

On the Symbols and Their Meaning

A Discourse on Symbolism
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by

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Translated by

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Beloved Sisters and Brothers,

To seek the Truth, it is necessary to be free of all the passions. Unhappiness is what they inspire in us from birth, which gives, as said Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, the first shock to our reason.

They place here, for the fundamental basis of our actions and our opinions, this famous maxim: Make a fortune.

It happens from here that we no longer see anything but that which has some relation with this desire. The natural truths even disappear for us, because we no longer see nature but in machines or in books.

"Let us live first, then we will come to Wisdom."

Then, in order to live, they have recourse to every means, and everywhere men, widespread in commerce, industry, finance, administration, etc., appear here as so many bugs in a bedstead.

In it necessary to live!

If, for many among these men, Religion is a pretext, for many others Masonry is but a means.

Do not speak to them of Morals: that has no currency in the Stock Exchange, nor in any market, and it is purely the affair of the constabulary. Do not speak to them of Symbolism: this sort of puzzle no longer interests them.

Well, we, Martinists, who have not this mentality of careerists and impudent parasites, examine a little the question of Symbols, in order to see whether we will discover something more useful to Humanity than the ignorant indifference of these gentlemen.

The sole aim of religion, said the Br.'. Priestly, is to make men better in order to make them happier.

To this, Br.'. Volney responded: There are really in the world but two Religions: the one of good sense and beneficence, and the one of malice and hypocrisy.

If Volney had given some attention to the History of Religions and in particular the History of the first times of Christianity, he would not have spoken thus, and he would not have come to say, like Br.'. Dupuy said in his *Origine de tous les Cultes*, that Religion was a madness and a monstrosity.

To demonstrate this, these two writers have not delayed to examine the doctrines; they are content to scratch the surface of the Symbols a little, and, in carrying out this scratching, they have happened to discover that the Vishnu of the Indians was but one of the thousand emblems of the Sun in Egypt, and that the incarnations of this god in fish, boar, lion, tortoise, etc., were only the metamorphoses of the radiant star passing successively through the signs of the twelve animals. The Japanese Bull which broke the Egg of the world was but the one of the heavens which, formerly, opened the age of creation, the Spring Equinox. This Bull was also the animal which, under the name of the *Apis Ox*, was worshipped in Egypt,

and that the Jews worshipped too in the idol of the *Golden Calf*. This Bull was likewise the one which, sacrificed in the *Mysteries of Mithra*, poured out a fertile blood for the world. It is likewise the Ox of the Apocalypse, with its wings, symbol of the air; and the *Lamb* of the Christians, like the Bull of Mithra, sacrificed for the salvation of the world, was only ever the same Sun in the sign of the celestial Ram, which, in a later age, opens the Equinox in its turn, delivers the world from the reign of Evil, that is to say from the constellation of the Serpent, from that great snake, mother of the Winter and emblem of Arhiman, the Satan of the Persians.

Finally, the entire basis of religious systems was the Cult of the Sun. It was the Sun which, under the name of Orus, or Jesus, was born at the Winter Solstice, in the arms of the Celestial Virgin. It was the sun which, under the name of *Osiris*, which presented with Typhon and the tyrants of the air, was put to death, enclosed in a dark tomb, emblem of the hemisphere of Winter, and which, then, rising again from the inferior zone to the culminating point of the heavens, resurrects, vanquisher of giants and destroyer angels. The tonsure of the Catholic priest was but the disc of the Sun; the stole, its Zodiac; the rosary the emblem of the Stars and Planets. The miter, the cross, the cloak of the pontiffs and the prelates, were but those of *Osiris*. The Christian cross was that of Serapis, traced by the hand of the Egyptian priests over the plane of the figurative world; and this Cross, passing through the Equinoxes and Tropics, became, like the other, the emblem of the future life and the resurrection. The 12 labors of Hercules, the 12 tribes of Israel, the 12 apostles, all this was also the 12 signs of the Zodiac, the 12 months of the year, the 12 hours of the day.

