

Masonic Symbolism: Thoughts on Its Philosophical Source

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I. Introduction

Masonic Tracing Boards are training devices. In the earliest days of speculative Masonry the Master used to sketch designs on the floor of the Lodge before the meeting using chalk. Then he would talk about the drawing during the meeting. (It may be that early in the history of the Masonic Order all meetings were "Masonic Education"). It's my own belief that the capacity to draw a Masonic diagram such as the ones we will look at this morning and to speak to it in philosophical terms was one of the qualifications of a Master in the early days of the speculative Craft. However, this sort of preparation was a time-consuming, laborious and difficult task; and in time it appears that the hand drawn diagram was replaced by a floor cloth on which the "standard designs" were available ready to be talked about. Floor cloths (which are sometimes referred to as "the Master's Carpet") occupied significant space in the Lodge, however; and as the ritual became increasingly better developed and more important during the course of the 18th century the standardized drawings seem to have been transferred (at least in England) to the "Tracing Boards", one Board for each Degree, which are pictures that encapsulate the symbols of each of the Degrees.

The Boards with which we will spend most time this morning are English; they were drawn by a Mason named J. Harris who apparently did many of these designs. They date from the 1820's which means they incorporate the symbolic structure as it was agreed during the Reconciliation of the English Grand Lodges in 1816. Thus, these boards (which are the ones that are in most common use today) are the product of a good deal of evolution. As we talk about the ideas incorporated here, we will refer to earlier diagrams on occasion.

There is a great deal of material here. If we were to undertake a comprehensive study we could probably spend a year on each Tracing Board. Why? Because the Boards, like the lectures in our American Lodges, are not lessons in themselves. They are references to a vast body of literature and philosophical doctrine which is at the core of Renaissance thought.¹ Someone who really wants to understand the Tracing Boards (and, I think, Masonry itself) must read into and understand those doctrines. It is from this perspective of Renaissance thought that we will consider the Boards this morning. I hope you will forgive me if we move quickly.

I must preface my remarks by stating specifically and unequivocally that the ideas that I will express are my own. They do not represent the attitudes or teachings of any Grand Lodge or Private Lodge. Please remember that. If I fail to identify an idea as my opinion, it is to prevent clumsy repetition of "it seems to me".

History

Perhaps a little bit of historical consideration is appropriate here. When we look at the symbols, you may notice that the ones I will speak of are somewhat different from those that we use in Virginia. That is because of the particular way in which American Masonry developed. We don't know where Freemasonry comes from. Some Masons think they have participated in the very ceremonies used by King Solomon. Others argue that we started in the 1700's simply as a gentleman's club. My own view is that Freemasonry is a codification of the Hermetic/Kabbalistic Tradition which was of central importance during the Renaissance which we will touch very briefly in a moment.

¹ I am using the term "Renaissance" in a particular way; as reference to a body of thought which defines the period, rather than as the historical period itself. Thus Martin del Rio, a Jesuit and a Counter-Reformation writer who lived in the late 16th and early 17th centuries and wrote very critically of the philosophers that we will consider would not qualify as a "renaissance thinker" in the context in which I am using the term. Del Rio's thought belongs still to the traditional thinking of the Church and to the Counter Reformation rather than to the thought which characterized the Renaissance.

Development of English Freemasonry

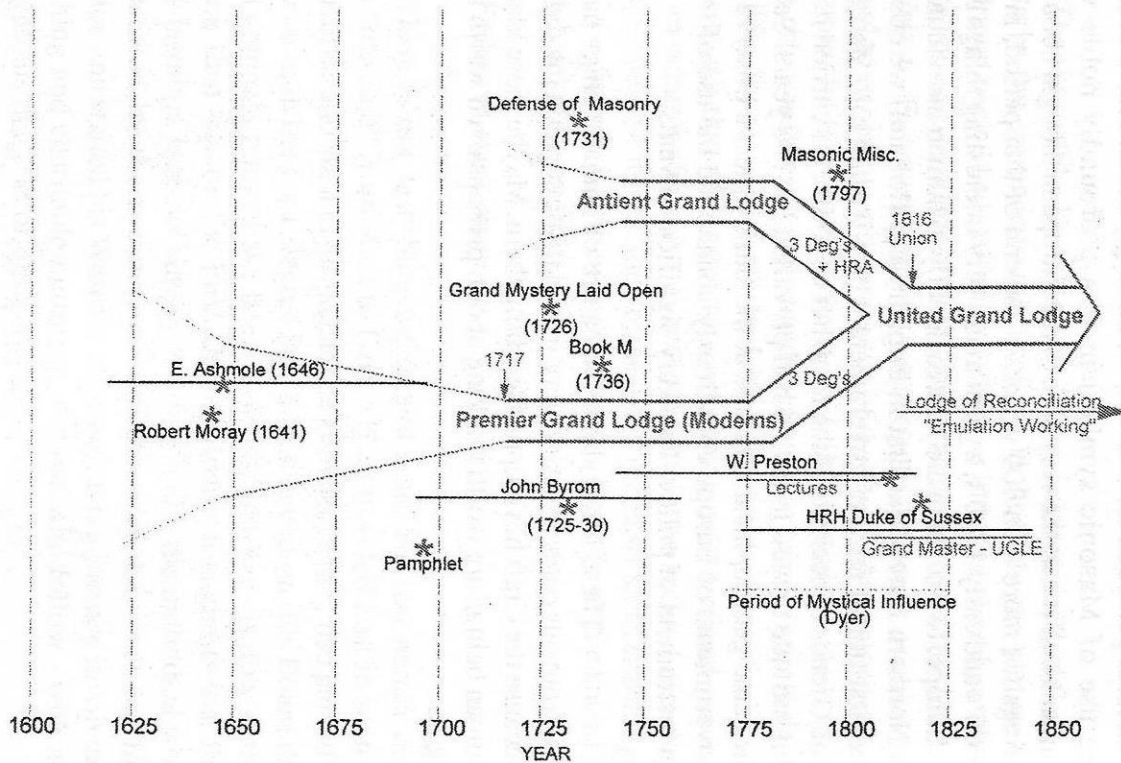


Figure 1

Figure 1 is a timeline for English Masonry. In very simple terms, Masonry evolves from uncertain sources; the Premier Grand Lodge is founded in 1717 while the Antient Grand Lodge starts in the 1740s. These two compete with each other until the end of the 18th Century when they negotiate a Union in 1813-16. Masons were working a two degree system in 1717; the three degree system was in place by 1730 (perhaps as early as 1723), and the Masonic ritual and symbolism continued to evolve right the way through the 18th Century. The evolution stopped with the Lodge of Reconciliation in 1816.

