A PREFACE TO MASONIC SYMBOLISM

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IT is not so long ago that a learned man could take all knowledge for his province. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century it seemed to Preston entirely feasible to sum up all human learning and expound its main principles to the ordinary hearer in three lectures. At the end of that century men believed that a learned jurist by sheer reasoning might work out by himself a complete code to govern all men in all places in all times. Even later compendia of universal knowledge were projected seriously. In the nineteenth century men's attitude changed completely. Reaction from this boundless faith in the intellect, born of the Renaissance, led to an era of separate sciences, of minute subdivision of learning, of distinct fields of knowledge intensively cultivated by individual scholars. In place of the general schemes of knowledge, we got narrowly limited, water-tight compartment sciences, each self- sufficient, each content to rest on its own basis, and each assured of finding within itself a critique of itself.

All learning in the last century suffered from the self-imposed narrowness of this water-tight compartment conception. But Masonic learning suffered peculiarly. For modern Masonic learning had its inception in the eighteenth century and had still to go through some preliminary stages of development when it found itself cut off from learning at large and divided into separate, self-sufficient compartments. Thus we got a Masonic history without general historical method, a Masonic philosophy divorced from the general current of human thought, and a Masonic symbolism ignorant of psychology. Nowhere is the process of breaking down compartments and letting in air and light from the outside, a process that is going on rapidly on every side nowhere is this more needed than in Masonic learning. Gould long ago did this work thoroughly for Masonic history. But it is still to be done for Masonic symbolism. We must view this subject for a season as but a phase of a general science of symbols; we must lay its foundation not only in Masonic history, nor solely in the history of rites and mysteries, but in psychology as well.

Symbols are visible objects which apart from their own immediate and proper

significance, represent to the mind something which is not shown but is realized by association with it; some ideal content which the symbols suggest, but cannot embody. They are said to be of two sorts, natural symbols and conventional symbols. In the former phrase "natural" is used in the sense of rational and refers to those symbols which appeal to natural reason and so achieve their purpose with the unlearned. Conventional symbols, on the other hand, have their basis in tradition and appeal only to those who know. The former may or may not be new. At any rate, they rest on analogies that are associated with the ideas of today, as, for example, when light is taken as a symbol for knowledge or truth, black for mourning, and so on. But it will be perceived that often in such cases we have simply a strong traditional association without any necessary association for all men in the absence of tradition. In consequence, well-known symbols may easily be borrowed and put to new uses, as many assert happened in the case of more than one pagan symbol taken over by the early church. Thus there is an easy transition from one type of symbol to the other. Traditional or conventional symbols rest on habitual rather than rational association with the subjects they suggest. In origin, no doubt, they were natural symbols. But after the circumstances that determined their choice have passed away, constant association with the object symbolized, kept alive by tradition, enables them still to function as symbols. A great many Masonic symbols are of this character, as, for example, the shape of the lodge, symbolizing the world, or the triads, of which Masonry in all rites is so full, symbolizing perfection.

Natural symbols require little or no study or exposition. But as the analogies upon which traditional or conventional symbols proceed have usually ceased to appeal to us, as the ideas that suggested them have been forgotten and sometimes their applications have been wholly lost, exposition of them, investigation of their history, and attempts to reconstruct their applications afford a tempting field for study. The Masonic student is attracted to them specially because symbols are among the most important of our traditions. Our ceremonies themselves are largely allegorical or symbolic and employ symbols at every stage and on every hand. To make the most of these symbols they must be studied. Accordingly, apart from its interest as a pure science, the study of symbols has a practical side for the Mason and symbolism has

been recognized from the beginning as one of the chief departments of Masonic scholarship.

Psychologists have generally rested symbolism upon association. Some, however, have sought a more intimate connection. Thus Lotze says of symbols in art, "We live over again in the object the motion to produce it." Symbols are obviously associated with the things symbolized. But many have felt that there is a sympathy involved that is not true of ordinary associations. It has been said that there is "an investiture of the object with the observer's own idea and feeling in a more intimate manner than is implied by the term association." This controversy as to the psychological basis of symbolism has gone on chiefly in connection with aesthetics and the conclusions reached are not very applicable to Masonic symbolism. Unhappily, no Masonic student of symbolism has taken up this fundamental question.

