

## FREEMASONRY AND SYMBOLISM: THE ART OF GUSTAVE MOREAU

Lucy Ellem

Freemasonry is a forgotten tradition in histories of Western art. Despite the significant impact of Freemasonry on European culture of the Romantic period (for example, on Goethe, Mozart, Tolstoy), the survival of a strong Masonic visual tradition, and its accessibility, has been virtually ignored in studies of the visual arts. The influence of Masonic tradition on the pictorial arts in nineteenth century France and the extent of its contribution to the development of the Symbolist movement are yet to be assessed.

Arguably the greatest single nineteenth century repository of the symbolic tradition, Freemasonry embodied and widely disseminated both a symbolic mode of thought and an abstract language of symbols. From the eighteenth to the twentieth century, many Masonic publications - manuals, histories, explanations, and even novels - provided a rich source of literary and visual symbolism accessible to the initiate and the profane alike. Masonic illustrations are hieroglyphic, diagrammatic and hieratic. They represent a rich store of memory images drawn from the major world religions and occult traditions, images compiled in ways that express complex relationships through the language of symbols.

In creating an art that bridges Romanticism and Symbolism, Gustave Moreau (1826-1898) drew on the symbolic language of Freemasonry. Moreau believed that artistic forms, like a spoken language, can convey a profound and deliberate meaning. His conception of art as a silent language, 'a kind of writing with mysterious, silent characters' parallels the diagrammatic and symbolic approach of Freemasonry. For Moreau, painting was 'the language of God', a 'poetry of silence'.<sup>1</sup>

Very early in his career, Moreau drew on the symbolic language of Freemasonry and its visual encoding of abstract, spiritual concepts. His central, autobiographical work, *The Daughters of Thestius* borrowed from Rosicrucian and Masonic tradition.<sup>2</sup> This paper argues that using the visual language of Freemasonry, Moreau presented its protagonist, Hercules, artist/chemist, as a Masonic aspirant in a setting that represents the lodge and ritual of Masonic initiation. In conjunction with an autobiographical context, the painting may be 'read' as a visual documentation of the artist's

own initiation into an esoteric tradition or group, and his self-dedication to a life of artistic and spiritual devotion.

Modern Freemasonry began in the early 18th century in England. Spreading rapidly to the continent, it was sufficiently in vogue among intellectuals of the Enlightenment for the aging Voltaire to be initiated.<sup>3</sup> The Masonic movement grew rapidly during the early part of the 19th century, and today, Freemasonry is a worldwide, secular religion.

Masonic symbolism and syncretism are illustrated in an early nineteenth century French text which summarises major Masonic tenets. A plate from De L'Aulnaye's *Summary of the whole of Freemasonry or description and explanation of the universal hieroglyph of the master of masters* (Paris, 1812) integrates alchemical and Rosicrucian imagery with symbols from Egyptian, Jewish, classical and Christian traditions.<sup>4</sup> Drawing on these established visual languages, De L'Aulnaye demonstrates the nature of divine creation, tracing the action of the creative spirit in the universe from its source in an unnameable God to its manifestations in the created cosmos and in the human soul. Silently, his 'Universal Hieroglyph' encodes and communicates a complex spiritual system.

De L'Aulnaye's diagram is the most likely source for the equally diagrammatic composition of Moreau's *The Daughters of Thestius*. This major painting, begun in 1852, enlarged in 1882 and unfinished at Moreau's death in 1898, has multiple layers of meaning, and is, on one level, an elaborate alchemical allegory. On another level, it is autobiographical. Hercules, in the traditional pose of artistic melancholy, seated with his head resting on his hand, represents the artist himself. Linking all these levels of interpretation is the central theme of creation - sexual creation, cosmic creation, artistic creation. As in De L'Aulnaye's diagram, the central theme is the action and manifestation of the divine creative spirit in the physical universe.

The subject of Moreau's painting, Hercules in the gynaeceum of the fifty daughters of King Thestius, illustrates a fertility myth from classical antiquity. Hercules, having killed a savage lion which was ravaging the countryside, was rewarded by King Thestius with the gift of his fifty daughters. The hero was to give each of these women a child, except the eldest and youngest who would bear twins. Fittingly for a myth which celebrates both male potency and female fecundity, Moreau decorated his 'prehistoric' setting for the narrative with symbols of masculine power (the bulls heads) and female fertility (the many-breasted caryatids of the architecture). Moreau's commentary reveals that this subject represented, for

him, no feat of merely human prowess, but a sacred sexuality, a 'hymne à la génération', a hymn to procreation. 'It is the considered realisation of an antique myth of the most delicate, of the most mysterious expression', he wrote. 'It is the illumination of a great and profound antique conception. The hymn to virility, to the creative force.' And of the semi-divine nature of Hercules Moreau wrote 'all the sacred gravity of primitive races is in him - a God animates and sustains him'.<sup>5</sup>

Moreau's high seriousness elevates the classical myth to the realm of sacred ritual and symbolic allegory. The true subject of this painting, the invisible subject underlying the visible images, is the cosmic and divine principle of creation of which human sexuality is but an aspect.