Now, when you add American Masonry to the picture, it looks rather like the timeline in Figure 2.

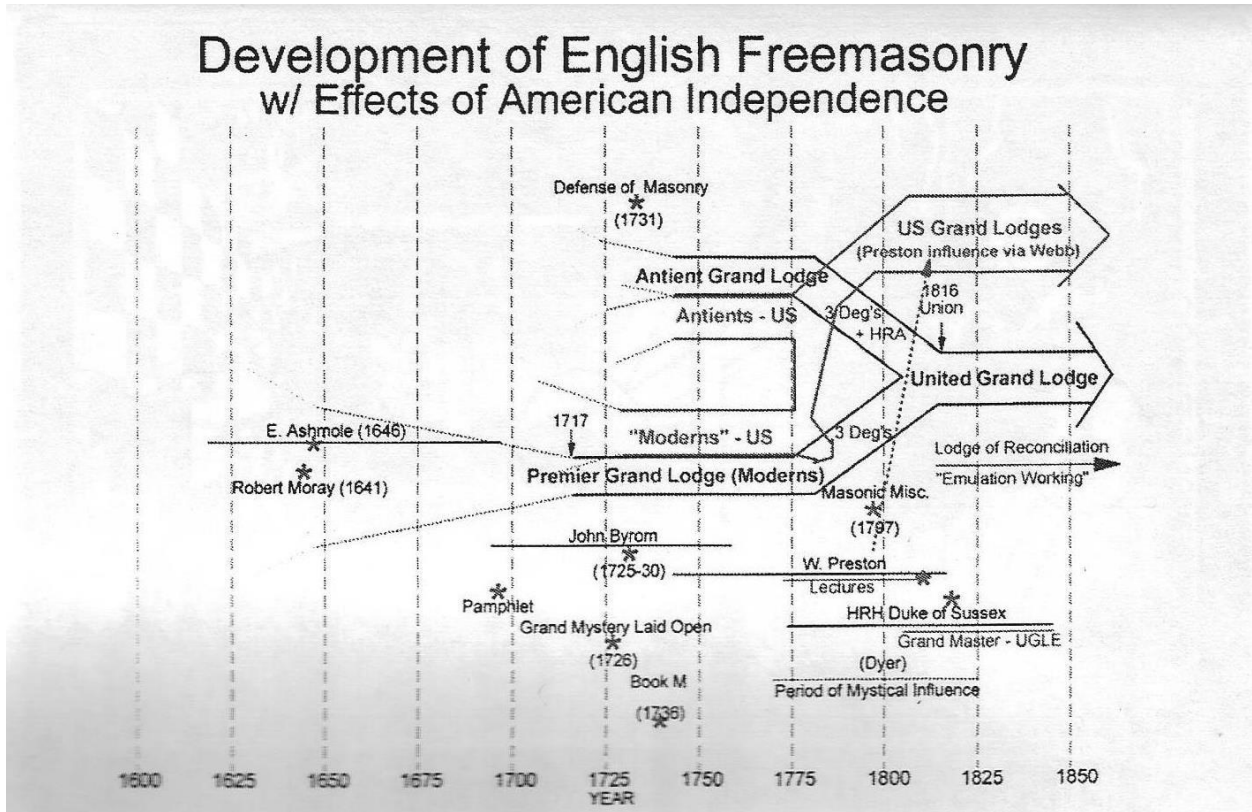


Figure 2

There were "Antients and Moderns" in the American Colonies just as there were in England; and it turns out that most of the Antients were Whigs and most of the Moderns were Tories. (That fits with the best guesses at the origins of the Antient Grand Lodge.) At the time of the American Revolution a lot of Tory colonists went north to Canada, and I think that they took their "Modern" Masonry with them. The "Modern" Masonry that remained in the United States after the war was subsumed into the Antient Grand Lodges, which is why almost all the American Grand Lodges have "Antient" in their titles, This separation from England meant that, in the 40 years from 1776 to 1816, the American workings did not continue to experience the evolution that was characteristic of the English workings. Again, in simple terms, American rituals are the Antient working as it was in 1776 refined by the influence of Webb who took his material from Preston's Lectures until about 1795. If you find the paper referring to unfamiliar symbols, this separation from England at the time of the American Revolution is the source of the difference.

Metaphysics

Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy which deals with God, with first principles, with the nature of being, and with the implications of those things which are, as the word implies, "beyond physics". In many respects it has become a "dirty word". In the context of the positivism which is fashionable today, to say something is "metaphysical" is to say that it is incapable of proof. That, from the contemporary point of view, is to say that it is meaningless. This was not always the case. Until the beginning of the twentieth century almost all philosophy in the West had a strong orientation toward the Deity, and metaphysics was an important field. Metaphysics seeks to describe the structure of that part of the universe which is beyond the range physical observation. It also deals with the manner in which the Deity is understood to operate in the process of creating and maintaining the universe. There are many metaphysical systems in use throughout the world; for the last 2000 years those in the West have been dominated by a metaphysics based on some variant of Judeo-Christian monotheism. The Renaissance is no exception, although it was also characterized by a revival of interest in the Classical world (in particular the Greek and Roman civilizations) and its thought.

Medieval scholars had been interested in Classical philosophy from the point of view of reconciling it to Christian doctrine. Renaissance thinkers were interested in classical philosophy for what it said about man, himself. These Renaissance philosophers incorporated a good many Greek (particularly neo-Platonic) and Jewish mystical ideas into their orthodox Christian thought. The first of these influences came principally from a body of writing called the Hermetica which originated in Alexandria sometime near the start of the Christian era. It seems to be a form of early Egyptian philosophy with a heavy overlay of Hellenized Judaism and Christian thought. It has been shown to have had substantial influence on the formation of early Christian doctrine.² The second of these influences came from Kabbalah, the mystical tradition of Judaism, which was distributed throughout the Mediterranean basin by the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492.

