

ALBRECHT DUERER AND THE FREEMASONS.¹

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HOW many blossoms of medieval culture have faded and disappeared, cloaked out by the Italian Renaissance! It is probable that their memory found an echo here and there as late as the beginning of the seventeenth century and the Thirty Years' War, but the devastation of Germany which that struggle occasioned swept away every trace of the old culture, so that those who wish to study the earlier period must grope their way as painfully as antiquarians elsewhere. A promising field for investigation is furnished by Albrecht Dürer's copper-engravings, etchings and woodcuts, which in addition to their other great merits in the faithful portrayal of the life of his time have caught and handed on to us many old traditions. Real mines of information are Dürer's mystically symbolic copper-plates, "which have always been treasured and admired—to-day more than ever—although their meaning has remained an unsolved problem."² Of these puzzling will-o'-the-wisps the most important is the one entitled "Melancholy," which was formerly considered the first picture in a cycle representing the various moods of the soul, but which now, viewed in the light of the Nuremberg developments, is seen to be an exposition of the now completely forgotten medieval freemasonry.

What the freemason lodges, those romantically mysterious guilds of builders with patrons and honorary colleagues, accomplished from the earliest Middle Ages in the construction of the great Gothic cathedrals of France, England, Germany, the Netherlands, and other countries, is everywhere known and admired; but names, organizations, technical and ethical teachings, the content of their secrets, have remained secret or have been forgotten. Yet their

¹ Translated from the German by R. T. House.

² Moritz Thausing, *Dürer*.

operations can be traced in England until far into the sixteenth century, and in Germany to the end of the fifteenth century, as it is known that in Strassburg, in 1498, Emperor Maximilian I gave the German lodges whose patron and honorary brother he was, a new organization, charter and coat of arms. The years from 1439 to 1477 were occupied in the construction of the choir of the church of St. Lorenz in Nuremberg, with its rich, artistic Gothic vaulted roof; and when we remember the dates of Dürer's birth and death, 1471 and 1528, the figures fit together so well that the probabilities seem to point to Dürer's personal contact with the Nuremberg fraternity and his knowledge of their teachings; and a closer examination of his engraving "Melancholy" will show very clearly that he is enforcing the ethical doctrines of freemasonry by the use of the conventional symbolic formulas.

Symbolism, that double form of expression, having a naive and innocent form for the larger public and a hidden meaning for the intelligent initiated, is well known to have been the resource of the medieval freethinking teacher who was forced to pick his way with the utmost care among the rocks of the Inquisition. Victor Hugo calls the images on the portals of Notre Dame the "freedom of the press" of that epoch. It was natural that the architects, sculptors and painters of the Middle Ages, in their criticisms and satires directed at social evils, should have shielded themselves from the church, which, moreover, employed symbolism in the promulgation of her own mystic dogmas. Hence it is that Dürer avails himself of this stratagem in the promulgation of his humanistic ideas by his drawings, which were sold at the fairs under the inquisitorial eye of the church; although the church, in spite of her severe punishment of humanistic activities, was unable to prevent the public appearance of the Reformation in Nuremberg after the year 1524.

Humanism involved a revival of Platonism and the hope of an assimilation of the antique with the Christian view of life—a fusion which after the destruction of Byzantium was advocated especially by the Greek scholars who had removed to Italy and by the secret societies founded by them and termed Platonic Academies. But at even an earlier date the contagious doctrines of Greek philosophy had permeated the Masonic teachings and given them their ethical content, as can be inferred, among other reasons, from the fact that the great Aristotelian Albertus Magnus was a member of the lodge in Cologne. Thus these two secret organizations, the academies and the masonic lodges, are united in the pursuit of the moral development of mankind, and seek this end in a fraternity which

has freed itself from church supervision. During Dürer's stay in Italy as a student in 1505, which took him to Bologna, he undoubtedly made the acquaintance of the academies there, as appears clearly from copper-plates like "Great and Little Fortune." On the other hand, in view of his extensive knowledge of mathematics and engineering he must have been associated with the Nuremberg lodge, and was probably even a member of it. That he publicly handled the ethical doctrines of the latter, which through their agreement with teachings of the humanists were already known to a large circle of the uninitiated, in the regular symbolic language, indicates that the most severely kept secrets in the lodge were not these teachings, but some ritual which is known no longer.

