

450
Parker
Street

A LETTER

TOUCHING

MASONIC SYMBOLISM.

WASHINGTON, 8th November, 1889.

DEAR BRO.: GOULD:

In lieu of the phrase, "*Speculative* Masonry," I shall have to use two:

'Morally-symbolic' Masonry is what we have now,—our 'Speculative' Masonry,—'a system of *morality* veiled in symbols.'

'Philosophically-symbolic Masonry' means something quite different, in which the symbols conceal, and to the adepts express, the great philosophic and religious truths of antiquity; or, it may be, the philosophic doctrines of the Hermeticists and Rosicrucians,—these two being, as their books show, the same.

One need not argue that a philosophic recondite symbolism never *originated* among the manually-labouring illiterate Masons of Scotland or England. They were not Alchemists, Hermeticists or Rosicrucians, and had no use for nor could have understood and comprehended such symbols, or the doctrines concealed in them.

That some Rosicrucian or Hermeticist introduced such symbols, having philosophical and religious meanings,

among the Craft-Masons, and these adopted and used them, with such explanations, is equally incredible: and it was as impossible in the early part of the 18th century as it was in that of the 15th.

If such symbols were used in Masonry at all, before 1717, their religious and philosophical explanations were known only to those addicted to philosophic speculation, and the symbols must have had other explanations for the labouring men.

The working Masons *may*, even before the 15th century, have attached some simple morally-symbolic meanings to their tools, or had a few other symbols with like meanings; but I am not aware that there is any proof of either. Neither is there anything to raise a presumption of either, except this, that in all ages the rudest men have used figures and pictured images and other simple symbols, to express ideas and inculcate morality.

It is very certain that, at an early day, there were in England, as well as on the Continent, some men, perhaps many, who devoted their time to the study of that religious philosophy known by the different names of Hermeticism, Rosicrucianism and Alchemy,—the last being only pretendedly the ‘science’ of practical Alchemy, but using the terms of science to conceal the Rosicrucian and Hermetic Dogma. Elias Ashmole, writing under his own name, and also under the pseudonym of ‘John Hasolle,’ was one of the later of these men, and had a long line of predecessors and several contemporaries.

Several of the symbols used by these philosophers to express their doctrines are now in the keeping of Masonry, notably the Compasses and Square; and so also is one of the symbols of Pythagoras,—the 47th Problem.

To the latter Masonry attaches no meaning at all, and to its others only moral ones; but there is sufficient proof elsewhere in Masonry that some of these have other and higher meanings.

As these symbols, common to Masonry and Hermeticism, were certainly used by the latter long before they made their appearance in the former, it may well be presumed, as men like Ashmole were Free-Masons, that Masonry received them from Hermeticism.

To speculate about what may not have been, when there is nothing to rest the foot upon, is to beat one's wings to no purpose in the void. There must be something, of fact or reason, to turn the scale in favour of one possibility against another.

We have sure proof that, in the 17th century, some philosophers did connect themselves with Masonry. It is hardly probable that Ashmole was the first to do so. There could have been nothing in the companionship of illiterate day-laborers to attract such men, in York or Lancashire or London; and as they had no open and known organization as Rosicrucians, Hermeticists or Alchemists, it is possible that they met in the Masonic Lodges, but hardly so that the labourers were in the secret, or knew anything about their doctrines.

What is certain is, that in one of the four old Lodges of London there were esquires, noblemen, military officers, scholars, philosophers and clergymen, in numbers sufficient for a society devoted to *some* special study or purpose, and not drawn together by the seductive influences of pipes and ale.

We have, I think, a solid resting-place for the foot when we think it probable that to these men, or others like them, is to be ascribed the authorship of the Third Degree, and the introduction of Hermetic and other symbols into Masonry; that they framed the three Degrees for the purpose of communicating their doctrines, veiled by their symbols, to those fitted to receive them, and gave to all others trite moral explanations of them, which they could comprehend.

Many things combine to prove that the symbols had

other meanings for the few than those which they had for the many,—the attraction which the Degrees had for men of high rank, the Preface of the Book of Long Livers, the real meaning of the substitute for the Master's Word, the Sun, Moon and Master of the Lodge as its Lights, the 47th Problem, which is not a symbol of any *moral* truth: and the expression in the Regius Manuscript, that 'Gemetry' took the name of Masonry. These are strengthened by the traditional connection of Pythagoras with Masonry, and by the charge to keep the secrets "of the chamber."