² Hermetica, trans. Scott, W., (Boston, Shambhala, 1993) pp. 14-5

Francis Yates has called this fusion of classical and Jewish philosophy the "Hermetic/Kabbalistic Tradition"³, and after it had been interpreted in the context of orthodox Christian doctrine it was fundamental to the thought of the early Renaissance.⁴ Thus, I think the metaphysics of the Renaissance represents as close to a "general" statement of Western Metaphysics as we are likely to find. Speculative Masonry dates from the end of the Renaissance (the mid-to-late 17th century), and it seems to me that Masonic symbolism reflects this Renaissance tradition.

Three fundamental ideas seem to characterize this philosophical view: First, the Deity was considered to be without limit. This resulted in a view of all existence as a single, tightly integrated unity centered on the Deity. A particularly clear statement of this view comes from the Hermetica: "...for God contains all things, and there is nothing that is not in God, and nothing which God is not. Nay, I would rather say, not that God *contains* all things, but that, to speak the full truth, God *is* all things".⁵ Spinoza wrote the same thing in 1677, although he arrived at his conclusion by a very different method.⁶ Second, earthly experiences were considered to reflect events in the heavenly realms; the succinct statement of this idea is, "As above; so below".⁷ This epigram is a consequence of the integrated view of the world described above. In a universe regarded as a single, consistent, Divine Entity there must be a correspondence between that which occurs in the higher (heavenly, causal) levels and that which occurs at the lower (earthly) ones.⁸ Knowledge of the "higher", or more subtle, aspects of the Universe was thought to be available only by experience (i.e. by one's own revelation); certainly not by logical argument, nor, ultimately, by faith in the authority of other's revelation.⁹

³ Yates, Frances A., *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, (London, RKP, 1979), Introduction p. 1

⁴ It was subsequently repudiated by Counter-Reformation writers.

⁵ *Hermetica*, trans. Scott, W., (Boston, Shambhala, 1993), LIBELLVS IV, p. 185

⁶ Spinoza, B., *Ethics*, (1677)

⁷ *Hermetica*, the Emerald Tablet

⁸ Reuchlin, J., *De Arte Cabalistica* (1517, reprint Univ. Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1993), Book Two

⁹ e.g. Reuchlin, op. cit. and Agrippa, H. C.; *De Occulta Philosophia*, (Antwerp, 1531) ed Donald Tyson, (reprint Llewellyn, St Paul, 1993)

I will suggest that the Masonic symbolism, as represented on the tracing boards, reflects these principles which make up this world view.

II. The First Degree Tracing Board

Figure 3, which looks at first glance like a collection of heterogeneous objects, is, I think, a representation of God, the Universe, and Everything. It is also a picture of a human being standing in a landscape. Neither of these images is immediately obvious; but I hope I can convince you that they are, at least, reasonable interpretations of the data.

Ornaments

A central idea fundamental to Renaissance thought was the unity of the system and the consequent omnipresence of the Deity. For me, this idea is represented on the First Degree Board by a group of three symbols which are called, collectively, the "Ornaments of the Lodge". The fact

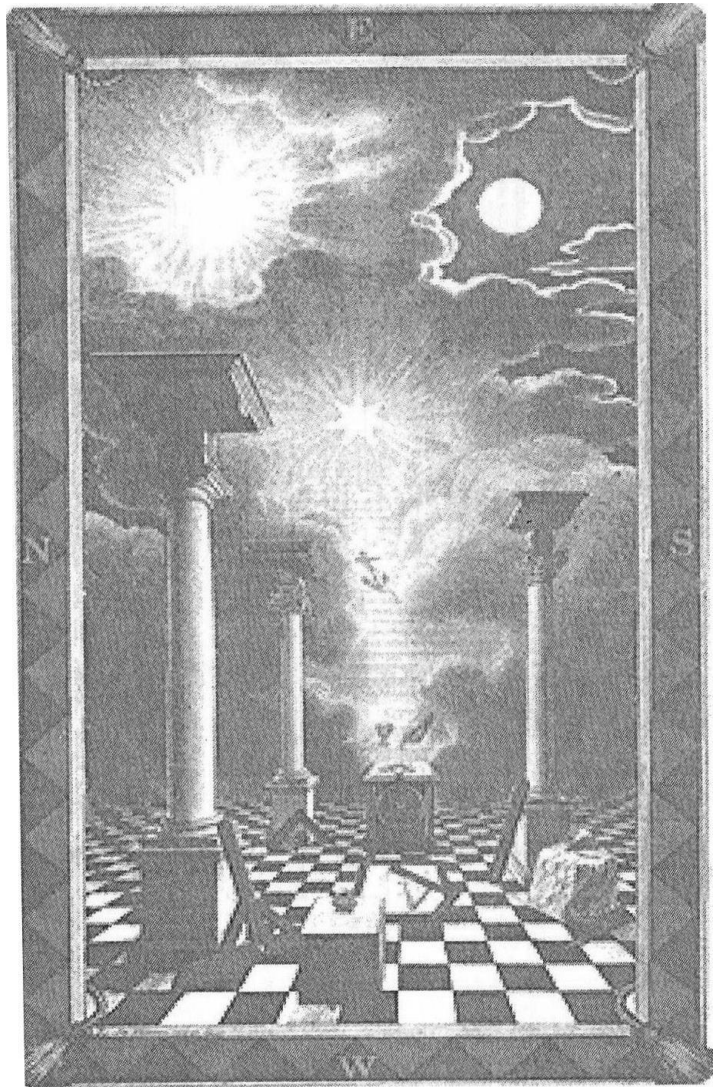


Figure 3

that the Masons who formulated our symbolism gathered these three objects into a single group seems to require that we consider them together and in relationship to each other. The Ornaments of the Lodge are the Blazing Star or Glory, the Chequered Pavement, and the Indented, Tessellated Border. I will suggest that they are all intended to refer to the Deity. The Blazing Star or Glory is a straightforward heraldic representation of the Deity.