When we examine the picture of Melancholy in a purely objective fashion, we come to the conclusion, from a view of the most elevated figure, that of the writing angel, that the theme is some divine command which this being is communicating, a revelation or an ethical teaching. The content of the latter is drastically brought out, as always with Dürer, by a sharp contrast, the contrast in this case between the lower material handicraft and the higher symbolic labor, so that in the arrangement of figures the former is placed on a lower level, the latter on an elevated platform. On this level appears the prominent figure of the whole picture, a genius with mighty wings, much larger than the little angel, who in accordance with the old symbolism is represented as a small winged child. The leading figure is a woman in rich festal attire, a garland on her loosened hair, her head supported thoughtfully on her left arm. Her right arm rests on a book, probably the Bible, and in her right hand she holds an open pair of ornamented compasses with which she is drawing figures on the tablet on her knees suggested by the form into which her skirt is drawn. Humanistically interpreted, this genius is the personification of some virtue operating with the writing angel, and the use of the compasses suggests the activity of the masons. The explanation is given added weight by the polygonal structure with the ladder and the great building-stone leaning against it. But all this does not mean the completion of the work; it has only symbolic significance. In this the three great Platonic virtues, beauty, wisdom and strength, play a leading part as the means to human perfection—just as Raphael, for instance, treats them in the *Segnatura*—and are here evident as the content of the three main elements in the picture. First the angel, who sits on a round stone hung with a rich fringed cover, symbolizes wisdom because he is the means of divine revelation. At his left the

great winged genius, the prominent person in the picture, is Beauty. In her is symbolically represented the main interest of the fraternity; she is their guide and adviser, who teaches them to handle the compasses in the production of beautiful architectural figures.



MELANCHOLY.

Copper engraving by Albrecht Dürer, 1514.

Finally, at the right of Wisdom, Strength is represented, not in a personification, but by an indication of the result, by a symbolizing of labor as the principal object of the effective Masonic lodge. This lesson is taught by the great, many-sided building-stone, with the shaping-hammer at its side, the conventional symbol of labor. The

logical conclusion of this ethical teaching is the landscape in the background, with a sun breaking forth from rain-clouds and a diabolical creature who has no place in the calm scene and who is hastening to leave it, bearing a sign which labels him Melancholy.

This sad attitude of soul, which would to-day be called pessimism, is ascribed only to the fleeing, banished devil, not to the genius of Beauty—serious as this personage, in common with Dürer's characters in general, appears—nor to the picture as a whole, which is thus wrongly named. This general characterization of the engraving as the ethical content of freemasonry is borne out by the symbolic additions. In the first place it is significant that exactly over the angel on the outer wall of the polygonal structure the scales are hung, the well-known symbol for the judgment of the world and divine justice. This arrangement therefore characterizes the polygonal structure as a temple, the symbol for the perfection of all humanity.

Only two faces of the building are represented, before whose broader front sits the genius of Beauty. Beauty, according to the Platonic conception, is moderation and harmony of the soul; in technical masonry it is rhythm in architectural proportions. This genius has a secret to guard, as is indicated by the bunch of keys and the bag suspended from her girdle. The subject of the secret is indicated again by the articles on the temple wall, especially the hour-glass, the symbol of our fast fleeting life and the careful valuing of earthly and heavenly goods. On the dial above the hour-glass the hand stands between the figures 3 and 4, which can be distinctly seen with a magnifying glass. These two numbers play an important part in the figure that follows, which is a so-called magic square,—hung up likewise on the temple wall, and reading 34 in every direction.

16	3	2	13
5	10	11	8
9	6	7	12
4	15	14	1

If the reader will make the trial with the numbers from 1 to 16 written in the sixteen squares he will be astonished at the result. The same sum, 34, is obtained not only in the horizontal and vertical rows, but also in the diagonals, in the four smaller squares, in the middle square, etc. In the symbolism of numbers 3 is the number of completeness and 4 indicates the extension of space in four direc-

tions, to the right, to the left, upward and downward. Hence 4 is the symbol for the world and the house, moreover for the masonic lodge and the masonic fraternity. If these symbols are combined with the bell symbol above, the meaning is this, and may be put in the mouth of the genius as follows: "Here sits the genius of Beauty, whose efforts are directed toward securing harmony between God and the world, and in view of the transitory nature of life she invites an active interest in the symbolic temple structure, which represents a perfected world."