Another branch of learning which has been much concerned with symbols is logic. Here the theory of symbols has been treated fully, especially in connection with the nature of knowledge. Thus Leibnitz distinguished between intuitive and symbolical knowledge. The word "intuitive," so used, is deceptive. Leibnitz took it in its original, etymological meaning, in which it refers to what we know by looking on it or by seeing. Accordingly he uses the phrase to include all knowledge which we gain directly through the senses or by immediate communication to the mind. Symbolical knowledge, on the other hand, is that which we cannot gain directly through the senses, which, therefore, must be represented to us. Thus writers on logic remind us that we may learn by the direct evidence of our senses what a square or a hexagon is, but we cannot expect to earn in this way what a chiliagon or figure of one thousand sides is. If one doubts this, let him attempt y looking at them to tell the difference between a figure of one thousand sides and one of a thousand and fine sides. Such conceptions can be known to us only symbolically. And this is true of all large numbers also, for the velocity of light (186,000 miles per second) or the distance of the sun (91,000,000 miles) are beyond reach of our imaginations. So we speak of infinity, of zero, of nothing. But there is nothing here that may be perceived through the senses; nor can one realize in the mind, such conceptions as "the

unthinkable," the inconceivable," the "impossible," about which we speak continually. Such things are only to be treated symbolically.

Symbols, then, enable us to know what we cannot now directly through the senses and enable us to keep in mind or to keep before the mind what is not and cannot be directly and immediately represented to it. Hence symbols play a great part in all that we do. Art is largely symbolic, endeavoring to present to us through symbols what we cannot apprehend directly. Religion uses symbols in the same way "as sensuous emblems of spiritual acts and objects." Ritual is symbolic, and so are even the sacraments in one aspect of their significance. In this aspect religion often makes use of art. For as the objects of religion are unseen and intangible, there is obvious need of "helping the imagination by means of sensuous objects which may serve as fitting materializations of the spiritual." Even the architecture of churches is symbolic. The building is not merely adapted to certain functions. Even more, the very form of the building seeks to express the spiritual import of those functions.

Symbols are no less important in practical affairs. Large parts of mathematics are symbolic. Chemistry is full of symbols. Even in biology we are coming to think that genus and species are symbols by which we are able to represent knowledge of types, none too clearly defined, in a universe of infinitely diverse individual creatures.

No less a role is played by symbols in the social sciences. In primitive law symbols are used on every side, since primitive man has no general ideas and the abstractions of developed legal science are beyond him. He cannot conceive of litigation over an abstraction called a title, so in the beginnings of Roman law a bit of turf from the land in dispute was brought in before the magistrate and the parties went through the form of a fight for the possession of it, in which the magistrate intervened. If a flock of sheep was in dispute, a bit of wool from the flock was the subject of the simulated fight, and so on. Again, the Roman used the spear as a symbol of title to property, and Tacitus tells us of a like symbol among the ancient Germans. All Masons know the Jewish symbol in case of sale and redemption. In our own law the formal ceremony of conveying land by livery of seisin was highly symbolic, and we still speak of symbolic possession where one makes delivery in

case of gift, for example, by delivering the key by means of which the donee may obtain actual control.

Likewise in government symbols are made use of to keep before men's minds the idea of sovereignty, to enable them to comprehend the abstraction called the State, to hold up before them some visible sign of authority. The king is a symbol. His image, his monogram, his superscription stand for the State to many who can keep before their minds the ownership and the rights of George and the duties due to Alfonso or Victor Emmanuel when the State as an abstraction would appeal to them but dimly. In the same way we speak of loyalty to the flag, love of the flag, and the like, thinking and speaking of the visible symbol rather than the invisible and intangible things for which the symbol stands. So also we speak of Uncle Sam or John Bull as symbols for the abstractions of the American or the English people. Sociology devotes much consideration to ceremonial institutions as means of social control. But these are symbolic. Homage, coronation, investiture, inauguration, are outward signs of something which is not tangible or visible. Says Professor Ross:

"The picturesque, dramatic, or sensational will serve to impress an event upon the memory; hut the ceremony that modifies the feelings must be full of meaning. It dwells on what would be overlooked, reminds of that significance that would be forgotten, and so reveals the full significance of what is being done."