Each of you will be carrying a similar representation. You have only to reach in your pocket, pull out a dollar bill, and examine the obverse of the Great Seal of the United States. You will see the Deity represented there in the same manner. The Blazing Star, shown in the Heavens, represents the Deity as It is, in all Its Glory, as It projects Itself into existence. The Chequered Pavement represents the Deity as It is perceived to be at the opposite pole of consciousness, here on Earth in ordinary life. The light and dark squares represent paired opposites, a mixture of mercy and justice, reward and punishment, vengeance and loving kindness. They also represent the human experience of life, light and dark, good and evil, easy and difficult. But that is only how it is perceived. The squares are not the symbol; the Pavement is the symbol. The light and dark squares fit together with exact nicety to form the Pavement, a single thing, a unity. The whole is surrounded by the Tessellated Border which binds it into a single symbol. In this representation on the Tracing Board the Border binds not simply the squares, but the entire picture, into a unity. The Tessels can be thought of as representing Divine agency which operates throughout the whole.

Columns

Except in the case of the Glory which stands alone, the idea of duality occurs throughout the Board - from the black and white squares at the bottom to the Sun and Moon, an ancient symbol for the paired opposites of masculine and feminine, at the top. In the central area of the Board duality is represented by two of the three columns; but here, as we rise from the fixity of the elemental existence of the physical world, the third column introduces a new idea. The striking thing about these columns is that each is of a different Order of Architecture. In Masonic symbolism they are assigned names: Wisdom to the Ionic Column in the middle, Strength to the Doric Column on the left, and Beauty to the Corinthian Column on the right. How shall we interpret these Columns and their names? As we have seen, one of the principal components of Renaissance thought was Kabbalah, and in particular it was the Sephardi Kabbalah which spread throughout the Mediterranean area with the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. Several very

significant books were written on the subject of Kabbalah.¹⁰ The principal diagram which is used by Kabbalists to communicate their ideas is the "Tree of Life" which is shown in Figure 4.

The column on the right is called the "Column of Mercy" and is the active column; that on the left is called the "Column of Severity" and is the passive column; the central column is called the "Column of Consciousness" and it is the balancing column of equilibrium. When the Tree is used to represent a model of the Universe groups of ideas such as revelation, expansive growth and passion are associated with the right (active) column. Groups of ideas such as principled understanding, disciplined containment/restraint, and classification/analysis are associated with the left (passive) column. Ideas and agencies that keep the active and passive forces in balance are found on the central column. The three columns all terminate in (depend on) Divinity at the top of the central column. Look

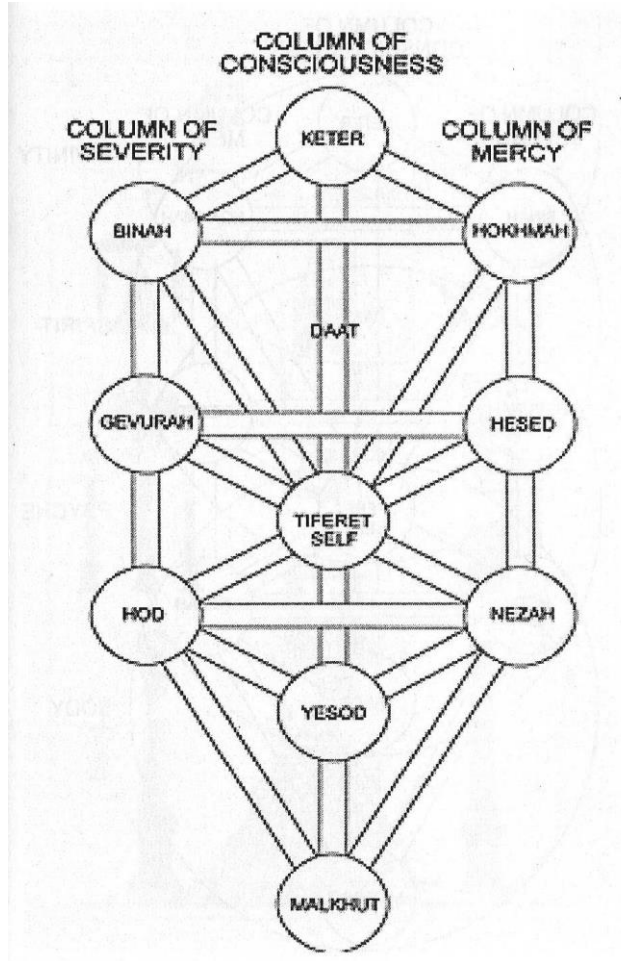


Figure 4

again at the columns on the Tracing Board. The Corinthian Pillar of Beauty is on the right, and in the classical world the Corinthian Order was thought to be suitable for buildings dedicated to vigorous, expansive activities. The Doric Pillar of Strength is on the left, and the Doric Order was used for buildings where discipline, restraint and stability were

¹⁰ For an accessible introduction to Kabbalah see Halevi, Zev ben Shimon, Adam and the Kabbalistic Tree, (Bristol, Gateway, 1974)

important. The Ionic Pillar of Wisdom is in the middle. That Order is recognized as an intermediate between the other two and was used for Temples to the rulers of the gods who coordinated the activities of the pantheon. The Three Pillars, like the Tree of Life, speak of a universe in which expansive and constraining forces are held in balance by a coordinating agency.

Four Worlds

The Universe as it was perceived by the Renaissance philosophers consisted of "four worlds".¹¹ The Hermetica describes such a division with each of the four worlds associated with one of the "elements".¹² Kabbalah has the same division as shown on the Tree of Life in Figure 5.¹³

They are the "elemental" or physical world, the "celestial" world of the psyche or soul, the "super celestial" world or spirit, and the Divine world. We can see that these same levels are represented on the board (the four levels are more obvious if you remember that the symbol is taken from a time when people believed in a geocentric universe with earth at the center and heaven beyond the stars).