It is thus that with great strokes of erudition, the BB. Dupuy and Volney have believed to demonstrate the madness and monstrosity of the Religions by attaching them all to the Cult of the Sun. How, they have not perceived that in striving to give to the Religions a common origin, they showed by the same that their founders and all read from the same Book of Nature - that admirable book which is not given to everyone to comprehend, and in which Saint-Yves d'Alveydre has been able to discover the Absolute, at the same time as the scientific basis of his Archéomètre.

It is a very grave fault, when one misinterprets the Symbolism of any Religion, discredits it by means of this interpretation, converts it into madness or monstrosity, and then attributes to it all the evils of the human race.

If, throughout the earth, they have often used Religions in order to do evil, it is no less true that they have been instituted to do good, and that none of them teach what is considered evil by the human Conscience. It is therefore a great inconsistency to reproach them for having shed blood, when they specifically forbid murder. The troubles which have devastated and still devastate the earth are born only from the Law of the strongest, and when pride, self-interest, egotism, and envy of enjoyment have become motives to make a fortune and the basis of all human conditions.

How, then, can the Religions be accused of precisely that which would not have taken place if their principles were engraved deeply in all hearts?

As to the malice and hypocrisy, of which Br. Volney has made a Religion, they are truly the weapons of the strongest, but the strongest have in vain covered themselves with the mask of Religion; the Religion cannot be confused with the mask, nor the abuse with the institution itself.

An illustrious Freemason, Br. Montesquieu, has said on this subject in his *Esprit des Lois*:

"It is wrong to argue against a Religion by assembling in a book a long enumeration of the evils that it has produced when one has misunderstood its spirit,

unless one does the same of the good that it has done *when they have followed its maxims*. If I wished to relate the abuse of the most necessary institutions, I would say frightful things; and certainly, the longer these institutions would have lasted, the easier it would be to accumulate the frightful things that one might say of it."

Under another form, Br.'. Voltaire has said, on page 13 of volume XLV of his *Œuvres*:

"A false science makes atheists, a true science prostrates man before the Divinity."

What makes up the foundation of all Religion is the Moral which is common to them. All work towards the same goal, which, as Br.'. Priestly has said, is to make men better in order to make them happier. Let the Moral of the Religions be graven in all hearts, there will be no more Law of the strongest, the exploitation of man by man no longer exists, all the evils which have afflicted and afflict the earth disappear.

In antiquity, all the Religions were connected between themselves by an invisible chain of Initiates, profoundly educated in all the sciences, and in general of all those who were to fulfill some charge of the state.

But, in the long run, corruption slid in a little everywhere, and we see kings who, in order to free themselves from every tutelage, to escape the salutary yoke imposed by their initiation, do not recoil before anything, in the name of the right of the strongest, when they wish to be despotic. The terrible fate of the Gymnossophists of Méroe is one of these examples which naturally come to mind, when one wants to show the reasons for which the Initiates, at certain epochs of History, have had to resolve themselves to living in secret in the midst of the Anarchy being born among men.

For, from the moment that the prince no longer wished for the censure of the Initiate, the lord delayed not to scoff at that of the prince, the bourgeois at that of the lord, and the artisan at that of the bourgeois.

As in all Religions, the Moral system of the Initiates - which have been perpetuated unto us under various appellations - was veiled by Symbols.

And here I come to the Masonic institution which, most certainly, was a renovation, a continuation of the ancient Mysteries, and which, it too, has its Symbols by which the Adepts, in introducing them into its midst, have expressed the great truths that prudence forbade them from making common.

One will quite agree with me that a profound and philosophical Symbolism, as is that of this Order, could not have been imagined by illiterate workers. These workers, as skillful as they were as Masons, were neither Alchemists nor Hermeticists, and certainly did not have the knowledge required to comprehend the doctrines contained in this Symbolism.

My opinion is that the philosophical meaning that it contains has only been known by those who gave themselves to certain studies, and that the Symbols, long before 1717, must have had another explanation for the operative Masons. It is possible that they had attached some symbolic moral sense to their tools, and even that they had had some particular Symbols, for the most common men have, in all times, used figures and signs to express some moral idea.