The context, I believe, for Moreau's extraordinary choice of subject<sup>6</sup> is the concept of Universal Generation, one of the central tenets of Freemasonry. The flaming star with the letter 'G' at its centre, ubiquitous in Masonic symbolism, refers to this concept and signifies its active principle, the feu générateur, generative or procreative fire. According to De L'Aulnaye, (or Delaulnaye as his name was also printed), the concept of Universal Generation was the foundation of all ancient mythologies and great religions, while the feu générateur, the creative fire or spirit, formed the basis of 'all mysteries, all initiations'. This active principle, Delaulnaye wrote, was represented by Som, the Egyptian Hercules.<sup>7</sup>

Since De L'Aulnaye's diagram is the most likely source for Moreau's composition, it bears analysis in some detail. Its central theme is creation and the action of the divine creative spirit throughout the cosmos. The sun and moon represent the two great principles of creation, agent and patient, male and female, *pater* and *mater*. The product of their union is the flaming star, the feu générateur, the 'son of the Sun' which represents primary matter, 'la semance unique universelle de tous les êtres' or the universal creating spirit. The letter 'G' at the centre of the star stands for the union of this spirit with matter. Two columns flanking the flaming star represent the masculine and feminine poles of creation. These columns, surmounted by globes as in this diagram or by the sun and moon as in Moreau's painting, are found in most Masonic illustrations and form an essential part of the decoration of the Masonic lodge.

The skull, tomb and candle at the centre of the diagram, together with the square formed by the two columns (representing the four elements, earth, water, fire and air) represent Masonic initiation rituals. The tomb refers to the primary initiatory rite of Freemasonry - the Cabinet de

Réflexion or the Trial of Earth - which centres on a symbolic death, a return to the earth from which all things are born.

Moreau's composition repeats the diagrammatic relationships of De L'Aulnaye's Universal Hieroglyph. Hercules, in a pose which forms the letter 'G', is centrally placed between the columns bearing the sun and the moon, replicating the relationship of the sun, moon and flaming star in De L'Aulnaye's plate. The tomb symbolism is present in the 'beds in the form of powerful marble cenotaphs' described in Moreau's commentary, while the flaming torch in the background repeats the single candle. The four elements of the Masonic initiatory ritual are also present in Moreau's painting: water in the foreground pool, fire in the torch and the flames seen through and above a door opening on the left, earth in the stone architecture entwined with vegetation and air in the open sky and the fragrances which, according to Moreau, waft in from the garden.

Like De L'Aulnaye's Hieroglyph,<sup>1</sup> Moreau's 'hymn to procreation' celebrates the cosmic creative force, symbolised by Hercules as the channel of this divine power ('a God animates and sustains him'). In the alchemical context in which this painting also operates, Hercules represents the active male principle of the Great Work of transmutation.<sup>8</sup> As the letter 'G', Hercules symbolises the creative spirit, the generative fire which Delaulnaye made the foundation of all initiations, and which signifies the union of spirit and matter. Other Masonic authors are even more specific. The letter G, according to Ragon de Bettignies, represents the animating spirit or fire, the generative principle; its philosophical signification is generation.<sup>9</sup> Under the veil of a classical myth, Moreau's 'hymne à la génération' presents a central concept of Freemasonry.

Moreau's choice of Hercules in this Masonic context was apt. French Masonic texts of the nineteenth century identify Hercules as a solar deity and a central symbol of the initiatory ritual. The two mandatory columns of the Masonic lodge represent not only the legendary pillars of the Temple of Solomon, Jakin and Boaz (symbolising the masculine and feminine principles of the universe), but also the columns of Hercules, representing the solstices, the points beyond which 'Hercules, or the sun, never goes.'<sup>10</sup> The initiatory trials by the four elements which the Masonic aspirant undergoes represent the phases of the solar year, the first, the Trial of Earth, representing the winter solstice or the captivity and apparent death of the sun.<sup>11</sup> This is the first of the trials by the four elements through which the Masonic candidate is purified. Masonic rites, like those of other initiations,

effect a symbolic transformation of the individual who, dying to his old self, is reborn as a new man.