The Pavement represents the "elemental", physical world, the central part of the Board including the columns and most of the symbols, represents the

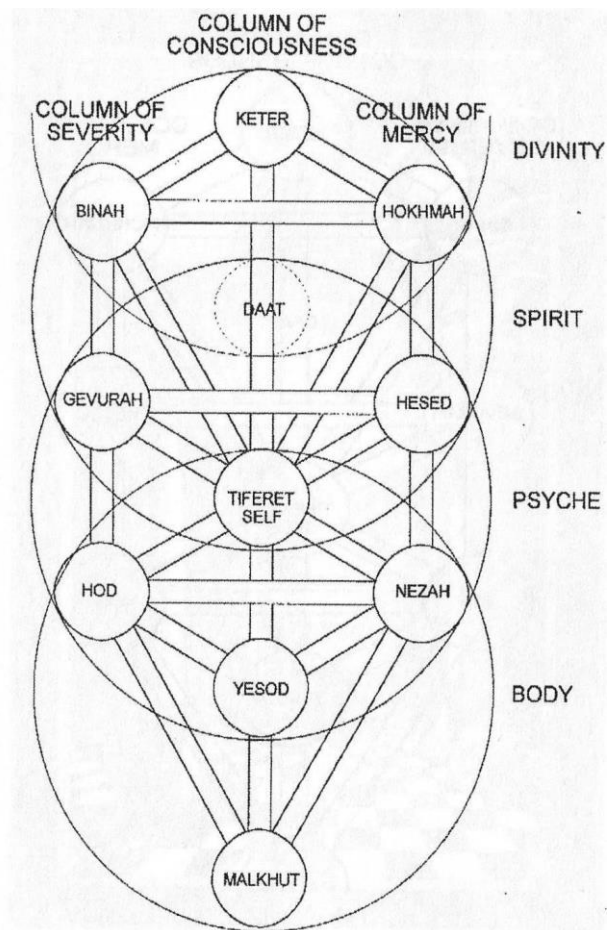


Figure 5

¹¹ This word is chosen carefully. They conceived of the Universe as a highly integrated unity; they perceived it (as incarnate humans do) as having this hierarchical structure.

¹² Hermetica, trans. Scott, W., (Boston, Shambhala, 1985) Stobaeus, Excerpt XXIV, p495

¹³ Halevi, ibid. p.28 Renaissance literature is not uniform in this respect. The hierarchy is generally present, but some authors describe "three worlds" seem lump Divinity and spirit together.

"celestial" world of the psyche or soul, the Heavens represent the "super celestial" world of the spirit, and the Glory, as we have seen, represents the Divinity.

Thus far we have considered how this picture can be conceived as a representation of the structure of the universe as it was conceived by the intellectual community in the Renaissance. That is the "landscape". Where is the man?

The Man

Remember that one of the ideas which was fundamental to Renaissance thought was the concept of a Macrocosm (seen as the universe as a whole) and a corresponding Microcosm (seen as the human individual). The idea is that the universe and human beings are structured using the same principles (both having been made "in the image of God"), and that in the course of events there is always a correspondence between activity in the greater and lesser worlds. This is a necessary consequence of the principle of "Oneness". We have seen that in the Hermetica, "As above, so below", sums up this idea; and it was stated prominently in England in the early 17th century by Robert Fludd in his *History of the Two Worlds*.¹⁴

Thus far we have avoided speaking of one of the principal features of the Board, the Ladder. It extends from the Scripture open on the Pedestal to the Glory which represents the Deity; and in Masonic symbolism it is said to be Jacob's Ladder. We will consider the ladder together with another symbol, the "point within a circle bound by two parallel lines", which is shown on the face of the pedestal or Altar. Why should we consider these two symbols together?

¹⁴ Fludd, R., *Utriusque Cosmi, Histoda*, (oppenheim, De Bry, 1617-9)

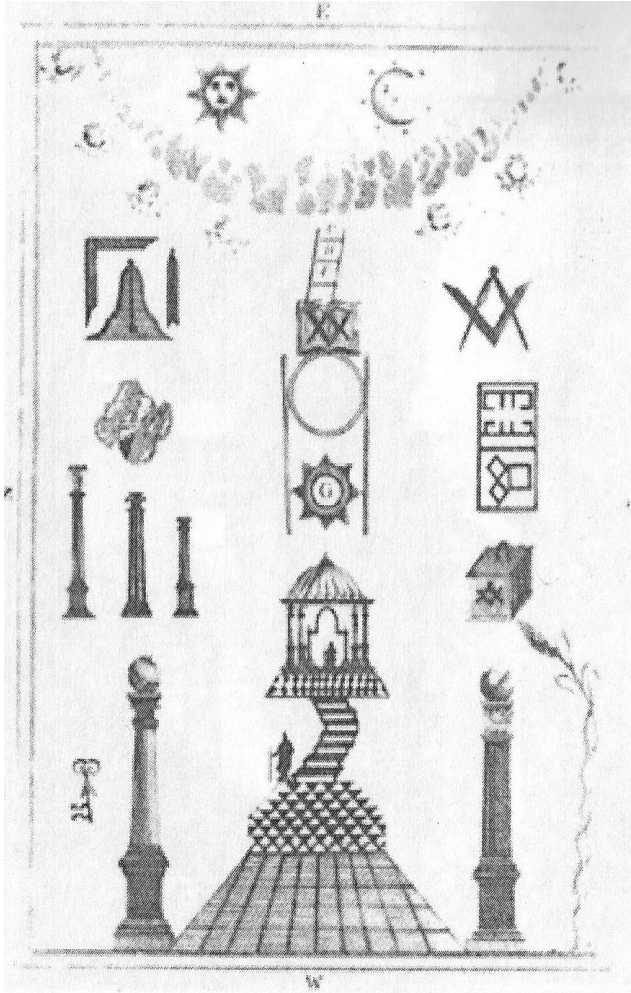


Figure 6

In many early Masonic drawings such as Figure 6, the Frontise Piece to Masonic Miscellanies, they appear together as if they have some connection. Consider the two parallel lines; like the Doric and Corinthian columns, represent paired opposites, active and passive qualities. Why? Because in Masonic Symbolism they are associated with St. John the Baptist's Day in Midsummer, and St. John the Evangelist's Day in Midwinter. In Lodges working under the English Constitution, which has de-Christianized its symbolic structure, the lines are said to represent Moses (the Prophet) and Solomon (the Lawgiver) - substantially the same idea. The ladder with its "three principal rounds", Faith, Hope, and Charity, rises to the Heavens between the two parallels.

