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The Rope and the Sword

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Introduction

The explanations given to the Candidate for having a pointy thing pressed to his chest and something else hung about his neck and shoulders are simple enough on the surface – but like all things Masonic there are, if we but stretch our imaginations a little, deeper moral implications and historical lessons. They are also possibly intimately connected in a very surprising way, as we shall see. To begin with, and before getting to the deeper meanings, it should first be pointed out that much of the beautiful, poetic nuances of our own English language have been forever lost: through the deliberate failings of our education systems, a growing disdain for Western culture, and the impersonal digitization of our means of communication. Texting “I [heart] U” is a very long way from “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways”, is it not?

Part one: The Rope

A good example of this linguistic decay is in the pronunciation of “cable tow”. The word tow actually rhymes with cow, not toe. It is a direct reference to both its proper composition and colouration: a cord made of golden flax fibres. A ‘tow’ (pronounced cow) is a bundle of fibres, typically of flax, but sometimes hemp or jute. Flax fibre has been used by mankind for at least 30,000 years (as recent archaeological discoveries have proven) to produce linen, clothing, rope, string, and so forth. The ancient Egyptians made extremely fine linens, cool and light in weight, and six times stronger than cotton or hemp, with fibre from the flax plant. A child with fine, golden hair was once upon a time referred to as ‘tow-headed’ and poets spoke of ‘flaxen-haired maidens’ – both terms being used in reflection of the fine, lustrous, golden aspect of their hair.

The cable tow (pronounced cow), is therefore supposed to be a rope of fine, golden thread: braided and tough, yet silky-smooth. It is not a tow (pronounced toe) - rope, used to tug or haul the Candidate along (and after all, isn’t he told its purpose is exactly the opposite?), but instead a rope, made of tow (pronounced cow, of course). In modern English usage, we like to put the attribute before the object, as in: “he was wearing a blue collar and leather apron”; we no longer have our not-so-distant ancestors’ poetic habit of instead saying: “wearing collar blue and apron of leather, was he”. Therefore, as in the ‘collar blue’ example, it is the ‘cable tow’ (pronounced cow) which is hung about the neck – one that serves to halt or anchor, not haul or pull.

Further imagery, the source of which it is not “obligatory” to detail here, also often misses the mark in many hearers’ minds. With the unfortunate impression given by the mispronunciation toe to the imagination that the cable tow is a tow-rope, one often hears the mistaken usage “a cable-tow’s length from shore”. It seems at first to make sense, because we have habitually used the tug-and-haul, toe, pronunciation, and it therefore imprints onto our psyche the concept of a lengthy piece of rope used to haul a boat to shore. The proper wording, “a cable’s length from shore”, refers instead to a unit of Imperial measure: the cable, which represents a length of 608 feet - equal to one hundred fathoms, or one-tenth of a nautical mile. The cable’s length was a standardization of the maximum length of an anchor rope or chain, between connecting joints, extending from ship to anchor. *(Digression: why the need for two locations: either at the low water mark or a cable’s length from shore? It is because there are two basic types of shoreline encountered by the mariner: prograding and regressing. Prograding shorelines are made by the flow of sediments out of the mouths of rivers, when ocean levels are falling. Nearly-flat deltas, bars, and wide beaches are formed and, when the daily tides recede, the tracts of sand separating ocean waters from the high-tide shoreline may extend hundreds of feet ‘outward’ from the land – even miles, if you’re at all familiar with the Bay of Fundy in New Brunswick. Regressing shorelines are those created by the crashing of waves, carving cliffs into the rock of the mainland, when ocean levels are on the rise. Beaches of regressing shorelines are narrow things, hugging the cliffs and crags: their river mouths are narrow, the shore rocky, and the sediment loads are swiftly carried away by the ocean currents. Along such shores, the distinction between high and low water mark is a matter of yards, or even less. At time of high tide, the high water mark may be on the face of the cliff, and the low-water mark drowned completely. In a general sense then, the low-water mark is roughly equal to the high-tide anchor-point.)*