This ritual death takes place in the Trial of Earth, known as the Cabinet de Réflexion. In a symbolic return to mother earth, the aspirant descends to a tomb or crypt and into darkness. A French nineteenth century print illustrating the reception of a Mason shows the Cabinet de Réflexion as a gloomy cavern, embellished by skeletons. The aspirant is seated at a table lit by a single candle. Head in hand, he meditates on his life and his life's goals. In preparation for his death, he writes his Philosophical Testament, a statement of his life plan on which he will later be examined. This contemplative, interior journey is symbolised by the initials V.I.T.R.I.O.L. which stand for a Rosicrucian inscription in Latin meaning 'Visit the interior of the earth, and in following the good path, you will find the hidden stone'.<sup>12</sup> The interior journey the Masonic candidate undertakes is, in reality, the withdrawal into himself.

Like De L'Aulnaye's diagram, The Daughters of Thestius incorporates elements that refer to Masonic initiatory rites and allow the 'reader' of Moreau's 'silent poetry' to identify, in the figure of Hercules, an aspirant for Masonic initiation. The setting for Moreau's painting reproduces key elements of the ritual of the Cabinet de Réflexion. The two columns, according to Moreau's commentary, are emblems of the two sexes, the poles of life and of creation. Their presence transforms Moreau's 'prehistoric gynaecium' into the symbolic space of a Masonic lodge or temple where two columns similarly represent the masculine and feminine principles of the universe.<sup>13</sup> The gloom of Moreau's painting is echoed in the night sky, while beds in the form of cenotaphs are establish the gynaecium as a crypt or place of tombs and refer to the symbolic death of the Trial of Earth.

Like the Masonic aspirant, Hercules is seated, head in hand, in contemplation. He, too, makes an interior journey :

Silent, too, he has taken his place

attentive, solemn and anxious between the two *cippi* erected in the middle of the room. He waits meditating this great act of procreation - he feels within himself the immense sadness of one who is about to create to give life - at the same time as that great exaltation of soul which comes upon him, the devotee of sacrifices at each act of his fatal destiny - all the sacred gravity of primitive races is in him - a God animates and sustains him.

Withdrawn, contemplative, Hercules reflects upon the divine principles operating in the cosmos. As Moreau's text makes clear, Hercules meditates upon the 'great act of creation' of which he himself is agent. Like a Masonic

candidate, he reflects upon his destiny and the life, devoted to sacrifice, that lies before him.

The architectural elements of Moreau's painting re-occur frequently in the decoration of the lodge for the rituals of the various grades. Plate 3 from Delaulnay's classic Masonic manual *Tuileur des trente-trois degrés de l'Écossisme* (Paris, 1821) shows the lodge arranged for initiation into the first grade of Apprentice. There one finds the two columns and three steps of the central portion of Moreau's painting before its enlargement in 1882. The portal, absent from *The Daughters of Thestius*, was prominent in an early drawing and in a later variant on the subject, *Hercules Entering the Gynaecium* which showed the hero poised above a flight of seven steps.

Delaulnay's Plate 4 shows the lodge arranged for the reception of the Mason into the second grade of Companion. In this setting, the sun and moon are placed above two columns surmounted by globes, as in Moreau's painting. Centred between and below the sun and moon is the flaming star, represented in Moreau's painting by Hercules as generative principle and agent. The portal above the steps, which are now seven in number, is that of Moreau's variant. Other elements present in Masonic reception rites and found in Moreau's painting are the tomb (third grade of Master), the Janus figure, the bull's head, and the pedestal with the ram's head.<sup>14</sup>

These parallels of setting and narrative are too extensive and too consistent in meaning to be coincidental, and they confirm the gynaecium as the symbolic space Masonic initiation. In *The Daughters of Thestius*, Moreau drew upon the symbolic language of Freemasonry to present Hercules, artist/chemist and agent of divine creation, as a Masonic aspirant in a setting which represents the lodge and ritual of Masonic initiation.

Moreau's choice of the Herculean myth for his purpose was particularly appropriate. The episode of the daughters of Thestius marked Hercules' initiation into a new life. It follows the youthful hero's first 'trial', the killing of the Thespian lion, and occurs at the very beginning of his heroic destiny, preceding the better known Labours. Moreau, too, when he began this painting in 1852, was at the beginning of his professional career as an artist. He, too, was commencing a life of sacrifice, a life of devotion to art. The autobiographical aspects of this painting are too complex to discuss here, but clearly Hercules, as artist, represents Moreau's own initiation, his own self-dedication to a life of 'devotion to sacrifice'. In the absence of any written record of Moreau's membership of one of the major nineteenth century Masonic lodges, only a familiarity with the traditions of Masonic symbolic

language enables the 'reader' to recognise the signification of these images, and to interpret The Daughters of Thestius as a visual documentation of the artist's own initiation. The painting functions, on this autobiographical level, as his Diploma or Certificate of Initiation. Whether Moreau refers to an actual event in his own life, or whether he uses the forms of Masonic ritual to refer to his 'initiation' in a wider sense cannot yet be determined.