Now, when you look at this "point within a circle bound by two parallel lines" together with the Ladder and its three levels you see a pattern very similar to the three columns. There are three verticals, two of which relate to active and passive functions, while the third, the Ladder, reaches to the heavens and provides the means by which we hope to arrive there.¹⁵ The Ladder, which I think is a representation of individual consciousness, has "three principle rounds" or levels, represented by Faith, Hope and Charity. This corresponds to the three lower levels of the four-level Universe we observed earlier. Both the Macrocosmic "Landscape" and the Microcosmic "Man" share the fourth level of Divinity, represented by the Blazing Star, or Glory. Taken together the Ladder and the

¹⁵ 15. Emulation Ritual, First Lecture, Fourth Section

point within a Circle represent the human individual, made in the image of God, according to the same principles on which the Universe is based.

East - West Direction

There is one more idea we should touch on before we leave the First Degree Board. A Mason is sometimes called "a traveling man", and one of the Masonic catechisms gives us a little insight into this seldom used epithet.

Q. Did you ever Travel?

A. My forefathers did.

Q. Where did they travel?

A. Due East and West.

Q. What was the object of their travels?

A. They traveled East in search of instruction, and West to propagate the knowledge they had gained.¹⁶

Notice the cardinal points of the compass on the Border of this Tracing Board; they define the East - West direction as it is to be understood in terms of Masonic Symbolism, and in doing so they make some comment about the nature of the journey which the new Mason apprentices himself to undertake. That journey from West to East is represented, symbolically, by the progress through the Masonic Degrees; and it is, in fact, the ascent up Jacob's Ladder - one of the "Principal Rounds" for each Degree.

The notion of a "mystical ascent" was part and parcel of the Hermetic/Kabbalistic Tradition. It is a devotional practice during which the individual rises through the worlds of the soul and the spirit and at last finds himself in the presence of the Deity. Reuchlin describes such an ascent in *De Arte Kabbalistica*;¹⁷ another can be found in the *Hermetica* volumes.¹⁸ Some of these ascents are deeply Christian in their character. In *De Occulta*

¹⁶ Emulation Ritual, First Lecture, Second Section

¹⁷ Reuchlin, J. op. cit. Book Three p277. The Ascent described by Reuchlin is achieved by means of contemplation of the Divine Name and Seventy Two selected from the Psalms

¹⁸ Henetica, trans., Scott, W., (Boston, Shambhala, 1993) LIBELLVS 1, p. 129 is an example of a seven level ascent in an astrological idiom.

Philosophia Agrippa "...rises through the three worlds, the elemental world, the celestial world, the super celestial world...where he is in contact with angels, where the Trinity is proved...the Hebrew names of God are listed, though the Name of Jesus is now the most powerful of all Names."¹⁹

Let us look now at how these ideas are represented in the Second Degree. We will find that the Second Degree Tracing Board is a detailed drawing of a part of the First. Of what part? Of the man who was standing in the landscape.

III. The Second Degree Tracing Board

The thing that stands out about the Second Degree Board in Figure 7 is that it is an illustration of an interior. This is a marked contrast with the previous Board which seems to be an exterior.

Although this is an interior, it is the interior of a very unusual building. Notice the sun. We do not usually find the sun shining inside buildings. This tells us that for all the fine detail shown in the drawing, we are not looking at the representation of a physical structure. It is a representation of Solomon's Temple, to be sure; but not the historic Temple in Jerusalem. Here we should remember that the Great Light tells us, "Ye are the Temple"; symbolizing the Temple that each of us represents.

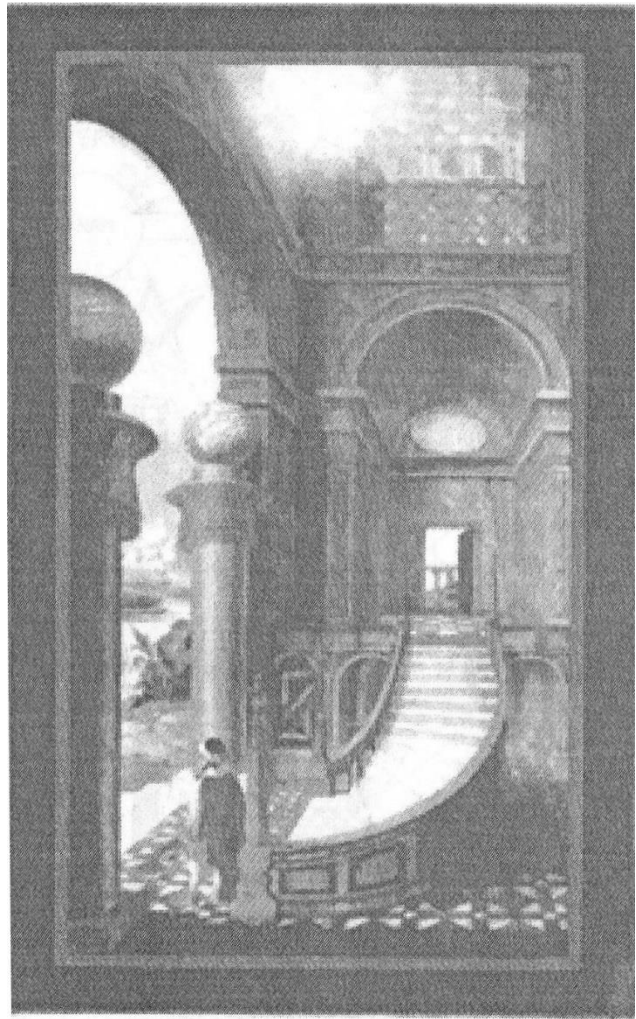


Figure 7

¹⁹ Yates, Frances A., *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, (London, RKP, 1979) p. 63

Moreover, the drawing is designed in such a way as to suggest that the Mason who embarks on the Second Degree comes from the outdoors (the world) and enters the Temple (his own being) to continue his eastward journey. The "ear of corn by the fall of water" suggest a situation of natural maturation and fruition which enables the individual to do that.

