

Symbols carry out their task by themselves
Jamblicus

*Hic est sensus, qui habet sapientiam*¹
Revelation

Introduction

In the foreword to “The Masonic Symbology,” Bro. Ivan Mosca warns the reader not to search for the initiate’s handbook, because: “each symbol, each instrument, each rule is a means to catalyze, to hold up, to favor the inner work.”

Can therefore an oriental carpet deliver a secret, esoteric message to whoever is able to receive it? My answer is affirmative and, on the other hand, “the wind blows wherever it pleases”.²

However, why the symbol? Which is the reason of its allusive speech? The answer is indeed simple: man cannot either explain or describe emotions, intuitions and feelings. They take root in the deepest soul, where the conscious reason cannot grab them, and so they refer to the unspeakable, which can never be expressed adequately by words.

Mircea Eliade wrote: “...The symbol reveals certain aspects of reality – the deepest aspects – which defy any other means of knowledge. Images, symbols and myths are not irresponsible creations of the psyche; they respond to a need and fulfil a function, that of bringing to light the most hidden modalities of being. Consequently, the study of them enables us to reach a better understanding of man - of man “as he is”, before he has come to terms with the conditions of History”.³ Man can therefore disguise, degrade or even humiliate symbols, but he will never be able to pull them out, because *mythos*, more and better than *lògos*, directly speaks to the essential man, whom History has not yet conditioned, making him to face the Sacred, which appears alluring and terrible at the same time.

Nevertheless this bare man does not lose his dignity; he does not descend at the bestial level: to the contrary, he finds out his lost innocence and rises over an Eden-like condition, thus discovering the common stock from which both men and gods stem, as Pindar said.



Here is a picture of my carpet: there are some roses, which lay down along the perimeter, then a thorn. Two equal and mirror-like trees hug a square; inside that, man can progressively see an eight-pointed star, a cross, a circumference and a point.

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The rose and the thorn

*Early morning roses woke up to bloom
And so they bloomed to get old.
In the bud they found both life and death.*

These verses of Calderòn de la Barca confirm the rose symbolizes the reality in its becoming. By studying the so-called “natural” symbolism, René Guénon wrote that the rose in the West and the lotus in the East symbolize the production of manifestation.⁴

I think, however, the rose can be also symbol of a new dimension of the conscience, typical of that man who endlessly asks himself questions about the scope of his life; a man who is

¹ This calls for a mind with wisdom. 17:9

² John, 3:8

³ Mircea Eliade, *Immagini e Simboli*, Jaca Book, Milano 1987, pag. 16

⁴ René Guénon, *Symbolic Flowers in Symbols of Sacred Science, Sophia Perennis*, p. 70

longing for a new, heuristic spirituality; a man who is ready to be initiated.

If, on the one hand, it is quite natural to put roses nearby a thorn, on the other hand this picture can have a specific meaning, given the context. The thorn, in fact, perimeters the carpet, as if it had a protective role and the roses are far before it. The thorn is seemingly separating the carpet's inner from the rest.

Also the Masonic temple fulfils this function. The word "temple" stems from Latin *templum*, this being that portion of sky which was circumscribed by the augur by his staff. The root *tem* is present also in old Greek: *témenos* is the sacred enclosure, *témno* means to cut, thus to separate, to divide.

In this sense man may agree with Bro. Fichte on Freemasonry being a *secret* society, therefore separated from the profane world, in which each Brother must strive "to find this wisdom, and that one joyfully take it up after he has found it, and has verified it in his own understanding and heart".⁵

The initiate shall go beyond the thorn, and the venture is not for everybody: man needs courage, firmness and, above all, perseverance.

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The Trees

"Trees are the everlasting effort of earth to speak to hearing heaven," said Tagore.

I also notice that tree can symbolize man, his feet on earth and his head towards heaven.

Here are two equal and mirror-like trees, so there is a hint to the biblical trees, that of life and that of the knowledge of good and evil. In the Bible man reads that the two trees were in the same place, "in the midst of garden".⁶

Since it is impossible that two different objects occupy the same portion of space at the same time, man can think the two trees are just two aspects of a unique reality. If this theory is right, the effect is that duality is evil, since it separates us from the Oneness. Man has therefore to go beyond it, if he wants to win the knowledge which will let him gain the life.