Such, then, are the uses of symbols. They enable us to reason abstractly; to extend our knowledge far beyond what we can know immediately and directly through the senses; to hold before us through the aid of a visible sign things invisible and intangible which are of the highest import in our daily life. They enable government to keep men conscious of its reality. They enable society to exert a necessary control by keeping before men in outward forms and ceremonies the abstract principles by which they must be governed in a life measured by reason.

On the other hand, symbols are liable to abuse, and some of these abuses have crept into Masonic symbolism. The chief abuse is that symbols readily lead the careless to confuse the symbol with the thing symbolized, to think that there is some real bond between them other than association in the mind of the observer. This

may easily run into nominalism; it may give rise to a belief that realities are wrapped up in names, that if one knows the name of anything, he knows the thing itself, and that in reasoning about names he is reasoning about things. "There is no worse habit for a student or reader to acquire," says William James, "than that of accepting words instead of a knowledge of things." Look at our Fellow Craft lecture and note how it is full of definitions. We have had to learn in other connections, too, that one has by no means mastered a thing simply because he is able to repeat an abstract definition of it.

Another abuse of symbolism is to be seen in the idea that a symbol not merely helps to comprehend a thing but thereby gives us control over it. We see this in its crudest form in witchcraft, when the warlock makes a wax figure of his victim and puts the latter to the torture of rheumatism by sticking the figure full of needles. We see it in its highest form in metaphysics. Thus, William James says: "Metaphysics has usually followed a very primitive kind of quest. You know how men have always hankered after unlawful magic and you know what a great part in magic words have always played. If you have his name . . . you can control the spirit or whatever the power may be. . . . So the universe has always appeared to the natural mind as a kind of enigma of which the key must be sought in the shape of some illuminating or power-bringing word or name. That word names the universe's principle, and to possess it is after a fashion to possess the universe itself.... Matter, Reason, the Absolute, Energy, are so many solving names. You can rest when you have them. You are at the end of your metaphysical quest." Many study symbolism in the same way, consciously or subconsciously, as if by penetrating into the original meaning of symbols, as disclosed by their history, or the true meaning of them as disclosed by logical or mystical principles of symbolism, they could acquire some sort of control of realities, some sort of power over the universe.

With this prelude as to symbols generally, a preface to Masonic symbolism may proceed to the primitive uses of symbols and next to the philosophical use of symbols, thus paving the way for a treatment of the Masonic use of symbols as a resultant or product.

Primitive society resorts to symbols for four purposes: (1) To convey messages, (2) to give instruction, (3) as a means of social control, and (4) to obtain control over nature. Before alphabets and writing have evolved men make use of ideographs and hieroglyphics, which sometimes attain their ends by picturing the very thing to be suggested to the beholder, but often appeal to the latter symbolically. Thus the Chinese ideograph for what we should call "a row" is a conventionalized picture of two women under one roof. For symbolism seems to play a much larger role in human psychology than we had perceived. A great part of what we do subconsciously is symbolic. Indeed psychologists believe that our dreams are largely symbolic. The undeveloped primitive mind, incapable of abstract reasoning, proceeds subconsciously by means of symbols.

Primitive teaching proceeds wholly by imitation and by symbols. What is not done by simple imitation of the master, is done by imparting the symbol and explaining it. Thus the primitive tribe inducts the boy into manhood by symbolic ceremonies to teach him that the boy is no more and that a man with a man's duties and a man's responsibilities has arisen in his place. Even more the primitive secret societies that grow out of these ceremonies employ symbolic dress and symbolic implements. One phase of this use of symbols has attracted much attention from Masonic scholars. It has been asserted that the ancients used symbols at the same time to teach the initiated and to conceal from the uninitiated. Albert Pike dwells much upon this aspect of ancient symbolism. No doubt there are such cases in primitive rites. But it is hard to be sure that we have any authentic cases since we are in no very good position to judge. It is seldom possible to be sure how such symbols were meant to be interpreted. There are, however, clear cases in later symbolism, and eighteenth-century French Masonry furnishes a notable example in its teaching of liberty of thought under the symbol of a contest for liberty of passage a symbol known to one of our rites today. It is not unlikely that this device is as old as symbolism.