The next striking thing about the Board is the fact that once again we have two columns (also representing opposites) with a ladder (it has become a staircase) between them. This is a configuration that causes me to think of this as a detailed drawing of the "person" we saw in the previous drawings. What all this suggests is that the individual who embarks on the Second Degree, having learned the general philosophical lessons in the First, is about to undertake some interior journey. The idea certainly fits with the Renaissance view which, as we have seen, considered the approach to the Deity to be an interior journey, an ascent in the mind, through the soul and spirit.

The Masonic Lectures assign two sets of characteristics to these two pillars which suggest they also represent paired opposites: first, they are said to be a memorial of the Pillar of Cloud and the Pillar of Fire that guided the Children of Israel (by day and night, respectively) during the Exodus; and second, on their tops they have representations of the Celestial and Terrestrial Spheres.²⁰ Like Jacob's Ladder on the First Degree Board, the Staircase forms the central column of this "three pillar model". The Mason is expected to "climb" this symbolic staircase in the course of his life as he does symbolically during the ritual; and the Masonic symbolism sets out a curriculum for him which will facilitate that ascent. This particular drawing shows fifteen steps, as do all of the Second Degree Boards drawn by Harris that I have seen. Personally, I am inclined to think that the fifteen steps are an innovation.

²⁰ Emulation Working, Explanation of the Second Degree Tracing Board

Earlier Tracing Boards and Masonic Diagrams such as Figure 8 (c. 1801) show the staircase with only seven steps. I don't suggest that these early tracing boards omit any of the material related to the fifteen steps with which contemporary Masons are familiar. Rather, the Masonic Lectures suggest that there are only seven steps, with the three included in the five, and the five included in the seven.²¹ The Lectures in the Emulation Working suggest this idea.

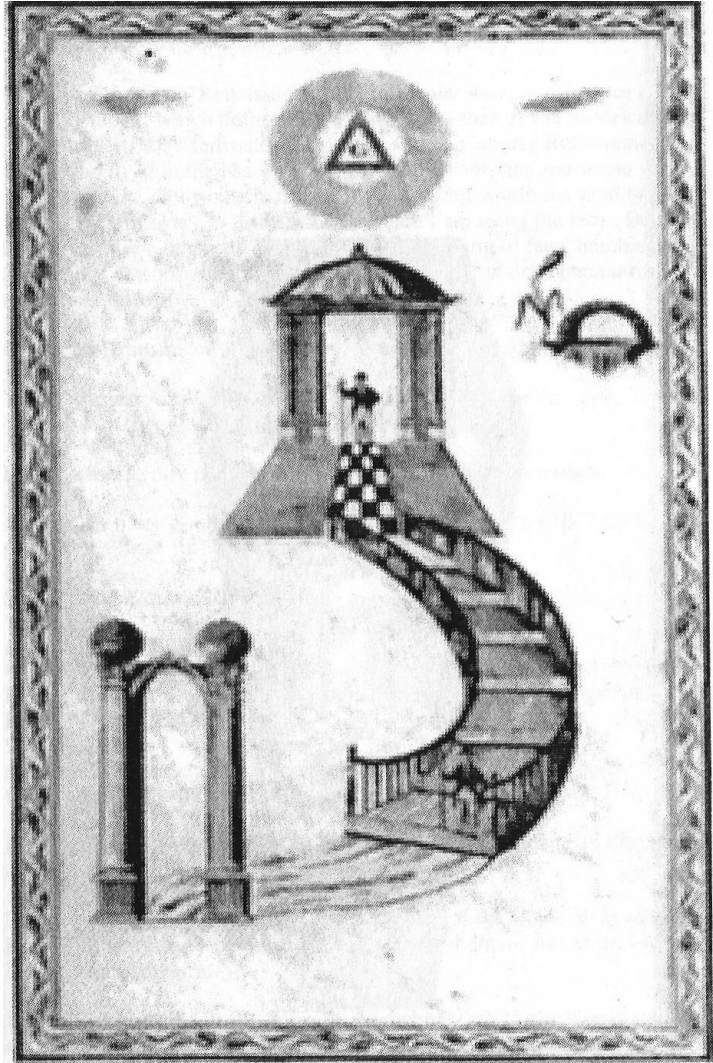


Figure 8

As we have seen, the literature of the Renaissance is replete with mystical ascents, and it seems to me, that the Staircase outlines seven stages through which one must pass on such an interior journey. Masonic Lectures relating to the Staircase associate a good deal of information with each of the various steps; specifically, the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences are related to the seven steps and the Five Classical Orders of Architecture are related to the top five. These subjects comprised the formal educational curriculum of the period, and there is a large body of literature associated with each. The intent of that curriculum was certainly to give the student an orientation toward the sort of contemplative intellectual work we are discussing.

²¹ Emulation Ritual, Second Lecture, Fourth Section

If we consider the Staircase to be a representation of levels of consciousness through which the individual must ascend, we can see that the symbol refers the Mason to a body of knowledge about each step, or level of consciousness, through which he must pass along the way. The Masonic explanation of the Staircase also associates the seven Officers of the Lodge with the seven steps and three principal characters from Masonry's traditional history with the three highest steps. That association assists in the understanding of progress through the positions of the Officers of the Lodge and in the interpretation of some Masonic Legends.

The Staircase leads to a room called the Middle Chamber where Masons were said to go to receive their wages. I would like to speak about it only briefly. In that interior room (interior to the Mason himself) the individual is able to see a representation of the Deity. He also has access to a Perfect Ashlar. A Perfect Ashlar is a building stone which has been completed and is ready to be placed in the building. It is found in the Middle Chamber "...for the experienced Craftsmen to try and adjust their jewels (tools) on."²² I don't want to talk about working tools at this time, but Masons will recognize that the Fellowcraft's tools are tools of measurement and testing, that two of them measure against absolute criteria which are opposite one another, while the third defines the relationship between the other two. Given an environment in which paired opposites are held in balance by a coordinating agency, those tools sound to me like a functional model of morality. Tools of morality, together with the Perfect Ashlar, a standard against which to calibrate them, all found in an interior Middle Chamber (within the Mason's own being) seems to me to be a pregnant idea. All this happens in the place where one "...receives his wages..." that is, where he gets what he deserves. The fact that all this takes place *within one's own being* is worth thinking about. It gives an interesting insight into the attitude and intent of the people who formulated this "system of morality".

