

The Hidden and the Visible
by
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This presentation looks at the nature of symbols in their capacity as a silent form of the oral tradition, particularly as they are used within the Western Esoteric Traditions. This umbrella term essentially describes the esoteric traditions as they were synthesised during the Renaissance, based on the rediscovery of Platonic, Neoplatonic and Hermetic texts. Freemasonry in its current form grew out of a necessity to preserve and codify these traditions, due to the cataclysmic effect that the Enlightenment and the Scientific revolution had on the esoteric traditions, literally forcing them underground. Thus, this silent language became one of the key repositories for these traditions, and the use and exploration of the symbols comprising it, came to form an integral part of the initiatory experience which is the heart of Freemasonry.

We often hear of the esoteric traditions, and Freemasonry in particular, referred to as secret societies, and seen as holding some kind of secret teaching. This "secret" can be summarised as "a different way of seeing", and it is this way of seeing, its initiatory function, its historic background and its application that I will briefly explore in the next few minutes.

Deciphering a three dimensional world of symbols is challenging to the modern mind, a parallel reality we are called on to make sense of, in which our normal mechanisms of logic are no help to us, at least not in the conventional sense. Learning this "symbolic language" is at the heart of initiation, and this process is essentially the key to what have come to be known as "secret teachings." Even if I were to describe the process to you, I cannot reveal the secret for a very simple reason: because my explanation would be interpreted by your logical mind. I can tell you what it looks like, but not what it is. In order for a symbol to have a meaningful impact, it needs to be internalized to the extent that our interrelationship and interaction with it becomes an inner, and incommunicable process. Though I may have internalized and decoded this symbol in a certain way, each individual will decode it a different way. Each person will reach the "new way of seeing" in a different way – and this is the "secret" at the heart of the initiatory experience. It is secret

because it is too personal to be shared, and because the secrecy is hidden within the very process of internalizing the symbol.

So how does this work? Is it something that only initiates in certain traditions can enjoy? If we are to judge from the history of these ideas, and the widespread use of such symbols during the flowering of the Renaissance, certainly not. Specifically masonic teachings are only open to initiates, but this way of seeing is something that most artists (of all kinds) practice without thinking, and it is something we can all remember, or relearn how to do. This use of symbolism fell into disuse when mechanistic science and rationalism replaced this enchanted worldview, and it was then that esoteric orders began to appear so that these traditions would not be entirely lost.

There was a time in Western history when “visual language” was the norm, and it was considered natural to see correspondences and moral significance in the juxtaposition of images and objects. To speak of a visual language in our time is to speak of thousands of kilobytes of information flashed at us from every possible quarter. Visual messages and stimuli surround us more than ever before, and the language of shape and colour is manipulated with breathtaking speed. Yet, these are hollow symbols, and the messages they communicate constantly urge us to hurry up, consume, consume some more... and so time, art, and language become nothing but means to an end, consisting of disposable symbols. This is the mindset that needs to be shaken off when entering the lodge, and understanding the origins of what has been called an “emblematic worldview” is to take the first step to understanding the way the silent, symbolic language of Freemasonry works, via a way of seeing that we can call symbolic perception.

The (historical) Renaissance, is defined as ‘the beginning of the civilization of the image,’¹ when painting and poetry were considered to be almost the same thing; and the concept that ‘poetry is mute painting and painting is speaking poetry,’² was repeatedly echoed in art theory, and was central to what has been called the “emblematic worldview” prevalent at that time. The Renaissance revival and celebration of antique imagery and symbols has been described as being the result of a spiritual longing on a grand scale, culminating in works of art and architecture embodying grandiloquent visions about ‘human and cosmic time, the order of the universe, the soul’s destiny.’³ In terms of architecture – from which Freemasonry draws the majority of its symbols - it has been pointed out that ‘architecture is midway between the microcosm of the

human being and the macrocosm of the natural universe.' In the words of one researcher: "A building is a sort of mesocosm [...] To decorate a building with a meaningful set of images is to acknowledge the presence of meaning in the universe.'⁴ We will return to this concept of a mesocosm, or intermediary world, but to better understand the thought process and worldview it relates to, here is a brief description of the mundane world in an age when these concepts were everyday reality:

'No domestic or public space was left unfilled by some appropriate emblematic decoration; [...] no opportunity was lost to surprise the eye and the mind into moral reflection. [...] This was attention seeking poetry [demanding] or challeng[ing] interpretation. Knowledge was a process of remembering, recollecting, recuperating and reminding. [...] What made this symbolic universe different from the medieval 'Book of Nature' was the active participation of the individual within the construction of significance. [...] Instead of a world divided [...] into the celestial and the mundane, one is presented with a curious knot that ties together the creation, so that spiritual realities can be seen within the created world as impinging on the individual.'⁵