What is most certain is that, in our lands of Europe, have existed early philosophers dedicating their time to the study of the alchemical or Hermetic Sciences, and employing special terms and particular characters in order to hide, in their writings, dogmas that only men superiorly endowed could happen to discover. Elias Ashmole, writing under his name and also under the pseudonym of John Hasolle, was one of these philosophers and had had, as well as his contemporaries, a long series of predecessors, the traces of whom go back very far in History.

Now, several of the Symbols in use among them to explain their doctrines are found today in Masonry, notably the compass and the square, as we find them also in the forty-seventh problem of Pythagoras. To this last Symbol Masonry attaches no meaning, and to the others it accords only moral significations; but it is other Symbols whose meaning is quite superior.

As these Symbols, common to Masonry and Hermeticism, have been used in Hermeticism long before being in Masonry, we are necessarily led to conclude that, from the moment that Ashmole was a Mason, Masonry must have received them from Hermeticism.

We have the irrecusable proof that in the seventeenth century some Hermetic philosophers joined Masonry, and it is even probably that Ashmole had not been the first.

What could they learn among illiterate workers? Nothing. Not having any overt organization, it is possible that they had the idea to gather in the Lodges of Masonry called *operative*; but it is quite certain that the workers knew then neither the secret nor the doctrines of the Philosophers.

What is also beyond doubt, is that in one of the four Lodges of London which founded - regularly or irregularly - the Grand Lodge of England, there were bourgeois, nobles, officers, protestant ministers, scholars, and philosophers, having made special studies and pursuing some aim, and who had not come there simply to smoke pipes, drink pale ale, and speak of plaster and mortar with the workers, as honest and distinguished as they were.

It is therefore probably that, among these men, there were those who then introduced into Masonry the Hermetic Symbols, then imagined a teaching in three arts with the aim of communicating their doctrines - veiled under their particular Symbols - to those who were apt to receive them, and gave to all the others common moral explanations, the only ones that these latter could understand.

Many things come together to prove that the meaning of the Symbols has differed between the Lesser number and the Greater number. First, the attraction that Masonry has exercised over considerable personages and scholars; next the remarkable Preface of the book by Samber of which I will speak presently; then the real significance of that which they have substituted as the word of the master, the Sun, the Moon, etc.; finally, this fact, held for certain, that the word "Geometry" took one day the name of Masonry. All this is reinforced by the traditional bond attaching Masonry to the secret doctrine of Pythagoras, and also by the obligation to keep the secrets of the Middle Chamber.

I grant that the obligation to the Masonic secret is very ancient, and that Symbolism has existed in Masonry long before 1717; but the worker class of Masons could not have any knowledge, this knowledge being reserved to the superior intelligences who, of another class, gathered in Lodges. Remove these superior intelligences from the Lodges, the symbolism is no longer understood or no longer has its *raison d'être*. It is like in a parochial school, where the children do not know how to attach any importance to the algebraic signs that a teacher has traced on a board.

And this is so true that, even among the superior intelligences, there are found therein those who, waiting on others for explanations that they ought to discover by themselves, have been incapable of becoming perfect initiates.

Twenty-three years ago we had a striking example of this fact. A Mason, a very distinguished barrister, who was even chief commissioner of Parisian police, acknowledged that he was ignorant of the Masonic Rites and Dogmas, and the meanings of the Symbols. After this confession, he resigned and wrote publicly:

"Beloved Brethren, if you permit me to speak to you with that frankness to which the Pontiffs are not, any more than the Princes, accustomed, I will tell you: The time for reform is come, let enter into the Temple the spirit of critique and of free examination: your Rites and your Mysteries are antiquated and old-fashioned. Be of your time..."

The art of construction, to which are subjected the other arts, has had in its service the most brilliant intelligences and the greatest artists. The old Symbolism has been incorporated into the Churches and the Cathedrals, and some of these have been adorned with emblems and figures which would have never been tolerated if the Clergy had known what they signify for the Adepts.