I have verified your references, except those to Prichard—my copy of which I have not for some time been able to find. I confess that the conclusion which you draw from the passages first referred to does not seem to me more persuasive than this quite opposite one, that Prichard, finding one answer different from the other, put both together, in order to give all.

There was no great uniformity of catechism, I fancy, where there was little communication between the Lodges; and, indeed, I can go now from one of our States into another and find differences as great as those of the two answers, which, as he could not prefer one to the other, Prichard combined into one, and so solved the difficulty. It is to be noted that he was divulging and disclosing, and his accuracy would be denied by some Masons, if *they* used one formula and he gave the other, used elsewhere. He was not laying down a formula to be followed.

Much of what was published in the Flying Post, in 1723, bears little mark of being genuine, and it is not certain that much of the other catechism was not of the authorship of the divulger of the Grand Mystery, but it seems to me to have more that is correct in it than the other.

There are some things in it which may be worth considering, as they seem to point to something above

hewing and laying stone. For example, "God and the Square," in answer to the question "How many make a Lodge?"

The Triangle and Square Cross," in this:

Q. What Lodge are you of?

A. The Lodge of St. John. \triangle

Q. How does it stand? \star

A. Perfect East and West as all Temples do.

And in this:

Q. How many angles in St. John's Lodge?

A. Four, bordering on Squares. \triangle
 \star

Also, the Cross in this:

Q. Who rules and governs the Lodge and is Master of it?

A. Irah }
 \star } or the right Pillar.
Iachin }

That the three Lights represent "the three persons, Father, Son and Holy Ghost;" and the two Pillars the "strength and stability of the Church in all ages."

That "odds make a Lodge," "because all odds are men's advantage."

That with God and the Square *five* or *seven right* and *perfect* Masons make a Lodge.

That the right *word* or right *point* of a Mason is Adieu [\hat{a} Dieu].

The Letter to a Friend shows that, in 1725, secret doctrines were taught in Masonry, the word Mason was used in a figurative sense, and Masonry was suspected of being gnostic and heretical.

The disposition of "the laws and statutes ordained by the honorable Lodge of Aberdeen, 27th December, 1670," "that no Lodge be holden within a dwelling-house where there is people living in it, but in the open fields, except

it be ill weather, and then let a house be chosen that no person shall heir or sie us," cannot be accurately said "to contain some parts of the Ritual of 1730;" or, to express the thought more nearly in your own words, does not show that "some parts of the Rituals of 1730 can be traced to 1670." It has only this in common with the later formulas,—that secrecy was to be secured for meetings of a Lodge. None of the later phrases are found in it; and therefore we cannot infer that because some *parts* of the Ritual of 1730 can be traced to 1670, therefore other parts may; for none of the *phrases* are traceable thither.

I do not see, in these several sayings about the places for holding the Lodge, anything connected with the symbolism of Free-Masonry, whether "the essentials of the Degrees along with other things" is an accurate definition of "symbolism" or not; nor any basis for a supposition "that the symbolism could not have been introduced by the newcomers into Masonry," and that "it can presumably be carried back to an earlier date than 1717."

I am quite ready to believe, and think it can be shown, that there had been symbolism in Masonry long before 1717, but that the working-class of Masons in the Lodges had no knowledge of it, it being confined to the men who, of another class, united themselves with the Lodges. If that was even so, those Lodges which had no members of that class had no symbolism in their Masonry.

So that I do not think we can be warranted in *assuming* that, among Masons generally,—in the *body* of Masonry,—the symbolism of Free-Masonry is of earlier date than 1717; while I think you *can* prove, that among Free-Masons of a certain class and limited number, the same symbolism, or a larger part of the same, afterwards placed in the Degrees, did exist long before, perhaps some centuries before, 1717.

It is not easy to conceive of anything in the purposes

or practices of Lodges of working Masons in the 17th century, that could have induced the Rosicrucians or the Hermetic and Alchemical philosophers to use the mask of the common Masonry to cover and conceal their own secret philosophical organization. "During the splendour of mediæval operative Masonry," association with it was more on a footing of equality, and 'Gemetry' styled itself 'Masonry.' It is quite true that "the Regius Manuscript addresses a much higher stamp of persons than the manuscript Constitutions of later date."

The art of building then stood above all other arts, and made all others subservient to it. It commanded the services of the most brilliant intellects, and of the greatest artists. The old symbolism was embodied in the churches and cathedrals; and some of these were adorned by figures and devices which would never have been tolerated there, if the Priesthood had known what they meant to the Adepts.