The magnificent artwork produced during the Renaissance was the product of far more than artistic inspiration derived from a longing for the glory of antiquity. This was a time when the West was rediscovering ancient wisdom that had for centuries been buried in obscurity, when the Florentine Marcilio Ficino was translating Plato. When the Jews were fleeing Spain, and brought Kabbalistic knowledge with them. When the practice of natural magic, studied and developed by Ficino, Pico della Mirandola and Giordano Bruno, inspired the realization – originally put forward by Plato – that the universe and the world of man were so closely interconnected, that action on the human plane could affect events on a universal scale. Demonstrated through symbols, this concept can lead to what St. Thomas Aquinas called 'an initiatory experience through a process of understanding that connects an outward revelation to a deeply intuitive sense of knowing.'⁶

The best way to understand this visual panorama of symbols and allegories consists of a fourfold system of interpretation comprising of: the literal, the allegorical, the tropological and finally the anagogical – which equates to the symbolic perception I've been mentioning – that is, perceiving everything we see around us through a kind of symbolic filter.

The first two levels take us through a process of passive observation on the literal level, to a primary, simple process of reading one thing and interpreting it as another allegorically. So in literal terms, for example, I look at an emblem of the sun and moon, and I see... the sun and moon. Allegorically, I may go as far as to recognize them as two complementary opposites, but little more than this.

Clearly we need to intuit a deeper symbolic dimension if we are to penetrate their deeper meaning. So here it is our active participation that becomes more important and it is strengthened at the next, tropological level, at which 'a change in attitude or behaviour in accordance with our understanding' is expected.

So what really happens? We are still observers, but now our intellect begins to participate, by making associations. Within a Masonic context, the sun and moon are seen in the East side of the lodge, and their polarity is reflected in the two columns, the seating of the officers and the members. The reference to the cardinal directions reflect the movement of the sun and the passing of the seasons, reflecting the deeper symbolic meanings of Winter as a time of gestation and preparation, Summer, as a time of completion. Interestingly, precisely the exact same arrangement as has been found in Mithraic lodges of antiquity, and the changing of the seasons is an important motif in the Eleusinian mysteries which centre around the myth of Persephone.

What we have, at the tropological stage, is a realization, mainly on an intellectual level, that everything we see is interconnected, that the complementary opposition of sun and moon is repeatedly reflected within the lodge, that the seating and movement of the members gives it a further dimension of meaning, and altogether, this has a correspondence on a macrocosmic level. Where does that leave us though, and how to make the intuitive leap to our own place within it?

At the final anagogical level a 'resolution of opposites'⁷ is involved, where the act of seeing and what we see, are united. We become an active part of this symbolic representation, we too, become symbols, and this inner realization IS the final step. It is disclosed by becoming internalized, raised to a spiritual and esoteric process, and interpreted whereby a kind of vertical thinking allows our microcosmic faculties to resonate and unite with the macrocosmic 'realities' which the symbol represents. s.'⁸

So symbols are not simply objects or images, they are intermediaries, or stepping stones. Intermediaries can be classified as whatever mediates in order for -and here I quote esoteric scholar Antoine Faivre - 'the eye of fire to pierce the bark of appearances to call forth significations,'⁹ and through these to either come to know (in the sense of gnosis) or to manipulate in the sense of practical alchemy, natural magic, or theurgy. They reside in the world of the imagination – not fantasy – but a mesocosmic timeless sphere of reality within which Gnosis – what we could call knowledge born not of reason, but of contemplation- can be perceived, and symbols are stripped away to reveal their full content. The medium dissolves to disclose the message, no longer in a dual form but whole. In this sense the imagination itself is an intermediary, which 'appears both as a means of knowledge and a modality of being. The imagination is thus itself an intermediary world.'¹⁰

This is not a new idea. Aristotle tells us that: the imagination 'is a faculty of knowledge intermediary between the senses and the intellect or rational intelligence. [...] Its function is to transform sensory impressions into images.'¹¹ He placed great emphasis on the visual nature of imaginal perception: 'the soul does not think without images.'¹²

The imagination is seen as a bridge between microcosm and macrocosm, and as one Renaissance scholar tells us: 'all is reduced to a question of communication: body and soul speak two languages [...] which are [...] different, even inconsistent, but also *inaudible* to each other. The inner sense alone is able to hear and comprehend them both.'¹³ So according to this worldview, in attempting to understand such concepts through logic alone, without the participation of the imagination, we can only ever come away with one part of the truth.

