoustic appearance. From the standpoint of those who produce them, they manifest

13-14. Emily Babcock's transcription of the ritual "Walking the Narrow Path to Zion"

(in Kirk 2002: 120-121)

either an indecipherable semiotics or an inaccessible meaning. Both are techniques for rendering spirits or deities present, and they thus make it possible to enhance the supernatural value of speech, drawing, practices and contexts which, without them, could appear to be perfectly ordinary. They thus play a part in the work of "demonstration" that must be carried out with all available means, mobilizing all possible "proofs" when one desires to convince people of the real existence of a non-existent authority.

The Era of Manifestations lasted only some ten years. Perhaps the Shakers wearied and the visions, songs and new dances dried up. On 19 October 1846, Emily Babcock renounced her membership in the Shaker community of New Lebanon and moved to New York City.

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XX

Pierre Déléage, *Pseudographies: the revealed writings of Emily Babcock*.—Based on the study of a writing system revealed to Emily Babcock, a member of the Shaker community, during the Era of Manifestations (1837–1847), and then its comparison with several similar writing systems found in Africa, Asia or South America, the author proposes a definition of pseudography. These systems are, on the one hand, indecipherable imitations of ordinary writing, producing a simplification of their most salient formal features and, on the other hand, like the glossolalia they are often purported to “transcribe”, techniques for rendering supernatural entities present that may add epistemological value to the messages, practices and contexts that accompany them, thus establishing the authority of their users.

Pierre Déléage, *Pseudographies: l'écriture révélée d'Emily Babcock*. À partir de l'étude d'une écriture révélée à Emily Babcock, membre de la communauté shaker pendant l'Ère des Manifestations (1837-1847), puis de sa comparaison avec plusieurs autres écritures semblables issues d'Afrique, d'Asie ou d'Amérique du Sud, une définition des pseudographies est proposée. Elles sont d'une part des imitations indéchiffrables d'écritures ordinaires, opérant une simplification de leurs caractéristiques formelles les plus saillantes, et d'autre part, à l'égal des glossolalies qu'elles sont souvent censées « transcrire », des techniques de présentification d'entités surnaturelles, susceptibles de conférer aux discours, aux pratiques et aux contextes qui les accompagnent une valeur épistémique accrue et, partant, d'affermir l'autorité de ceux qui les utilisent.