The initiate shall then take a long journey, from outer to inner, from what is hidden to what is manifest, from *phenòmenon* to *noùmenon*, from darkness to light: the aim is to unveil the mystery of Oneness, the true essence of the Infinite.

Man may however wonder whether the surrounding reality is illusory. Shankara, the great Indian philosopher, solved the dilemma: reality is such only if it is considered to what is relative; it is illusion, *māyā*, in front of the Absolute. For example, a man in the darkness takes a rope and, thinking to have a snake in his hands, is quite scared, till he eventually realizes that real things are indeed different from what he supposes to be.

To unveil the illusion of the "relative" reality it is then necessary to study it, starting from the nearest one, that is, nature.

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The square, the star and the circumference

These symbols are intimately connected, so I will examine them jointly, however postponing the star.

The square is symbol of the matter, thus of nature, either creating or created.

According to pre-Socratics, four elements made up the universe: earth, water, air and fire. Four itself is a cosmic number: the cardinal points, the four winds, the seasons. Besides, let me remind you the four living beings lying at the Lamb's feet, in Revelation: the first one as a lion, symbolizing bravery; the second one as a bull (perseverance); the third as a man (intelligence); the fourth one as an eagle (spirit).⁷

In psychoanalysis the square symbolizes the reality's conscious realization. In Freemasonry the square is also symbol of Brethren's inner work.

⁵ Gottlieb A. Fichte, *Philosophy of Freemasonry*, XIV letter, translation into English by Bro. Roscoe Pound

⁶ *Genesis* 2:9

⁷ *Revelation*, 4:6

The circumference symbolizes the intellectual, or spiritual dimension. Masonically speaking it is the compasses, which can be opened progressively, but not indefinitely. They trace even wider circumferences, symbol of man's mind, which is capable of even more ambitious goals, being however aware of its own limits.

When the lodge is working, square and compasses are over, not under, the volume of Sacred Law: like Gandhi, Freemasons reject any religious doctrine that does not appeal to reason and is in conflict with morality.

The circumference is also the geometric figure where man cannot distinguish the beginning from the end; it is therefore symbol of perfection and of eternity. Therefore, Plato wrote, the Demiurge "... made the world in the form of a globe, round as from a lathe, having its extremes in every direction equidistant from the centre, the most perfect and the most like itself of all figures; for he considered that the like is infinitely fairer than the unlike".⁸

Primitive men associated the picture of the circumference – with the central point – to the sun, the heat of which is tied up to love, and its light to beauty and to truth. In Tibetan Lamaism a *mandala*, a four or eight-spoked circle, is an important means to meditate. It usually represents the world and its relationship with divinity. Last, but not the least, in psychoanalysis the circumference symbolizes the totality, or the absolute Self.

Now, let us consider the eight-pointed star. If man joints the points he draws an octagon, which is the first polygon ideally passing from the square to the circumference. Man so understands because in ancient times baptisteries' shape was octagonal: baptism was a passage's rite, from earth to heaven, from matter to spirit.

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The cross and the point

The cross is indeed an ancient symbol, which made me to put down some reflections, which however I will not repeat here.⁹

In brief, the crossing point of the branches symbolizes the universal Principle, where opposites cease to be in conflict, thus becoming complementary. Therefore, in the Islamic esotericism, it is known as *Shekinah*, Holy Palace, where *That who is dwells*.

Aniela Jaffé wrote insightful words: "Up to Carolingian times, the equilateral or Greek cross was the usual form, and therefore the mandala was indirectly implied. But in the course of time the center moved upward until the cross took on the Latin form, with the stake and the cross-beam, that is customary today. This development is important because it corresponds to the inward development of Christianity up to the high Middle Ages. In simple terms, it symbolized the tendency to remove the center of man and his faith from the center of the earth and to "elevate" it into the spiritual sphere. This tendency sprang from the desire to put into action Christ's sayings: «my kingdom is not of this earth». Earthly life, the world and the body were therefore forces that had to be overcome. Medieval man's hopes were thus directed to the beyond, for it was only from Paradise that the promise of fulfilment beckoned".¹⁰

Effect of said permutation was the conflict between faith and reason, which tore the conscience of so many devotees. Such a conflict is groundless: who has caught the essential unity beyond the varied manifestation behaves in a balanced manner, avoiding either any irrational ecstasies or any sterile asceticism. We read in the Bible: "Does not humanity have hard service on earth?"¹¹, therefore, like disciplined soldiers, we must strive to balance our life, which will then be symbol of universal, divine harmony.