²² Emulation Ritual, First Degree Tracing Board

IV. The Third Degree Tracing Board

The Grave

I am not going to talk very much about the Tracing Board in Figure 9. Let me say, however, that I do not think that this image refers to physical death. During the renaissance (as in most periods of Christian history) there was a good deal of discussion among the intelligentsia about the nature of the biblical story of "The Fall of Man" and its effect.²³ To them "The Fall" seems to have referred to some event by which human beings, who were at one time conscious of the Divine Presence, lost that consciousness. One of their conclusions was that ordinary human life, as it we live it on a day-to-day basis (that is, after the fall) is "like death"²⁴ when compared to human potential and to a life lived in the conscious presence of God. It seems to me that one interpretation of the grave suggests such a "death" to be our present state. The plant growing at the top

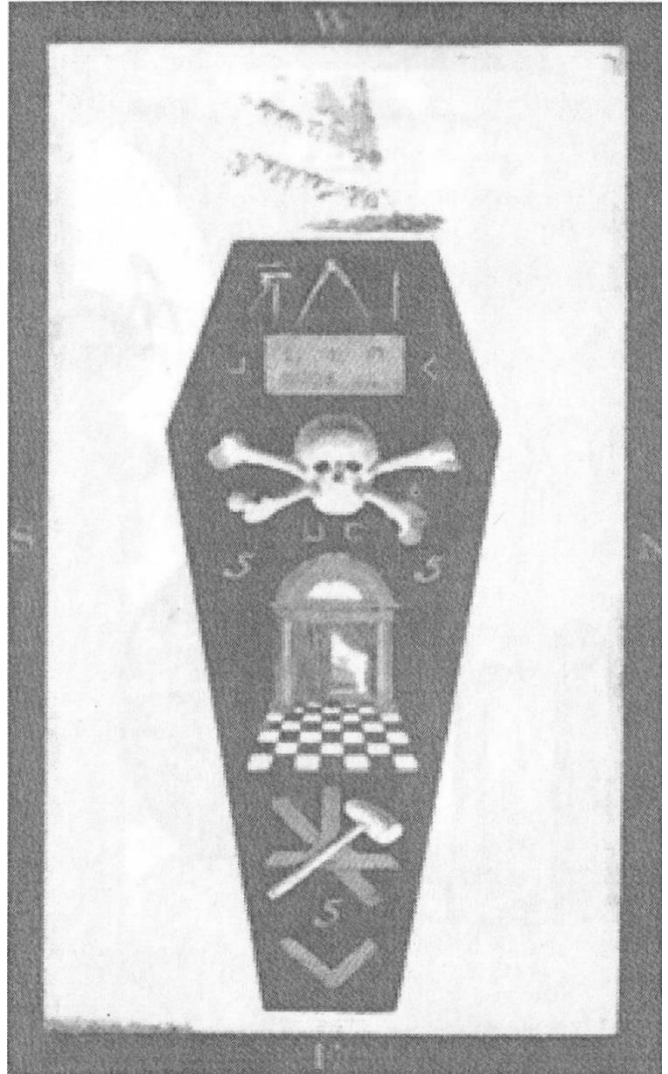


Figure 9

of the grave suggests first, that we are like vegetables when compared to our potential; and second, that there is a spark of life which can be encouraged. In this sense the plant refers to the possibility of regaining our original Divine connection.

²³ Reuchlin, J. op cit. Book One, pp. 70-3

²⁴ For a good presentation of this concept, as well as an introduction of the Art of Music as it is understood as part of the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences, see Streich, Hildamare, Alchemy and Psychology in Atalanta Eualens of Michael Maier. This essay can be found in Maier, M., Atalanta Fugiens, trans. / ed. Godwin, J. (Grand Rapids, MI, Phanes, 1992) p80.

The view of the Temple shows "King Solomon's Porch" which is said to be the entrance to the "Holy of Holies". In the picture the veil is drawn back a little offering a glimpse into that chamber where the Deity was said to reside. This suggests that at the end of the journey from West to East some process analogous to death enables the individual to experience the presence of the Deity. After this process has occurred he lives once more at his full potential. Again, I think that this refers neither to a physical resurrection after physical death nor to a life after physical death; both ideas are the concerns of religion. It seems to me that this refers to a psychological/spiritual process which can occur within any devout individual who seeks it earnestly and which I believe it to be the business of Freemasonry to encourage. After all we claim to be Freemasons, and this is the Truth the knowing of which "makes you free".

Points of the Compass

There is one last thing we should note. We saw earlier that Masons "traveled" from West to East. "They traveled East in search of instruction, and West to propagate the knowledge they had gained", as the Lecture in the First Degree has it. Notice that on this Board the cardinal compass points have been reversed, and West is now at the top where East was on the First Degree Board. It suggests that the Master Mason (in fact, not simply in titular rank), the individual who is represented by the symbolism depicted here, has changed his orientation and started his Westward journey. It is a journey involving the teaching and charitable nurturing of those who follow - with all the obligations that sort of thing implies.

V. Conclusion

Some of the things we've looked at and talked about today may seem to be a little bit abstract. They may strike you as interesting, perhaps; but not of great practical value. I would like to suggest an historical perspective. The way of thinking which I have outlined by the use of Masonic symbolism is a profoundly noble view of humankind. It was the very core of the European thought about human beings for more than 300 years. At the end of that period, in the late 1600's and early 1700's, a great many very interesting things occurred in Europe; two of them are related directly to human individuals. First, in Northern Europe (at first in England and Holland) we observe for the first time a form of government which we can call "democracy". The Greeks conceived of the idea, but nobody ever carried it off until this attitude toward mankind had prevailed for 300 years. Second, in the same geographical area and at the same time we observe that the governments of Europe consciously abandoned the use of torture as an instrument of policy. Two very significant events.

These ideas about the nature of human beings have been lost from our contemporary, very materialistic society; maybe, in part, because the Craft has stopped teaching them. Maybe these ideas about human beings are worth thinking about, perhaps even worth teaching again.