If symbolism is 'the art of thinking in images',<sup>15</sup> Moreau understood, and used, the language of symbols. Drawing on religious and occult traditions, alchemical, Rosicrucian and Masonic, his art, like the 'hieroglyphs' of Freemasonry, reinstates a lost language of symbolism.

Throughout a positivist and realist century, Freemasonry kept alive the traditions and imagery of ancient symbolic systems together with their symbolic mode of thought. The contribution of Freemasonry, rarely if ever mentioned among the sources of the Symbolist art movement, needs to be reassessed in examinations of that movement's origins.<sup>16</sup> The example of Gustave Moreau suggests that Masonic visual tradition may have played a significant role in the development from Romantic idealism to Symbolism. The symbolic language through which Masonic texts and diagrams communicated an inner, spiritual reality demands a concentration on memory and mental images rather than on the perceived model. Consequently, Freemasonry may also have contributed to that later nineteenth century rejection of fidelity to observed, outward appearance in favour of that which is more fully, more integrally human, yet invisible - the human mind and spirit.

---

#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Gustave Moreau in P.-L. Mathieu, ed., *L'Assembleur des rêves. Écrits complets de Gustave Moreau*, Fontfroide, 1984, pp. 184, 189.

<sup>2</sup> See L. Grace Ellem, 'Alchemical allegory in Gustave Moreau's The Daughters of Thestius', in *Australian Journal of Art*, vol. VII, 1988, pp. 70-96.

<sup>3</sup> Voltaire was initiated in 1778. See Pierre Chevallier, *Histoire de la franc-maçonnerie française*, vol 1, *La Maçonnerie: École de l'Égalité 1725-1799*, Fayard, 1974, p. 275.

<sup>4</sup> De L'Aulnay, *Récapitulation de toute la Maçonnerie ou description et explication de l'hieroglyphe universel du maître des maîtres, Orient de Memphis*, Nouzou, Paris, 1812. English title translation by author. See Ellem, op. cit. p. 92 for a reproduction of De L'Aulnay's plate.

<sup>5</sup> For translations of the texts of Moreau's commentaries on The Daughters of Thestius, see in Ellem, op. cit., pp. 72, 74, 78, 81 and n. 29. All the quotations from Moreau's commentaries cited in this paper are from this source.

<sup>6</sup> Moreau's painting appears to be the only illustration of this myth, ancient or modern.

<sup>7</sup> See Delaulnay, 'Système de la génération universelle des êtres, suivant la doctrine symbolique des anciens' in his *Thuileur des trente-trois degrés de l'Écossisme*, Paris, 1821, esp. pp. 330, 340 n.1, 348. See also De L'Aulnay, *Récapitulation*, pp. 27-31.

<sup>8</sup> Ellem, op. cit., p. 81.

<sup>9</sup> J. M. Ragon, *Cours philosophiques...des initiations anciennes et modernes*, Paris, 1841, pp. 172-73.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 156-7. See also p. 185.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95-6.

<sup>12</sup> V.I.T.R.I.O.L. stands for *Visita Interiorem Terrae, Rectificando Invenies Occultum Lapidem*. See Jacques Chialley, *La Flûte enchantée : Opéra maçonnique*, Paris 1975, p. 148.

<sup>13</sup> These are the columns Jakin and Boaz. In the Masonic lodge these columns are usually round. However, in an influential early Masonic text, *Crata Repoa*, an account of ancient initiation ritual compiled from the classical authors, the candidate at the conclusion of the Trial of Earth was placed between two square columns. See *Crata Repoa, ou initiations aux anciens mystères des prêtres Égypte (1778)* trad. A. Bailleul, Paris 5821, p. 21.

<sup>14</sup> J. M. Ragon, *Orthodoxie maçonnique suivi de la Maçonnerie occulte*, Paris 1853, p. 376-77 describes the setting of the lodge for the reception into the *Ordre des Philosophes Inconnus*. See also p. 409 where the pedestal is associated with the Aries, the ram. (cf Delaulnaye, *Thuileur*, p. 127, pedestal. *Crata Repoa*, p. describes a ladder with seven steps, p. 21.)

<sup>15</sup> Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, quoted in J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, New York, 1962, p. xxix.

<sup>16</sup> This reassessment is already beginning with current research by Teio Meedendorp into the relationship of Freemasonry to avant-garde groups in the later nineteenth century.