The chief use of symbols in primitive society is as a means of social control. Primitive man forgets authority unless its visible sign is always before him. He forgets his duty unless the duty is visibly represented to him. Law and order as abstractions have no hold on him. They must be kept before his mind by symbols.

The gods must be represented to his eyes by idols or statues or he cannot regard them. In short, morals, religion, and government get and keep their hold upon him largely through symbols. Hence symbolism is highly developed among primitive peoples and primitive secret societies have independently more than one symbol of which we speak and think as Masonic only.

Developing confidence from these notable achievements by means of symbols, primitive man becomes ambitious of greater things and seeks to control external nature in the same way. This attempt to control the thing symbolized through the symbol gives us, along with magic, the crude beginnings of metaphysics and the crude beginnings of medicine. In the one case the quest is for a single simple principle of nature, wrapped up in some symbol, possession whereof will enable the possessor to direct natural forces; in the other there is a quest for the fundamental principle of disease in general or of some particular disease, which again is to be wrapped up in some symbol whereby the disease may be controlled. To primitive man the occult was a serious practical business. He looked upon it as we look upon physics or upon the study of electricity.

It was a means whereby nature might be harnessed to man's use. We make a great mistake today when we attribute any more profound significance to primitive symbols of this type.

Passing to symbolism in philosophy, we may begin with the Pythagoreans. For even if we may not for other than ritualistic purposes refer to him as "our ancient friend and Brother," Masons must always feel a kinship to Pythagoras because he called symbolism to the aid of cosmology. Prior to Socrates the problem of philosophy was to lay hold upon the original ground or basis of things which outlasts all change; to discover how this original basis changes into the particular things which we see about us, and how it changes these things back into itself. The Milesians sought to find this original basis of the universe in some element. The Atomists sought it in primordial indivisible constituents of matter. The Eleatics sought it in a unity of nature. Heraclitus thought he had found it in a perpetual but rhythmical flux or change. Attacking the same problem, the Pythagoreans conceived that this

permanent being which men were seeking was to be found in numbers. They held that in contrast with changing things of experience, numbers, as regards their content, possess a validity independent of time; that they are eternal, without beginning, imperishable, unchangable, immovable. Thus, so they reasoned, numbers possess the unity and permanence sought by the Eleatics and the rhythmical order insisted on by Heraclitus. They found the abiding essence of the universe in mathematical relations, particularly in numbers, and as their solution was more abstract than that of the Milesians, more possible to represent to the imagination than that of the Eleatics, and far clearer than that of Heraclitus, naturally it had much influence.

But the Pythagorean solution of the problem of cosmology readily went into symbolism. For they believed that in the antithesis between the limited and the unlimited they recognized the antithesis between the odd and the even in numbers, and they identified this antithesis with that between the perfect and the imperfect, the good and the bad. They put over against the limited, the odd, the perfect, and the good; antithesis of the limitless, the even, the imperfect, and the bad. Yet they conceived that both principles were united in the number one, which had the value both of an even and of an odd number, so that in the universe as a whole these antitheses were adjusted to form a harmony. In other words, they conceived of the universe as a harmony of numbers, and with this idea they exerted themselves to make an order of things corresponding to the system of numbers by assigning the fundamental conceptions in every department of knowledge to various numbers and on the other hand by assigning to every individual number, especially to those from one to ten, determining significance in the various spheres of reality. As Windelband says: "The fantastic nature of the symbolic interpretation into which they fell in doing this must . . . not cause us to overlook the fact that the attempt was made thereby to recognize an abiding order of things which could be grasped and expressed in conceptions and to find the ultimate ground of this order in mathematical conceptions." In a phrase, the Pythagoreans attempted to comprehend and represent the universe by means of mathematical symbols. Thus they have a real place in the history of human thought. But today we have better ways of trying to

comprehend and represent the universe. We do little honor to the Pythagoreans when we solemnly retail the letter of their speculations as if they had some intrinsic validity, when their true significance lies in their attitude toward and their spirit of approach to a great philosophical problem. Let us approach the modern problem of philosophy with the same determination to achieve a reasoned result whereby permanence and stability may be assured, rather than continue to repeat the details of their speculations as to the exact numerical equivalent of this or that. Otherwise symbols be come our masters rather than our servants.