There is, therefore, every reason to believe that it is in the Middle Ages, and not after Masonry had begun to decline, that the Philosophers, becoming Free Masons, have introduced their Symbolism into Masonry.

Evidently, these newcomers ought not to have brought Symbols whose meaning they would not have understood. Evidently, they ought not to have revealed them to workers little apt to understand them. When, then, in order to assure the existence of their association, the Philosophers formed and formulated the Masonic teaching that we know, and confided their old Symbols to the keep of the Lodges, it is quite clear that they should have kept to themselves the philosophical meaning of these Symbols, by giving to the workers only the moral explanation which they could grasp.

Such is the reason for which ignorance still prevails in the majority of the Masonic Lodges, where the *letter* has precedence over the *spirit*.

Consider, for example, the 47th problem that one sees among their Symbols. No explanation: it is, therefore, no longer a Symbol. It had, however, a profound meaning for Pythagoras, and we know what it was, through the Gáthás of the Zend-Avesta. But Plutarch had not known it. This meaning was already lost by his time, and the explanation that he gives thereof is as stupid as it is insignificant.

Look, now, at the numbers 3 and 4, which constitute the number 7. The Hermetic Philosophers made use of the 4, represented by the square, to symbolize the Earth or Nature, or the 4 elements, Fire, Air, Earth, and Water. But for Zarathustra, 4 represented, like the 4 arms of the Cross, the 4 masculine Energies of the Divinity, that is to say the Divine Wisdom, the Divine Word, the Divine Power, and the Divine Sovereignty; and 3, the feminine Potentialities of the Divinity across Nature, that is to say the Desire to propagate, Strength or Virility, and Vitality.

The fact that the meaning of many Symbols has been unknown to the mass of Masons does not prove that they possessed it and lost it.

It is more reasonable to think that they have never known it, because they were incapable of penetrating it, and that when the Symbols were a part of the Masonic Degrees, the explanation that they gave thereof was only that which we have today and which masks another, of which, most certainly, the BB. Dupuy and Volney have not dreamed.

I have just said that between the Lesser number and the Greater number the meaning of the Symbols differed, and, on this subject, I have given as proof the Preface of a book written in 1721 by Br. Robert Samber.

I am coming to it.

All those who, among you, occupy themselves with Occultism, know that the name of Philalethes, adopted later by a Masonic Rite founded in Paris, was put into use, as a collective nom-de-plume, by a long series of Hermetic Philosophers.

Thus, *Eugenius Philalethes* was the pseudonym of the celebrated Thomas Vaughan; *Eireneus Philalethes*, that of Georges Starkey; *Irenaeus Philalethes*, that of William Spang, Burckhard, Louis Dumoulin, Samuel Prypowski, etc.

Well, in 1722, just one year before the publication of the first Constitutions of the Grand Lodge of England, appeared at London, under the signature *Eugenius Philalethes Junior*, Member of the Royal Society, a little booklet entitled "Long Livers," *Dedicated to the Grand Master, Masters, Wardens, and Brothers of the Most Ancient and Honourable Fraternity of the Freemasons of Great Britain and Ireland.*

This is of a very great importance, as you are going to see, for *Eugenius Philalethes Junior* was none other than a writer otherwise known as Br.'. Robert Samber, member of the Royal Society, and intimately connected with the Br.'. duc de Montagut, Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of England, to whom, elsewhere, he has given - in another of his writings signed by his real name - the title of "best of teachers, best of friends, best of benefactors."

In the Preface of his book dedicated to the Grand Master, his friend, here then is how the Hermetic Philosopher *Eugenius Philalethes*, otehrwise known as Br.'. Robert Samber, expressed himself:

Gentlemen, Brothers,

I address myself to you in this manner, because it is the true language of the Fraternity, and because the primitive Christian Brethren, as well as those who were from the beginning, have made use thereof, as we learn from the Holy Scriptures and by an uninterrupted tradition.

