

Masonic Tracing Boards and the Western Metaphysical Tradition

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Introduction

Masonic Tracing Boards are training devices. They depict Masonic symbols in pictures which can be interpreted to reveal the teachings of Masonry. The Boards which we considered at the Forum were drawn by a Mason named J Harris in the 1820s and 30s. They are references to a vast body of literature and philosophical doctrine which is at the core of Renaissance thought. Many of the ideas are kabbalistic. Someone who really wants to understand the Tracing Boards (and Masonry itself) must read into and understand those doctrines; and the presentation to the forum considered the Tracing Boards from this point of view.

I have to make a disclaimer: the ideas expressed here are my own. They do not represent the attitudes or teachings of any Grand Lodge or Private Lodge.

Metaphysics

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 was 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.

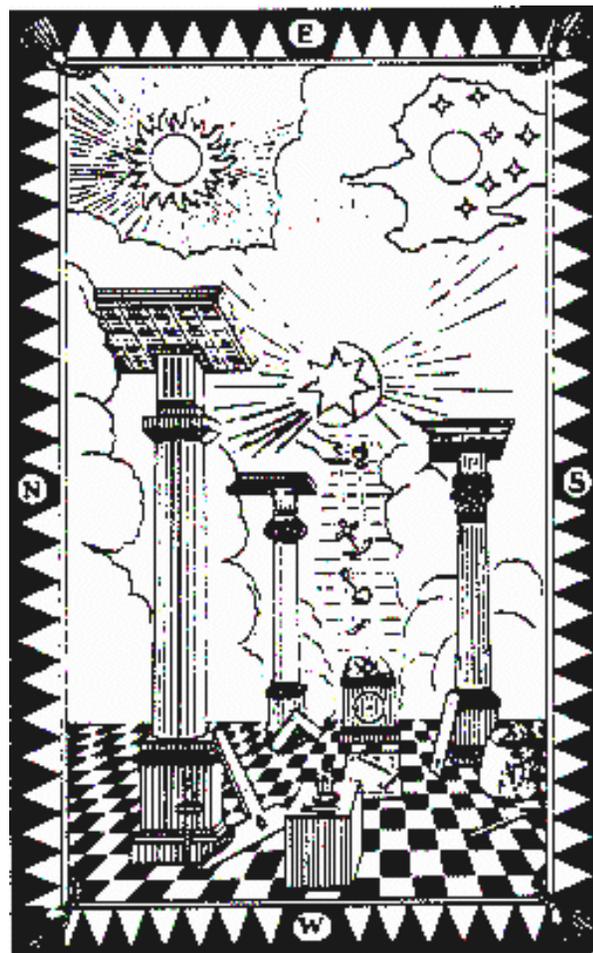
Medieval scholars had been interested in Classical Philosophy from the point of view of reconciling it to Christian doctrine. Renaissance thinkers were interested in Classical Philosophy for what it said about man, himself. These Renaissance philosophers incorporated a good many hermetic and kabbalistic ideas into their orthodox Christian thought. Frances Yates has called this fusion of classical and Jewish philosophy the 'Hermetic/Kabbalistic Tradition,' and after it had been interpreted in the context of orthodox Christian doctrine it became fundamental to the thought of the early Renaissance. 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 the Renaissance 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.'¹

Second, earthly experiences were considered to reflect events in the heavenly realms; the succinct statement of this idea is, 'As above; so below.' There must be a correspondence between that which occurs in the higher (heavenly, causal) levels and that which occurs at the lower (earthly) ones.² Third, 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 another's revelations I think that the Masonic symbolism, as represented on the tracing boards, reflects these principles which make up the Renaissance world view.

The First Degree Tracing Board



The picture, 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 which was 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 that the Masons who formulated our symbolism gathered these three objects into a single group seems to require that we consider them together. The Ornaments of the Lodge are the Blazing Star or Glory, the Chequered Pavement, and the Indented, Tessellated Border, and they are all intended to refer to the Deity. The Blazing Star or Glory is a straightforward heraldic representation of the Deity. On the Great Seal of the United States the Deity is represented 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.

Columns

Except for the Glory, 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 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?

Consider the Columns in the context of the 'Tree of Life.' In the Tree the column on the right is called the 'Column of Mercy,' the active column. That on the left is called the 'Column of Severity,' the passive column. The central column is called the 'Column of Consciousness' the column of equilibrium which keeps the other two in balance. The three columns all terminate in (depend on) Divinity at the top of the central column. Look 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 used 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 important. The Ionic Pillar of Wisdom is in the middle. The Ionic Order 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.' Kabbalah has the same division. They are the 'elemental' or physical world, the 'celestial' world of the psyche or soul, the 'supercelestial' world of spirit, and the Divine world. We see that these same levels are represented on the board. The Pavement represents the physical world, the central part of the Board including the columns and most of the symbols, represents the psychological world, the Heavens represent the spiritual world, and the Glory, represents Divinity. In this way the picture represents the metaphysical structure of the universe. That is the 'landscape.' Where is the man?

