

CHAIN OF UNION

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*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*
(Shakespeare, Hamlet, I, V. 166-7)

Freemasonry is a “Peculiar Morality, veiled in allusion and illustrated by symbols.” Of course, there are many types of symbols, there are visual symbols, pictures, oral symbols, which primarily make up speech, and demonstrated or enacted symbols. The Chain of Union is an “enacted” symbol, that is, a rite by gesture.

Generally, it is formed at closing a lodge, and usually only in the first-degree. Some do it immediately before the closing, others after, and some as a part of the ritual of initiation where it is done in an evocative manner: Immediately after closing the works, the novice is placed “between the pillars” where he is able to see the formation of the chain. After it is formed, by order of the master, the circle is opened towards the West so the candidate, crossing the threshold, is welcomed into and becomes an integral part of it. The chain is closed, locked “with force and vigour”, having assimilated the new ring in an almost organic way.

The Chain of Union is ancient, going back to the Compagnonnage — the 12th century French stonemason corporation — where it is known as “alliance’s chain.” Francisco Ariza thinks this ritual acted as support for a sacred invocation, it being a collective practice of “enchantment.” Enchantment is a sacred invocation, and is just a mean to activate a memory of what is already inside the agent, awakening his inner faculties.¹

To this end Bro. René Guénon wrote:

By the comparison they allow, these considerations will make it easier to understand what we will now say about ‘incantation’. It is essential to note that what we designate with this name has absolutely nothing to do with the magical practices to which the name is sometimes given; besides, we have already said enough about magic so that no confusion should be possible and no further comment necessary.

In contrast to prayer, the incantation we spoke of is not a petition and does not even presuppose the existence of anything outward, which every petition necessarily supposes, because outwardness cannot be understood except in relation to the individual, which is here precisely surpassed. It is an aspiration of the being toward the Universal in order to obtain what we might call in somewhat ‘theological’ language a spiritual grace, that is, essentially an inward illumination that can naturally be more or less complete according to the case.

Here the action of the spiritual influence must be seen in its pure state, if one can speak thus; instead of seeking to make it descend, as in prayer, the being tends on the contrary to rise toward it. The incantation thus defined as an entirely inward operation in

¹ *El símbolo y el rito masónico de la cadena de unión*, in the Review *Symbolos* n. 3, 1992, pp. 14-5

principle can nonetheless in many cases expressed and ‘supported’ outwardly by words or gestures that constitute initiatic rites, such as the *mantra* in the Hindu tradition or the *dhikr* in the Islamic tradition, which must be thought of as producing rhythmic vibrations that reverberate throughout a more or less extensive domain in the indefinite series of the states of the being.

Whether the result obtained be more or less complete, the final goal is always the realization in oneself of ‘Universal Man’ by the perfect communication of all these states in proper and harmonious hierarchy and in an integral expansion, both in ‘amplitude’ and ‘exaltation’, that is, both as to the horizontal expansion of the modalities of each state and the vertical superposition of the different states, according to the geometrical figuration that we have explained in detail elsewhere.²

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Let us now examine the shape of the chain. The Brethren remove their gloves and gather themselves, forming a circular frame around to the Tracing Board or altar in lodges where the altar is in the center of the lodge. Each Brother crosses his right arm on the left so to form a symbolic cross of Saint Andrew, joining hands to those of his neighbour from both sides, so that one’s right-hand grips one another’s left: the former ‘covers’ and the latter ‘supports’. In the Far-East tradition the right side matches to the yang, or the masculine element, it being ‘the way of Heaven’, while the left one is that of yin, feminine, representing the Earth: ‘Heaven covers and Earth holds’. For some reading this, a recollection of the due guard of the first degree will also illustrate the concept.

Man has to interpret the terms as complementary, rather than opposite, bearing in mind that “in all manifested things [other than Heaven and Earth] there is no yang without yin and no yin without yang, for everything by nature partakes simultaneously of both Heaven and Earth”.³ This is the duality of man and masonry.

The Master Mason, perfectly balanced, is always ‘in the Middle’, mediator between the two elements, and thus becomes the third leg of the triad, that which joins the duad into a triad and thus becomes the MONAD. I am reminded of the Masonic formula, according to which the initiate must know how ‘to discern the light in the darkness (the yang in the yin) and the darkness in the light (the yin in the yang)’.

As the brothers’ hands are joined to form the circle, each Brother unites his own heels so to form a square and opens the points, in order to let them contact the ones of his neighbours. The chin is on to the chest, the eyes closed and everybody concentrates on “the Worshipful Master’s intent”, even if it remains undisclosed. The Brethren are silent and meditative. After some time the Worshipful Master shakes his arms three times and so do all the Brethren and thereafter loose their hands and “break” the Chain. If the works are still to be finished, the Brethren return to their places.

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² René Guénon, *Perspectives on Initiation*, Sophia Perennis, Gent, NY, chap. XXIV, pp. 163-164

³ René Guénon, *The Great Triad*, Quinta Essentia, Cambridge, 1991 p. 31

The Chain of Union is a continuous physical symbol and as such, it reminds us of the sign of the Pythagoreans, which had to be traced in a continuous way. From that man can deduce that the Chain testifies in a tangible way to the invisible tie that joins all the members of a lodge, and truly, in a more general way, to all Freemasons withersoever dispersed.

The reference to the Universal within the chain is clear if we imagine it as being seen from above. Its shape is roughly a circle, the centre of which is shown clearly. Therefore, if on the one hand the circle represents the temporal and the dynamic expression of the initiatic chain — the world of the Manifestation — while on the other hand the point recalls the permanent origin, or the Immutable Being.

Last, but not the least, we must examine another aspect of the Chain, which refers itself to the interaction between the 'thick' and the 'subtle'. From physics we know that each geometric solid figure causes waves which vary according to the form of the figure. These waves are known as form-waves, or shape-waves, which can be measured according to their vibratory frequency.

Egyptians knew of this phenomenon, and in fact used it to protect the Kings' chambers by emitting waves which are vibrating in the electrical phase, harmful for living entities: man commonly speaks about the "curse of Tutankhamen". To the contrary, churches and pyramids emit waves, which vibrate in the magnetic phase, so they are favourable for men. In ancient times, Freemasons were aware of this peculiarity and therefore they protected their constructions through the cornerstone, which has a trapezoidal shape.

There is no 'magick' in this, no witchcraft, just an acknowledgement of physical facts. The interpretation of their effect is subject to discussion, to be sure. However, there is nothing in Masonic ritual of which we should be ashamed. Initiates reject the artificial distinction between physics and metaphysics; they are aware that "rites and symbols are fundamentally only two aspects of a single reality, which is, after all, none other than the 'correspondence' that binds everything together through all the degrees of existence in such a way our human state can enter into communication with or at least dimly perceive, the higher states of being."⁴

Let's turn back to the Chain. The Worshipful Master, as the focus and exciter, by initiating the chain starts the energy, which passes to his neighbour and so on around the chain. The energy so amassed and strengthened comes back to the Worshipful Master and therefore launched to the 'astral', from which it turns back on earth, like a rocket on the target, to carry out the "intent" which was mentally expressed by the Worshipful Master at the beginning of the ceremony. Thus the ceremony projects the will of the Brethren.

⁴ René Guénon, *Rite and Symbol*, in *Perspectives on Initiation*, chap. XVI, p. 114