Thus far the task of philosophy has been to comprehend external nature and to represent it. After Socrates the interest in philosophy turned from the outside of man to the inside, and when, following the the conquests of Alexander the Great, in the period of decadence after the great age of Greek intellectual activity, the Helenistic culture spread over the civilized world, the revived symbolism of the Neo-Platonists was a higher symbolism, for it attempted to symbolize the spiritual. They thought of the world immediately the about us as chiefly significant in pointing the way to a higher world. Its value was not in what it was but in what it revealed. It was the sign and symbol of a higher being. Thus their doctrine, instead of seeking symbols of the actual world of sense, treated that world as having a symbolic character. Presently there came a succession of debasements of this philosophy in the writings of the Hellenizing Theosophists, the mass of writings that go by the name of Hermes Trismegistus, the Gnostics, and later the Cabbala. Albert Pike has studied these attentively and has revived much of their elaborate symbolism- But this symbolism is quite void of meaning for us if we are ignorant of its philosophical pedigree, and when we are able to comprehend it we can but see that there are better ways to represent the more critical metaphysical knowledge of the modern world.

With the revival of learning that ushered in the world of today there came presently a revival of symbolism in philosophical thought. The Middle Ages were wholly dominated by Aristotle, whose powerful intellect, perhaps "the most powerful ever possessed by any man," was yet limited to the exterior of things and unable to reach beneath to the hidden forces by which things are moved. "It was natural," says Benn, "that one who ranged with such consummate mastery over the whole world of

apparent reality, should believe in no other reality.. . . The visible order of nature was present to his imagination in such precise determination and fulness of detail that it resisted any attempt he might have made to conceive it under a different form." When the reign of Aristotle came to an end and men sought once more to comprehend and to represent the unseen and the unseeable, a flood of symbolistic writing resulted. Chemistry has its roots in the half charlatan symbolism of Alchemy. The symbolic medicine of the revolt from Galen has an important place in the history of modern medicine, and the hermetic philosophers, who busied themselves with alchemy and symbolic medicine and attempted to adapt and apply the fusions of Oriental mysticism and NeoPlatonic symbolism of the Hellenistic decadence, are in the right line of descent of our Masonic symbols.

Later the rationalism of the age of "enlightenment" turned men away from symbolism. For a time men's faith in reason was boundless. The age of Preston cared nothing for symbols except as they might be made convenient vehicles of rational instruction. Indeed Preston indulges in an obvious sneer at those who would employ symbols otherwise than to impart "wise and serious truths." And when presently reaction from this age of reason came with the Romanticists of the nineteenth century, it was felt chiefly in art, and the revival of symbolism was most conspicuous in aesthetics. There was no adequate philosophical apparatus to guide the revived Masonic symbolism of Pike, snow in consequence the subject is still disfigured by too much of Hermetic charlatanism. With the clearer light afforded by psychology and the gesture appreciation of the role of symbols in man's subconscious life and the effects thereof upon his conscious activities which it reveals we may hope presently for a more truly scientific study of our mass of traditional symbols. This will build, indeed, upon the historical studies of Pike and will use much of the results of his instinct for interpretation. But it will have a critical method unknown to his time that will enable Pike's successor in Masonic symbolism to do for that subject what Gould did for Masonic history. And so with one further suggestion this preface to that work may be brought to an end. As we now think, things are important not so much for what they are as for what they do. Institutions are significant functionally rather than intrinsically. Thus our student of Masonic

symbols will investigate the history of the symbols employed by the Craft and will seek their original meanings and the development of their interpretations. But above all he will ask, and will seek to know by means of their history and their development, how they function today, what they teach today, and how they teach it, and even more what they may teach and how we may make them effective for teaching it.