The Man

Remember the idea that the universe and human beings are structured using the same principles (both having been made 'in the image of God'), and that there is always a correspondence between activity in the greater and lesser worlds. We have seen that in the Hermetica, 'As above, so below.'

Thus far we have not spoken of the Ladder. It extends from the Scripture open on the Pedestal to the Glory which represents the Deity; and in the Masonic symbolism it is said to be Jacob's Ladder. We considered the ladder together with another symbol, the Point-within-a-Circle-Bounded-by-Two-Parallel-Lines which is shown on the face of the Pedestal. We considered these two symbols together because in some early Masonic drawings they appear together as if they have some connection. 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 the Saints John, and the Baptist's Day is Mid-summer, and the Evangelist's Day is Mid-winter. In English Masonry the lines represent Moses (the Prophet) and Solomon (the Lawgiver), which is 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-Bounded-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 between them, reaches to the heavens. The ladder, a representation of individual consciousness, has 'three principal rounds,' represented by Faith, Hope and Charity, which correspond 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 Point within a Circle bounded by Two Parallel Lines 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 travelling 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 travelled East in search of instruction, and West to propagate the knowledge they had gained.

The cardinal points of the compass on the Border of this Tracing Board define the East-West direction as it is to be understood in terms of Masonic Symbolism and thus describe 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. We looked then at how these ideas are represented in the Second Degree.

The Second Degree Tracing Board



The Second Degree Board is an illustration of an interior, in marked contrast with the previous Board which seems to be an exterior. It suggests that the Mason who embarks on the Second Degree comes from the outdoors and enters the building for that purpose.

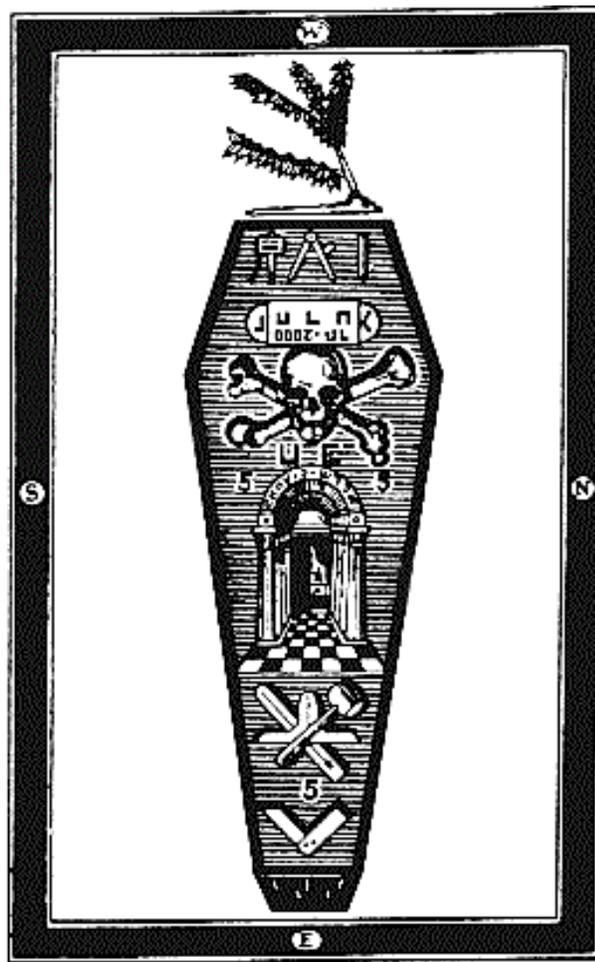
Notice that here (once again) we have two columns (also, as we will see, representing opposites) with a ladder (it has become a staircase) between them. I think the Second Degree Board is a detailed drawing of the 'person' we saw in the previous drawings. This suggests that the individual who embarks on the Second Degree is about to undertake some interior journey, an ascent through the soul and spirit.

The Masonic Lectures assign characteristics to these two pillars which suggest they 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. 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.

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 Renaissance, and there is a large body of literature associated with each. The intent of that curriculum was certainly to give the student the sort of contemplative intellectual work we are discussing. 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 information 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. That association assists in the understanding of progress through the positions of the Officers of the Lodge.

The Staircase leads to a room called the Middle Chamber where Masons were said to go to receive their wages. 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.' 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 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 Third Degree Tracing Board



The Grave

I do not think that the images in this Degree refer to physical death. During the renaissance there was a good deal of discussion about the nature of the biblical story of 'the Fall of man' and its effect. '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. They thought that ordinary human life (that is, life after the Fall) is 'like death' when compared to human potential and to a life lived in the conscious awareness of the presence of God. It seems to me that one interpretation of the grave suggests such a 'death' to be our present state.

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 sacred 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 of which 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 that Truth the knowing of which 'make(s) you free.'

Points of the Compass

There is one last thing we should note. We saw earlier that Masons 'travelled' from West to East: 'They travelled 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 (Master in fact, not 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.

References

1 *Hermetica*, translation Scott W, (Boston, Shambhala, 1993), *Libellus ix*, p185

2 *Hermetica*, *The Emerald Tablet*

3 Reuchlin J, *De Arte Cabalistica* (1517, reprint University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1993), *Book Two*, for example.

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