I present you the pages which are going to follow as belonging to you more properly than to all others. In what I say here, those among you who are less illumined, who remain in the outer place, who are not capable of seeing behind the veil, will find a diversion which will be neither disagreeable nor without benefit to them; but those who are fortunate enough to possess a greater light will discover, under the shadow that I employ, something truly great and noble, worthy of the attention of the most elevated and most sublime genius: the spiritual celestial Cube, sole basis and true, solid and immutable foundation of every Science, Peace, and Happiness.

Remember that you are the Salt of the Earth, the Light of the World, and the Fire of the Universe. You are living Stones, raised into a spiritual house, believing and resting on the first Lapis angularis...You are called from the Darkness to the Light...

After some considerations indicating clearly that the idea of Masonry has been drawn from hermeticism and the Rose-Croix, the author continues:

And at present, my Brothers of the High Class, permit me some words, since you are but some of them; and these few words, I may tell you them in riddles, since it is given to you to know these mysteries which are hidden to the unworthy.

Have you not seen, my dear Brothers, that prodigious Bath filled with a water most clear. . . Its form is a square placed in a sublime manner upon six others, all shining with celstial joys, and each angle is supported by a lion. Here repose our mighty King and Queen (I speak foolishly, not being worthy to be among you). The King, sparkling under his golden apparatus, transparent and incorruptible, is surrounded by living sapphires. He is fair and ruddy and feeds among the lilies; his eyes are two coals; . . his long tresses flow blacker than the deepest black; . . his royal spouse is clothed in an immortal silver fabric, strewn with emeralds, pearls, and coral...O mystical union! O admirable commerce!...

Throw now your eyes to the base of this celestial structure, and you will discover before it a large marble porphyry basin, receiving from the mouth of a great lion's head, a greenish fountain of jasper liquid. Meditate and consider this well. No longer frequent the Woods and teh Forests (I speak as a fool); no longer hunt the hare which flees; let the eagle take wing without watching it; do not occupy yourselves any longer with the idiot who dances, with the toad which puffs up, and with the dragon which devours its tail; abandon this as elements of your tirones.

The object of your wishes and your desires (some among you have perhaps obtained it, I speak as a fool) is that admirable thing whose substance is

neither too fiery, nor entirely terrestrial, nor simply humid In short, that sole One Thing, beyond which there are no others, the blessed and most sacred subject of the Square of the wise men, it is... I came close to saying it and committing a perjury, a sacrilege. I will speak of it then by means of an even more obscure circumlocution, so that, only, the Sons of Science and those who have the illumination of the most sublime Mysteries and the most profound Secrets of Masonry, may comprehend - that sole One Thing, I say, it is... which leads us, my dear Brothers, to the diaphanous palace of the true and impartial friends of Wisdom, to that transparent pyramid of purple Salt, more radiant and more sparkling than the finest rubies of the Orient, and in which reposes inaccessible the epitomized Light, that incorruptible celestial Fire, flaming like the crystal which burns, and more brilliant than the sun in its full meridian glory, that Fire which is the eternal, immortal Syropos, king of the Gems, from where proceeds everything which is great, wise, and blessed

Many are called, few are chosen. Amen.

Eugenius Philalethes, Jun.
F.R.S.

March 1, 1721.

By this Preface, addressing itself to two categories of Brothers, you may ascertain that at the moment when Masonry became again the connecting link between all the cults in the Invisible, there were, in the Masonic Institution, as in all the Religions, two languages and different meanings applied to the same Symbols.

That is a thing which would have put into great disarray the sagacity of Dupuy and Volney, if they had known of it, and which will attract, I have no doubt, all your attention.

To find the dangerous path which may lead to the Truth, the intelligent Mason must resolve to labor by himself, to study the Symbols, to observe, compare, and meditate; to avail oneself, in his research, of the study of the Occult Sciences, and to frequent the schools where, as in Martinism, these Sciences are taught.

But, in order to arrive at the sublime Secret of the Great Work, it is necessary, as I told you in the beginning, and as the Masters of Hermeticism have not ceased to repeat, to first free oneself from all the passions, and to recognize that the fundamental basis of all our actions ought to be the love of our neighbor, and not that frightful maxim that Egotism has engraved everywhere: Make a fortune.
