

THE PILLAR BEAUTY
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PREFACE

Why is it that today we don't give beauty the credit it deserves? Now, many you may quickly object that, in fact, we currently live in a society in which we have never been quite so obsessed with beauty – consider the current cultural obsession with the young, the attractive, and the famous, the enormous profits made by the cosmetics, fashion, weight loss and fitness industries, not to mention plastic surgeons (e.g. “The Swan”). Even the current proliferation of “lifestyle” programming – that began with Martha Stewart, and evolved into numerous TV programs on how to beautify one's home – speak to this cultural infatuation. Indeed it has become so prevalent that one commentator recently referred to this cultural element as “lifestyle porn.” How then, can I conceivably make such a statement?

Brothers, bear with me. I would like to assert in the strongest possible terms that such matters are merely surface considerations. They are superficialities that frequently lead us away from beauty, not toward it. I have said on many occasions that what one sees locks away what one doesn't see, and then that what one feels throws away the key. Nowhere could this be more evident than in relation to our cultural conceptions of beauty today. Indeed, to the limited extent that such matters do reflect one small segment of beauty in its wider sense, they simultaneously circumscribe our conception – and experience – of it to such a narrow realm that we frequently miss what is truly important.

But, as Masons, we are in a singular position to move beyond such limited perspectives, to remove the blinkers, as it were, and see beyond. Tonight, Brothers, I hope to take you through one man's interpretation of the Masonic conception of beauty so that we may consider its wider implications for both our labours in the Craft and outside. Indeed, the ritual teaches us that “masonry is a progressive science...(in which) the holy principles of morality and virtue were inculcated by beautiful ceremonies and lectures.” Thus, I give you my reflections on “The Pillar Beauty.”

I will proceed as follows. First, I will take you through the common descriptions of beauty in the ritual, delineating what might be called a “literalist” masonic interpretation of beauty. I will supplement this, where necessary, with what masonic commentators have had to say on the subject. Secondly, in order to help broaden our conception of these matters, I will move on to consider several possible conceptions of the lodge itself. Finally, I will integrate these elements with some of the philosophical and mystical literature to develop a deeper conception that – again, while one possible interpretation – I believe is worthy of consideration.

(1) THE LITERALIST INTERPRETATION: THE RITUAL

Perhaps the best known reference to beauty in the ritual is in the description of the supports of the lodge. It states:

“A lodge is supported by three great pillars denominated Wisdom, Strength and Beauty, for there should be wisdom to contrive, strength to support, and beauty to adorn all great and important undertakings. They are represented by the three principal officers of the lodge, the pillar wisdom by the WM in the East, who is presumed to have wisdom to open

and govern the lodge; the pillar strength by the SW in the West, whose duty it is to assist the WM in the discharge of his arduous duties; and the pillar beauty, by the JW in the South, whose duty it is to call the Craft from labour to refreshment, superintend them during the hours thereof, carefully to observe that the means of refreshment are not perverted to intemperance or excess, see that they return to their labours in due season, that the WM may receive honour, and they pleasure and profit thereby.”

Of course, we hear much the same words from the Junior Warden upon opening or closing the lodge. Masonic commentators, such as Mackey in his (Revised) Encyclopedia of Freemasonry (1925) have elaborated. He indicates that beauty is:

“Said to be symbolically one of the three supports of a lodge. It is represented by the Corinthian column, because the Corinthian is the most beautiful of the ancient orders of architecture; and by the Junior Warden, because he symbolizes the meridian sun – the most beautiful object in the heavens. Hiram Abif is also said to be represented by the Column of beauty, because the Temple was indebted to his skill for its splendid decorations. The idea of beauty as one of the supports of the lodge is found in the earliest rituals of the 18th century, as well as the symbolism which refers it to the Corinthian column and the Junior Warden.” (Mackey, as revised by Hawkins and Hughan, 1925 Encyclopedia of Freemasonry, 101).

So, up to this point, we have beauty associated with the Meridian sun, the Junior Warden, an allusion to the moral beauty of temperance, and Hiram Abif – he who drew the designs upon the Trestle Board for the workmen to beautify King Solomon’s Temple.

I should point out, however, that just because this is the best known of the references to beauty in the ritual, it is by no means the only one. Just to give a few examples, it is found: (1) in the opening prayer said at the beginning of every meeting by the Chaplain; (2) when the aid of the GAOTU is sought before a candidate is initiated as an EA; (3) upon a Candidate being brought to light; (4) with reference to the beauties of KST, said to be akin to the works of the GAOTU; (5) in the teaching that we are to erect a beautiful spiritual temple based on designs laid down on the trestle board by the GAOTU; (6) at several points in the FC lecture in relation to morality, the senses, their link to education in the 7 liberal arts and sciences, and the glorious works of creation that “inspire men with the most exalted ideas of the perfection of their Divine Creator”; and (7) during the MM drama in relation to Hiram Abif (could it not be symbolic that the candidate portrays Hiram, the individual most closely linked to moral beauty in the ritual. Here is the same individual who both offered up his adorations to Deity in the SS and drew the designs on the trestle board? Moreover, look at what happens to the craft when he is gone!)

