

## Rocks and Shoals: The Risks of the Different Uses of Symbolism

Although we know that Masonry is a system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols, few of us give much thought to what that means. In fact symbols have more than one type of use, and misapprehension of the use to which the symbol is put can lead to grave errors, both for Masons and non-Masons.

At their simplest level, symbols can represent another thing. They are a sort of shorthand so we can quickly refer to the concept. Thus the symbol 3 stands for the concept of three or the square and compasses stands for Freemasonry. They can quickly warn us of danger: a saltire cross sign on a road warns us of a railway track, or a pattern of yellow triangles warns of radiation. All words of the noun or verb type are symbols of this kind. Indeed the purpose of this kind of symbolism is communication.

Because such symbols are intended as communication, they are intended to be unambiguous. The person using them wishes to get his message across and is not interested in allowing any confusion as to his meaning. Thus the saltire cross also happens to be a symbol of St. Andrew and also by further association, of Scotland, but the man putting up the railway crossing sign intends that the context will lead to the correct interpretation. A similar sign placed against a blue background at a Robbie Burns supper would no doubt be correctly identified as intending to refer to St. Andrew.

This leads us to the next level at which we can view symbolism. An object, sign or word in one context can remind us of a similar symbol or concept in another situation. This can be intended or unintended. A person might be reminded of St. Andrew when he comes to the railway crossing.

This kind of symbolism is called allusion. We run into it all the time in ordinary life. We hear a person speak and wonder whether under the surface of his conversation he is secretly referring to someone else. And sometimes he is. We ask ourselves, "What is written between the lines?" and try to find an ulterior meaning. And sometimes there isn't one. All of our communication is rife with such ambiguity which, fortunately also allows for puns and other forms of humour based on double meanings.

There is a lot of this type of symbolism in Freemasonry, both intended and unintended. For our purposes it does not matter which. The lectures are crammed with them. The starry firmament is represented by seven stars which remind us of the number of Masons needed to form a quorum. The two ideas are not connected in any way except by the number seven. Later the same number is connected with the liberal arts and sciences and the length of time it took to build Solomon's temple. None of these ideas are related except by the coincidence of a number.

We can go beyond what is spelled out in the Work and find other allusions within the ritual. The Fellowcraft symbol of an ear of corn by a stream of water could have a secondary allusion to corn as the wages of an apprentice or as a part of the consecration ceremony. Some go beyond that and find allusions to the Trinity in the use of the number

three or allusions to the apostles (or the Tribes of Israel, or the signs of the Zodiac) in the twelve Fellowcraft who recanted.

There are two important things to note about the symbolism of allusion. The first is that an imaginative person can find a host of allusions in anything whether it is intended symbolically or not. This is brilliantly illustrated in Wallace McLeod's paper "Masonic Symbols: Their Use and Abuse"<sup>1</sup>. The second is that an allusion is only a reference and does not add to our understanding of the thing alluded to. Seven stars may have an allusion to the seven Masons in a perfect Lodge but we do not understand the notion of a quorum any better as a result; the Three Pillars may allude to the Trinity but we have to have the fully-developed notion of the Trinity first.

Errors unfailingly result from a misunderstanding of these two points. Most of the problems identified in Bro. McLeod's paper arise from the first. An allusion is not exclusive: symbols can and do have a number of allusions potential in them. The first error is to confuse an allusion with a representative symbol which is intended to only have one meaning. The giveaway is when anyone purports to have found *the meaning* of a Masonic symbol; only symbols of the first or representative type have *meanings* (that is, exclusive intended significance) and such meanings are superficial and obvious.<sup>2</sup> This is particularly true when the allusion is found outside the scope of Masonic ritual in the fields of religion, psychology, mythology or philosophy. Thus to say that the word "Light" in the Masonic ritual *means* salvation because it has an allusion to the Christian use of that word is an error, since that is only one of a number of potential allusions.

A misunderstanding of the second point results in the assertion of connections between disparate concepts based solely on the coincidence of a common symbol. Many people get overexcited because the symbol chosen by the Order of the Eastern Star is similar to that chosen by Satanists. There is a coincidence of allusion certainly but it doesn't mean anything--certainly not that Eastern Star members are Satanists! I like to point to the fact that in the second World War the U.S. Army Air Force marked their airplanes with a five-pointed star within a circle (symbol of Wicca), the Royal Air Force used a point within a circle (symbol of the Egyptian god Ra) whereas the Luftwaffe used a cross (symbol of Christianity). Christians might have a difficult time with this if they were obliged to assume that this coincidence has significance.

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<sup>1</sup>This paper was delivered at the Annual Banquet of the AMD, Feb. 25, 1995

<sup>2</sup>There is, of course, the possibility of a code or secret language where words or symbols have a specific intended meaning according to some hidden formula. The nature of such codes is that they are not intended to be understood without the code key. If part of Masonic symbolism was written in code, either the key to that code has long since been revealed or it never will be. It is a waste of time trying to find it and somewhat paranoid to imagine that it still is being hidden by someone. Such notions are best left in footnotes which is what I intend to do.

There is, however, a third level of symbolism beyond the intentionally superficial representative level and the ambiguous but uninformative allusive level. It is the level of symbolism where we attempt, by means of symbols, to gain a better understanding of some part of the world around us. This attempt at understanding has nothing to do with the scientific method and relates better to what people are trying to do when they study literature or make an exegetical study of the Bible. Insight or understanding is a very personal thing quite different from the notion of scientific fact. By use of symbolic or literary talk we attempt to induce in others a similar understanding or insight to that we have experienced. The experience of your mind suddenly changing perspective on a subject has been dealt with at great length by the English author Edward de Bono<sup>3</sup>. He describes it as your mind suddenly leaving its well-worn channel and jumping to a new one. A new perspective gives you a better understanding of a thing the same way that you understand a building better if you see it from all sides than you do if you only see it from the front.

Jesus made constant use of parables, which are little allegories, to try to induce insight in his followers. Masonry uses allegory and symbol in a similar way.

For example, we are told that Charity, "like its sister Mercy blesses him who gives as well as him who receives." Why are Charity and Mercy depicted as sisters? Sisterhood is here given as a symbol of the kinship between the two: they are similar and neither gives rise to the other as they would if they were mother and daughter. What is that similarity? Why "sister" rather than "brother"? Exploring the answers to these questions can give us new insights into both Charity and Mercy.

We are all familiar with the legend of Hiram Abiff, but do we look at it symbolically? What do the ruffians represent? They are impatient and greedy, certainly. What happens if we look on them as symbols of Impatience and Greed? Do we not have a story like the Goose that laid the Golden Eggs?

One danger to watch out for with the third kind of symbolism is the person who has only ever had one insight in his life, and who interprets any symbol presented to him so that it leads to that insight. We have all heard the jokes about Freudian interpretation of symbols so that anything is interpreted as having an allusion to sex: if the object is convex it represents the male and if it is concave it represents the female. You can spot writers of this type because they will spend a lot of time talking about the details of their theory without any reference to the symbols involved.

With the third use of symbols there are no guarantees; there are no guarantees that insight will result or that if it does it will be the same insight as that experienced by another. Yet only in this way can we gain any valuable benefit from symbolism. And so we live and work in the hope of finding that insight, which hope is symbolized for us in our journey

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<sup>3</sup>In such books as [Po: Beyond Yes and No](#)

from East to West which we re-enact at every meeting. When we return from the West we return, not with the reality, but with the symbol of it. It is a symbol within a symbol and the emblem of hope.