All these explanations are taken from well-known works on Christian symbolism and the symbols of the old Christian catacombs. The seven-runged ladder also, which leads into the temple, has its significance, as have the surfaces of the great building stone. We must assume that Dürer, the accurate draughtsman, has made a correct picture; and in fact any one who goes scientifically to work to secure the projections of this stone will be surprised at the many conclusions to be derived from a study of this traditional piece of apprentice-work. One surface is an equilateral triangle, another a regular pentagon, two are trapezoids and two irregular pentagons. An architect acquainted with old buildings recognizes the block as the keystone for the vaulted ceiling of a six-sided cloister room, a chapel with a round apse in which belongs the flat circular stone, whose center where the altar stands is cut with a double opening, all with symbolic significance. The keystone is to be so placed that the triangular side comes underneath, with the point toward the altar and the base toward the entrance. It is easy to reconstruct such a building, and the result opens up a wonderful perspective into some as yet unknown connection between the masons and the Templars, the order which was destroyed in 1313 and whose prototype for all their chapel structures is just the plan we have described. One more symbol is to be mentioned, the melting-pot which stands beside the stone, burning vigorously and ready to fuse the lead. This symbol is unknown elsewhere but can reasonably be assumed to indicate the Brotherhood fused together in love, as the clamps and braces are leaded and secured by the help of the flame.

We have already spoken of the landscape in the background, but we must add that there is no evidence of a comet, as some commentators insist; it is the sun breaking through rain-clouds and sending out somewhat exaggerated beams. If it were not the sun the rainbow could not be where it is, seen by the spectator with his back to the sun, so that he looks out of the picture. According to the old Christian symbolism the rainbow is a sign of peace and the

covenant between God and men. When this alliance with the Most High is perfected, the batlike, nocturnal devil's imp, Melancholy, flees from the temple and the scene. On the label there appears after the word which has led to so mistaken a conclusion, a figure 1 or an *i*. The scholars who insist on a series of four pictures dealing with moods of the soul, considered this drawing the first because they read a 1; but if it is the letter *i*, it indicates an abbreviated Latin word, appropriate to the general tone of the picture, for example *iacet*. Then it reads "Melancholia iacet," Melancholy falls in defeat or flees, which indicates the thought of the picture as a whole. Now if the old interpretation of the engraving, which makes the great winged genius the personification of Melancholy, is abandoned, and the new one accepted, the meaning of the articles scattered about on the ground is clear. They are the carelessly dropped, as it were discarded, tools of the trade at the feet of the winged genius, just as in Raphael's celebrated picture, Saint Cecilia discards the musical instruments which seem to her inadequate.

In contrast to the higher symbolic spiritual implements, these tools, pliers, beveling tool, plumb line, plane, iron band, saw and nails, represent incompleteness. But among them we see the sleeping dog, the ball, and an article which is not absolutely clear, but which is perhaps a vessel for incense. The dog, who lies very significantly under the round altar-stone, represents in Christian symbolism, on account of his watchfulness and fidelity, the priestly order, as is indicated by the phrase *Domini canes*. When this order disregards its duty and, like the dog here, falls asleep, it belongs among the discarded tools and gives the laity who constitute the masonic fraternity the right to open communication with the Most High without clerical mediation. As a pendant to this could not the article lying near, an unused incense-vessel, the symbol for the prayers which are pleasing to God, indicate that this vessel, belonging to the priesthood, is also discarded and that in its place we have the loving alliance of those who seek perfection through their own efforts, symbolized by the melting-pot? The ball, elsewhere a mathematical sign of completeness, here standing for the earth, is probably also a symbol of earthly imperfection, in view of which the flight into purer regions of the spirit seems all the more necessary.

Many scholars undervalue Dürer's inventive independence. Thus we read in Dohne's *Kunst und Künstler*: "There is no reason for imputing profound thoughts to him; Dürer was no nineteenth

century philosophical thinker, but his was a genuine artist-nature, and in works like 'Melancholy,' 'Nemesis,' and others, we may be sure that he was working under the orders of learned patrons." Who of the Nuremberg humanists—Pirkheimer perhaps, or the town-clerk Lazarus Spengler—could have coupled with his philosophical training so intimate a knowledge of the practical demands of stonemasonry? It is just here that we have an evidence of Dürer's peculiar nature, which this ethically symbolic material, appealing to his mystic bent, fitted exactly. Hence this profound artist-philosopher, who sought to train his contemporaries in wisdom and beauty to strength, becomes for us a still far from exhausted source of the highest pleasure and the noblest teaching.