From these additional references, it could be added that beauty is both associated with the divine inspiration of the GAOTU, the sciences through which men strive to understand and emulate creation, and corresponding moral action on the part of us all. In the words of Roberts:

“As Hiram prayed daily for guidance from his God before drawing the designs that would set the craftsmen to work, so must we...Hiram drew his designs for the building and beautifying of the temple in the Sanctum Sanctorum, or Holy of Holies. There he received the inspiration he needed because he felt the presence of God. There he could concentrate without being disturbed. Man, in order to build and improve his spiritual temple, must do

so in the presence of God. He, too, must find a retreat where he can concentrate and meditate. In his retreat, man can let God help him draw the designs that will improve his life. There he can ponder the lessons and secrets he has learned from the ritual of the Craft...“Each MM becomes his own architect. Each supervises the building of that “Temple not made with hands.” Each builds into his structure beauty, harmony, and knowledge to the extent that he is willing to work.”(Roberts, 1974: The Craft and Its Symbols, 84).

These, then, are some of the common interpretations of beauty in the ritual. Now it is time to move on.

(2) INTERPRETATIONS OF THE LODGE:

Masonic symbolism is multifaceted and it is difficult, if not impossible, to pin down any final, authoritative meaning. Some interpretations are common – almost platitudes – such as the common idea that the three degrees represent spiritual birth, education and maturity, and immortality. Other things are much harder to make sense of, and one’s interpretation of a given symbol depends greatly upon the what an individual Mason brings to them.

I thought it useful to supplement and broaden this discussion of beauty by first integrating several common interpretations of the lodge in its totality. As we will soon see, these will enable us to flesh out considerably our understanding of beauty in Masonry.

Before proceeding, then, let us consider some of the interpretations of the lodge. Some writer, like Wilmshurst, have considered that its operation represents the well-ordered individual, who has learned to subdue his passions such that all parts may work together in harmony (Wilmshurst, 1995 The Meaning of Masonry, 32-33). Others, like Roberts, have suggested that the lodge room represents the world – as broad from East to West, as low as the earth and high as the heavens (Roberts, 1974: The Craft and Its Symbols, 26). Still others have suggested that the lodge represents key components of Deity. All of these interpretations have value, and, rather than fruitlessly argue which is better than the other, it will be important to consider what may be brought to the issue of beauty in Masonry by employing each of these – ultimately interrelated – interpretations.

(3) SYNTHESIS: MY INTERPRETATION:

I will begin by drawing out the useful implications of each of these interpretations.

First, let us consider beauty in relation to the idea of the lodge as the individual. Wilmsthurst has written that he “cannot too strongly impress upon you, Brethren, the fact that, throughout our rituals and lectures, the references made to the Lodge are not to the building in which we meet.” “The individual man, in himself, constitutes the perfect lodge, if he will but know himself and analyze his own nature aright” (Wilmshurst, 1995 The Meaning of Masonry, 32-33). Indeed, he states that the form of the lodge represents the length, breadth, height and depth of man’s being. By the assistance of the lesser lights within (denoting our spiritual consciousness, reason and will) each man is meant perceive himself, body and soul, as holy ground upon which to build the altar of his own spiritual life, an altar which he should suffer no iron tool, no debasing habit of thought or conduct to

defile. By them, too, he will perceive how wisdom, strength and beauty have been employed by the Creator, like three grand supporting pillars, in the structure of his own organism (Wilmshurst, 1995 *The Meaning of Masonry*, 32-33). Not only are we seen as “Temples of the Most High,” in which the spirit of God abides, love of the inherent beauty of the GAOTU is key (and, of course, what is at the very centre of the lodge?).

Moreover, and in particular reference to beauty, I’m quite sure that Wilmshurst would find little disagreement with the famous sentiments of St. Augustine who once wrote, in his *Confessions*:

“How late I came to love Thee, beauty so ancient and yet so new. Late have I loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made. You were with me, and I was not with you. The lovely things kept me far from you, though if they did not have their existence in you, they had no existence at all. You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put flight to my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain that peace which was yours.” (St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book X).

Next let us consider the second interpretation of the lodge: as representative of the world. Roberts suggests that “At the time of the building of KST the world was thought to have been oblong. A masonic lodge is a representation of the then known habitable globe. A lodge symbolizes the world; an oblong square symbolizes a lodge” (Roberts, 1974: *The Craft and Its Symbols*, 26). In a similar fashion, Mackey has written that:

“A Lodge, when duly opened becomes a symbol of the world. Its covering is like the world’s, a sky or clouded canopy, to reach which, as the abode of which do the will of the Great Architect, it is furnished with the theological ladder, which reaches from earth to heaven; and it is illuminated, as is the world, by the refulgent rays of the sun, symbolically represented by his rising in the East, his meridian height in the South, and his setting in the West; and lastly, its very form, a long quadrangle or oblong square, is in reference to the early tradition that such was the shape of the inhabited world” (Mackey, as revised by Hawkins and Hughan, 1925 *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*, 451).