This concept places a further emphasis on visual 'language,' regarding which it was thought that 'there must exist a grammar of thought independent of language,' key to understanding 'the Renaissance Eros, the Art of Memory, theoretical magic, alchemy, and practical magic,'¹⁴ all part of this primordial wisdom of the Mysteries. This in turn was based on the Renaissance understanding of Horapollo's Hieroglyphica, the famous manuscript discovered in Patmos in 1492, regarding which it was believed that: "Hieroglyphics... gave an example of a marvelous language which was believed to convey mystical knowledge in symbolic, iconographical form, and, most importantly, described the meaning behind natural objects."¹⁵ This language, is not of a discursive nature, but of an internalized, non-verbal kind, leading to a flash of insight which Plotinus

describes as 'the life of the gods.' [Enneads I, 6 & V, 8]. Champollion may have proved this theory wrong – but it makes no difference – several centuries of western culture was built up around it nevertheless.

This way of thinking and seeing requires us to read everything around us as a book, and through the active imagination, to allow our sensory, intellectual, and intuitive input to become part of the inner dialogue that defines our understanding of reality.

Therefore back in the masonic context, the lodge, its ritual and its symbols are the passive intermediaries, waiting for its members, the living intermediaries, to unite the two dimensions of microcosm and macrocosm. This connection takes place on a deep esoteric level, within the individual, as they become the missing part of the equation by completing the process.

Now one might be quite justified in asking whether this process is only accessible to initiates in a tradition such as Freemasonry? The answer, as the history behind these tradition demonstrates, and as most artists already know, is certainly not. Freemasonry is one custodian of these traditions, within which these ideas have been codified and canonized in the form of rituals and the three-dimensional space in which they are enacted. It holds specific teachings, is built on specific traditions, and offers a specific path to them. The actual process of learning to read the world as a book and developing this symbolic perception is a faculty that our modern world has taught us to forget – but it is something that we still exercise without knowing it, particularly when we engage with any form of art.

Now, apart from other pursuits, I am also an artist, and it was art that led me into this particular area of study. When discussing the theme of this event, Ms. Sandrolini asked me to say a few words about my work, as it is closely tied to my study of these areas. A couple of years ago I prepared an art exhibition that took the form of a visual narrative intending to demonstrate a way in which these ideas could be applied in the present day and in a more publically accessible setting. Drawing on the symbolism of the mystery traditions, the narrative is focused around two main archetypes, embodied by Prometheus -not pictured, but alluded to, and Mnemosyne, mother of the Muses, whose gift to mankind was language itself.

The first two paintings in the series are **Babylon and Sophia**. Within them I connected the modern crises we are facing to the Gnostic concept of the fall into matter, expressing the divisive nature of a dualistic universe, and questioned visible reality. Is Babylon really a whore, or, as she holds the Lion-headed Aeon, is she showing us the path back to reintegration after the Fall? In some traditions it was believed that this specific deity mediated between the divine and human worlds, as did the Gnostic Abraxas, guardian of knowledge who kept the balance between good and evil in the world. Behind Babylon we see the tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge – the Hebrew words on each stand for Da'ath, and Chai, but the colours suggesting life and death have been reversed. Next to Babylon is a melancholy and virginal Sophia, chained to the blind and foolish Demiurge (creator of the material world according to Gnostic tradition) whom she spawned. Through her gift to humanity and the Gnosis that can come through a contemplative understanding of living Platonic geometry, perhaps we may understand the real nature of matter and rediscover the key for a more integrated state of being.

Lethe and Eros

They are both friends and adversaries of man. Lethe and this aspect of Eros are both subject to the Spindle of Necessity – a reference to Plato's Republic, where he speaks of a myth told from an Orphic perspective of life after death. According to the myth, the motions of the planets and the destiny of souls is ruled by Anagke – Necessity alone. According to Orphic cosmology, after death, most souls pass beneath the throne of Necessity, drink from the spring of Lethe (oblivion), forget their previous life, and are reincarnated. Only initiated could pass by Lethe and drink from the spring of Mnemosyne – Memory. So here we see Lethe, peaceful and hospitable as she proffers the dark water of amnesia, but she is blind and her gift is emptiness. Behind her the three Fates continue their work unabated, measuring and cutting off lives. As for Eros, he is both arrogant and petulant, but also playful... it is not his fault that necessity made him this way. The question within the narrative is whether his toys will awaken...

Mnemosyne:

The four golden leaves in the four corners reflect the golden amulets found in Orphic graves. On them were inscribed prayers as well as the necessary passwords for initiates to be able to avoid Lethe and to drink from the spring of Mnemosyne. On the skull are inscribed the first words of the password - "A child of earth I am and of the starlit sky" - also derived from Orphic cosmogony, reminding the guardian, who here takes on the form of the Sphinx, that the initiate is aware of his divine origin and

therefore has the right to drink from the spring of Mnemosyne. In the background we see the Theatre of Memory – a reference to the Art of Memory, and symbols from Giordano Bruno's magical memory system, one of which forms the tiara worn by Mnemosyne. One of her gifts to mankind were the arts, in the form of her daughters, the nine Muses, also referred to in the DNA spiral, which hints at their presence in the very warp and weft of matter.