If we succeed, we need no other masters, since we are masters of ourselves. No wonder, therefore, that Virgil greets Dante with these leave-taking words:

⁸ *Timaeus*, VII:33b

⁹ Giovanni Lombardo, *Il simbolo della croce*, in *Hiram* 1986 p. 150. English translation: *The Cross*, International Lodge Room Magazine, issue 09 2006

¹⁰ Aniela Jaffé, *Symbolism in visual arts*, in C. G. Jung, *Man and his symbols*, Aldus Books Ltd. 1964

¹¹ Job, 7:1

*Await no further word or sign from me:
your will is free, erect, and whole-to act
against that will would be to err: therefore
I crown and miter you over yourself.*¹²

We have now to examine the carpet's last symbol, that is, the point. Mathematics teaches that it is dimensionless, therefore invisible, as well as the Principle of which it is symbol. This is why "nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you."¹³ Some versions read "among", but I think wrongfully. "Among" points out the position of an object among other ones, but it does not specify if such an object is inner or outer in respect of them. "Within", – in the Latin text *intra*, in the Greek one *entòs*, – is instead preferable, for it highlights the inner centrality.

These thoughts introduce us to the universal symbolism of the Centre. About it there are many examples: let's think to the cave – exemplary that of Bethlehem – the mountain, the Chamber of Reflection and, above all, the heart. In the Catholic iconography man often comes across the picture of Jesus offering his heart. This means that truth has to be sought for within, in one's inner; the initiate must come back into himself, like the *Ouràboros*, the mythical snake which is eating its tail. Only within himself man can find the Principle, the presence of which he will notice outward confusedly, *per speculum et in aenigmate*.¹⁴

The Principle is always alike himself. Let us consider the cross: if its branches are two lines at infinity, the figure shall be huge, but if they are two segments, each of them being made by three points only, it shall be a very small one, almost invisible. In its essence, however, the cross shall be the same in both cases.

We can conclude that the Principle affects everything which is in existence; any manifestation exists only through the Principle and has no positive reality except by participation in its essence, and in the very measure of that participation.¹⁵

It is now clear the meaning of another parable, that of the mustard seed, "which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches."¹⁶

The same concept was expressed by similar words, thus witnessing the unity of Tradition:

He, who is permeating the mind, who has Prana for his body, whose nature is consciousness, whose resolve is infallible, whose own form is like Akasa, whose creation is all that exists, whose are all the pure desires, who possesses all the agreeable odours and all the pleasant tastes, who exists pervading all this, who is without speech (and other senses), who is free from agitation and eagerness – this my Atman, residing in (the lotus of) the heart – is smaller than a grain of paddy, than a barley corn, than a mustard seed, than a grain of millet or than the kernel of a grain of millet. This my Atman residing in (the lotus of) the heart is greater than the earth, greater than the sky, greater than heaven, greater than all these worlds.

*He, whose creation is all that exists, whose are all the pure desires, who possesses all the agreeable odours and all the pleasant tastes, who exists pervading all this, who is without speech (and other senses), who is free from agitation and eagerness, He is my Atman residing in (the lotus of) the heart; He is Brahman. On departing hence I shall attain to His being. He alone who possesses this faith and has no doubt about it (will obtain the result). Thus declared Sandilya – yea, Sandilya.*¹⁷

¹² Comedy, Purgatorio, XXVII:139-142 translation by Allen Mandelbaum, New York: Bantam Books, 1980. The crown was symbol of the temporal power, the mitre, instead, of the spiritual one. Jointly, they mean that the Poet was a perfect man, at least so far as the human dimension was concerned.

¹³ Luke, 17:21

¹⁴ *Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror.* 1 Corinthians, 13:12

¹⁵ See R. Guénon, *The mustard seed*, in *Symbols of Sacred Science*, quoted

¹⁶ Matthew, 13:31-32

¹⁷ *Chandogya Upanishad*, III Prapathaka, XIV Kanda, shruti 3