Now, we are certainly aware that there are many beautiful things in the world, and it is not difficult to come up with lots of examples of earthly beauty – ranging from our great loves, music, art, wondrous destinations, to spectacular natural phenomena. Yet, Masonically, these should not be perceived – as is often the case in the West – as cut off, separate and distinct phenomena. We are taught in the volume of the sacred law that it is the GAOTU in whom we “live and move and have our being.” Indeed, writers of many faiths have referred to the GAOTU in either pantheistic (“there is nothing that is not God”); or panentheistic (“all is in God and God is in all”) perspectives. In these senses, many poets have written of God as expressed in the world of nature. The English Romantic poet Shelley, for example, writes of “That light whose smile kindles the universe, that Beauty in which all things work and move.” Similarly, the Turkish Sufi writer Fazil has written:

“Beauty, wherever it is seen, whether in humanity or in the vegetable or mineral world, is God’s revelation of Himself; He is the all-beautiful, those objects in which we perceive

beauty being, as it were, so many mirrors in each of which some fraction of His essential self is revealed.” (Fazil, quoted by Happold, 254.)

Hence we, as Masons, would do well to consider that the beauties we perceive – both in the lodge and in our activities in the world it represents – are again but reflections of the divine beauty – and activity – of the GAOTU, whom we would do well to emulate in reflecting beauty in our own actions. Indeed, I would go further and suggest that these may be cues that urge us to morally beautiful actions.

Finally, considering that both of the above interpretations of the lodge have led us back to the GAOTU, we would do well to consider the pillar of beauty as representative of one of the key attributes of Deity. In this respect there is no shortage of material. For example, the Jewish Kabbalists consider beauty to be a key component of the “tree of life,” their representation of the various emanations or aspects of God (Mackey, as Revised by Hawkins and Hughan, 1925, p.376-77). Indeed, Mackey adds that it was likely from the Kabbalists that Preston, the first to introduce the reference to the Corinthian column and Hiram Abif, that Masons most probably derived these symbols (Mackey, as Revised by Hawkins and Hughan, 1925, p.101). Islamic Sufi writers such as Jami, Rumi and others have written much in this regard as well. But it is in the Platonic tradition, at least in the West, where this is most eloquently expressed.

Plato, in the Symposium, suggests that beauty is not only multifaceted, but occurs on different levels. We learn to appreciate each of these progressively, in an analogous fashion to Jacob’s Ladder, or, more importantly, the education of the senses in the arts and sciences discussed in the ritual. We begin by appreciating – and being moved by- physical beauty. However, once it is realized that physical beauty is limited, the advancing individual comes to reckon beauty of soul more valuable. From this he comes to contemplate beauty as it exists in moral activities and institutions, and to recognize that all beauty here is akin – and physical beauty a poor thing in comparison. From morals he moves to the sciences, so that having his eyes fixed upon beauty in its widest sense, he may no longer be the slave of a base devotion to an individual example of beauty – be it a person or an activity – but gazing upon the vast ocean of beauty to which his attention is now turned, catches sight of the one unique science whose object is revealed to him:

“This beauty is first of all eternal; it neither comes into being nor passes away; neither waxes nor wanes; next it is not beautiful in part and ugly in part, not beautiful at one time and ugly at another, nor beautiful in this relation and ugly in that, nor beautiful here and ugly there, as varying according to its beholders; nor again will this beauty appear to the imagination like the beauty of a face or hands or anything else corporeal, or like the beauty of a thought or science, or like beauty which has its seat in something other than itself, be it a living thing or the earth or the sky or anything else whatsoever; he will see it as absolute, existing alone within itself, unique, eternal.” (Plato, Symposium)

Theologian Karen Armstrong has commented that:

“Plato’s idea of beauty has much in common with what many theists would call “God”... This notion would greatly influence mystics in all three of the religions of historical monotheism.” (Armstrong, 1993: A History of God, 36).

So, where are we? I have basically come to the conclusion that, regardless of how one conceives the Lodge – and our activities therein – there is no escaping either the GAOTU nor his beauty. The beauty of the GAOTU lies within the core of our being, is reflected throughout the world around us, and is considered by a number of faith traditions as a key attribute of the GAOTU. This is something that has not been emphasized enough in the West – at least not recently. As Masons, we need to integrate these into ourselves, not separate them by self.

CONCLUSION:

In the end, then, I feel that it is important that we not only consider traditional Masonic interpretations of the pillar of beauty which, though paying homage to the GAOTU and expressing much that is morally beautiful, veil as well as reveal. However, by integrating several interpretations of the lodge and writers from various faith traditions, we find ourselves in a better position to recognize the immense importance of the pillar of beauty to us as Masons, both in the Lodge and in our daily actions in the world.

It would be well to keep these considerations in mind, brethren, when faced with the limited, perceptually constraining images of beauty that inundate us in our culture. When we accept the premises of such “virtual realities,” we run the risk of enacting the results. Self-fulfilling prophecies sometimes have a real impact – on us, and on those around us. As Masons, it is incumbent upon us to think, to feel, and to act – from a broader perspective.

-- THE END --