I think that the Philosophers, becoming Free-Masons, introduced into Masonry its symbolism,—secret, except among themselves,—in the Middle Age, and not after the decline of operative Masonry began.

You truly say that the 'newcomers into Masonry' 'would not have introduced anything, of which they did not understand the meaning.' Nor would the philosophic, Hermetic or Rosicrucian Masons have displayed their sacred symbols to rude working-Masons, who could not be made to understand their explanations. For the same reason, when they did, to secure growth for the association, frame and formulate the Degrees, and deliver into the keeping of the Lodges their ancient symbols, they kept to themselves their philosophic and religious meanings, and gave to the pipe-smoking and ale-drinking toilers such trite moral explanations as they could understand.

The Grand Khaibar expresses unbounded contempt

for Masonry, calls its fictions 'solemn fooleries,' and declares that 'the Mystick Lodge'

"May soothe the fancy,
 "Words without meaning it affords,
 "And signs without significancy. . . .
 "A mole-hill to a mount to swell
 "Is the true sign of a Free-Mason."

I do not find in it any admission that Masonry, in 1726, *had* any symbolism, or any insinuation that its symbolism was not understood.

I agree with you, that an ignorance of the meaning of what is done in the Lodge, similar to that which now prevails, prevailed in 1717.

Consider, for example, how the 47th Problem stands among the Lodge-symbols, without any explanation at all, *i. e.*, without being a symbol. So it was in 1724. To Pythagoras it had a profound significance; and we learn from the Gâthâs of the Zend-Avesta what that significance was. But Plutarch did not know it. The meaning was lost in his day; and the explanation that he gives is insane and insignificant.

Again, take the numbers 3 and 4 as constituting 7. The Hermetic philosophers take 4, represented by the square, to symbolize the earth, or nature, or the four elements, fire, air, earth and water. But to Zarathustra, 4 represented, as the four arms of the cross do, the four *male* energies of the Deity, *i. e.*, the Divine Wisdom, the Divine Word, the Divine Might and the Divine Sovereignty; and, 3, the *female* Potencies of the Deity (female, as acting through Nature), Desire to Propagate, Soundness or Virility, and Vitality.

But the fact that the meanings of many of the symbols were unknown to the mass of Masons does not prove that *they* had had and lost them; but may quite as reasonably be held to prove that they *never* had them, because they were withheld from them, and when the symbols came

into their keeping, as parts of the Degrees, the meanings given them were only those that we have to-day. I cannot see in this anything to make untenable the theory that the *ceremonial* of 1730 was introduced into Masonry after 1717. You say, "Had such been the case, the meaning of what was so introduced would have been known, and, as I also venture to think, preserved." Why not think it would have been known and preserved until now, no matter when introduced? In other words, why not say, "No meanings have been lost. There never were other meanings than those given now. If there had ever been, they would have been known and preserved."

They would have been known, if the few possessors had seen fit to *make* them known to the many. No one can *assume* that they *did* make them known. *How* is it certain that they would have been preserved? How long were the meanings which the symbols used by Pythagoras had,—to himself,—preserved among his disciples? Did the blows given by the murderers, and the parts of the body struck, *never* symbolize anything? or the grips, by two of which nought is effected, and by the third the purpose is achieved? Did the Substitute-Word *never* have a meaning? Why, then, have these meanings, if once known, not been preserved? If one but reflects that all false religions have come from loss of the true significance of symbols, and that no religious or philosophic symbol has ever escaped final misunderstanding and loss of its meaning, he will see that the most perishable of all things are the true meanings of symbols. Do you not suppose that it was at one time known what the Tau Cross meant? I have known more than one symbol in Masonry utterly destroyed since I have been a Mason.

I hold the symbolism of Masonry to be of very ancient origin, and that its meanings have been lost, as those of the figurative expressions of the Rig-Veda have been, and those of the Gâthâs of Zarathustra.

I can find no ground, beyond that of which I have spoken, upon which to plant my foot, and I hesitate to step off of it into the void of conjecture and speculation. I cannot "suggest what influences could have had any effect on this early development of the science." I do not think that the science of symbolism ever had any development among the common class of working-Masons.

But it played a great part in architecture, and the mediæval architects must have been familiar with it. All the genius of the age was enlisted in architecture's service, in the fashioning of churches, cathedrals, and other great public and princely edifices, as well as in their carved ornamentation and their internal arrangements and furniture. If one were competent, it would be interesting to inquire how far the deterioration of architecture and its violations of good taste were owing to the dying out of the science of symbolism.

Fraternally and truly yours,

ALBERT PIKE.