Demeter-Persephone.

After passing by the guardian and crossing the bridge between worlds, we are back in the materia lworld, once again at the mercy of Time and the Seasons. Here we have overt references to the myth at the heart of the Eleusinian mysteries. Demeter, simultaneously withered and youthful, reminds us of the inexorable passage and devastating effects of time. The rest of the painting depicts elements of the Eleusinian mysteries and the myth of Persephone, we see the sacred kistis, an aspect of Dionysus, Hecate in her cave guarding the crossroads, but most of all, Persephone in the claws of Hades. And yes, I know she looks like me... this was not deliberate but I had no model and had to use a mirror! The only way to return to the light of day is through a door inscribed with the initials "Vitriol" – *Visita Interiora Terrae Rectificando Invenies Occultem Lapidem* – "Visit the interior of the earth and there, by rectifying, you will find the Hidden Stone." But the letters are written backwards, in mirror-script. Why? The question is returned to the viewer – who is looking in the mirror, Persephone, or the viewer? More than any of the others, this painting encapsulates a number of initiatory concepts also found in Freemasonry.

Finally, we see two more guardians of the most refined human capabilities, Athena, and Hermes, since communication and wisdom are both guardians, and the first steps on the Promethean path explored by this narrative. More than an oral tradition – this is a *silent* tradition, communicated not through words, but through symbols hidden in images which nonetheless also signify the ancient oral traditions in which they originated.

So as far as the paintings are concerned, I have tried to take these concepts and use the "language of the imagination" to directly communicate most of what I have now explained in theory, with the ultimate aim of demonstrating how that "different way of seeing" is meant to work and the path towards it. The paintings are meant as nothing more than a springboard, intended to raise questions in the mind of the viewer

and offer a new perspective on a forgotten worldview, forcing the viewer into an interplay with symbols, bypassing the logical analytic framework as well as the constraints of time and place, and thus allowing them to come to know the thing in itself.

I hope to have offered a few new perspectives on this silent language of symbols and their role in keeping alive a set of very old traditions, as a means to a different way of seeing the world. Thank you for listening.

- ¹Giulio Carlo Argan, *The Europe of the Capitals, 1600-1700* (Geneva, 1964), p. 14
in Gerard G. LeCoat, 'Comparative Aspects of the Theory of expression in the Baroque Age,' *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2. (Winter, 1971-2), pp. 207-233 (p. 208)
- ² Charles du Fresnoy, *De Arte Graphica* (Paris 1667)
Cf Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de più eccellenti architetti, pittori, e scultori*, Gaston du C. de Vere trans. (London, 1912), IV, 83
- ³ Joscelyn Godwin, *The Pagan Dream of the Renaissance* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), p. 39
- ⁴ *ibid.*, p. 65
- ⁵ John Manning, *The Emblem* (London: Reaktion, 2002; 2004) pp. 25-6, 30
- ⁶ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, (1265-1274), 10, in Angela Voss, *HPSM 152: Alexandrian Hermetism, Neo-Platonism, and Astrology: The Rebirth of Esoteric Knowledge*, (Exeter: EXESES0, 2005), p.3
- ⁷ *ibid.*, p. 6
- ⁸ Henri Corbin, 'Mysticism and Humour', in *Spring* (1973), p. 27, quoted in S. Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton 1999), p.93
- ⁹ Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, p. 13
- ¹⁰ Adriana Berger, 'Cultural Hermeneutics: The Concept of Imagination in the Phenomenological Approaches of Henry Corbin and Mircea Eliade', *The Journal of Religion*, Vol 66 No. 2, (1986), 141-156 (p. 142)
- ¹¹ Marieke J.E. van der Doel & Wouter Hanegraaff, 'Imagination,' in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, pp. 606-616 (p. 606)
- ¹² Aristotle, *De Anima III*, 7, 431 a 16, in van der Doel & Hanegraaff, 'Imagination,' p. 607
- ¹³ Ioan P. Couliano, *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 8
- ¹⁴ Sasha Chaitow, *Michael Maier's Atalanta Fugiens as an Initiatory Path*, MA thesis submitted to the University of Exeter, 2008., p. 24
- ¹⁵ Westerhoff, Jan C., 'A World of Signs: Baroque Pansemioticism, the Polyhistor and the Early Modern Wunderkammer,' *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (Oct. 2001), pp. 633-650 (p.634).