Part two: The Sword

Literally and figuratively, the function of the sword is, by its design, “straightforward”. Other than a preference of dialect – to pronounce it either ‘sword’ or ‘sord’ – there is no alternative meaning and at least a diminished chance of misinterpretation. The explanation given to the Candidate - much like the instrument itself - possesses neither subtlety nor poetry. It should be remembered though, that such a weapon has both defensive as well as offensive characteristics and uses, and this will have greater import later on. At the first encounter, at the business end of the sword, the Candidate is chastened and taught patience; at the other end, in the firm grasp of the Inner Guard, the Lodge is protected from incautious and foolish men becoming members...ostensibly. There is not much greater depth into which to delve then, when it comes to swords, knives, spears and the like. They are not part of our ceremonial accoutrements to be used in a physical attack or to initiate an act of violence - rather, we hope that they will serve to bring on an attack of conscience in the Masonic heart and memory. How then, are the binding cord and the cutting blade united in their allegorical meaning? Let us see...

Part three: The Rope and the Sword

In researching mediaeval architecture, I came across scholarly journals containing some curious findings. There is a small village in

Catalonia, or northern Spain, known by the name Miravet, at the end of the Ebro River. In the year 1153 A.D., the Knights Templar, at the behest of the Kingdom of Aragon, fought and defeated the town's Moorish occupiers - who had themselves conquered the area some three hundred years earlier. The Muslim ribât, or fortification, and the lands surrounding Miravet, were consequently granted to the Templars - who set about immediately to build a much larger and better-defended edifice, on top of the former Moorish encampment. Stone from nearby quarries provided blocks of limestone, dolostone and grainstones, the joints being made of lime mortar, gypsum and local sand. The walls, both inside and out, show evidence of repointing: the application of a mortar, or grout, to the spaces between blocks or bricks. The purpose of repointing is, of course, to waterproof the joints, avoiding infiltration of run-off water and thereby keeping the mortar from rotting and weakening the structural integrity of the walls. It is in the interior of the building - in what is presumed by archaeologists to be the dining room - where the rope and sword were put to a very unique purpose, and from which a moral lesson may be derived. (*Minor digression: A modern Lodge room, emptied of all furniture and decorations save for the altar in the center, might be thought of as being nothing more than the chapel room of some religious congregation. If a rectangular room, oriented east-west, with the remains of a stone table and basin situated in the east, can only be a 'dining room' - so be it: I, who am not an archaeologist, reserve the right to speculate other purposes.*)

The joints between blocks on the interior walls are decorated: red paint is found on the horizontal joints, applied while the pointing grout was wet; and black paint is found on the vertical joints, applied after the grout had dried. Red and black are known to be the traditional colours of the Templars of the period. There is further embellishment, however, beyond simple paint: In the horizontal joints, a twisted cord had been pressed into the mortar, adding a decorative element to what would normally be a structural function (keeping water out); in the black-painted vertical joints, a hard, sharp implement, such as a sword-point, had been dragged down the centre, also enhancing the visual aspects of the joint. The addition of a groove or impression into the mortar is intriguing, because it is risky: the possibility of moisture infiltrating the joints is actually enhanced by creating an irregular surface, subsequently increasing the chance of forming voids or cracks. It was, to say the least, a highly unusual practice: no other Templar building in the area, or any room in such a building, has been found to exhibit any sort of decoration to the joints whatsoever - although all the structures had been repointed at about the same time. Whether or not the Templars of 1153 A.D. made significant use of either Rope or Sword in their private ceremonies, or in that particular room, are questions I must leave to those expert in the subject (though one might expect a warrior society to flash around a blade or two); but if they did, it should be no surprise at all that later, 'speculative', Freemasonry would have adapted them to its purposes.

Conclusion:

As the cord and the blade are impressed into the mortar to enhance it and draw the eye thereto - and the mortar itself is applied in order to prevent the deterioration and rotting of the structure - so might it not also be impressed upon the heart and mind of the Candidate, by means of the same instruments, to keep inviolate that which he is about to receive; to be the mortar, preventing the decay of the structure? The Candidate is figuratively that fresh mortar, not yet solidified by Masonic moral teachings, upon which the Rope and the Sword serve to make the first impression - and to act as reminders throughout his Masonic career: not to rashly rush headlong into the unknown, but neither to retreat from it; to develop the inner strength derived from that Masonic knowledge which will serve him to help maintain the whole structure; to play his part along with his fellow Masons to uphold the bulwarks of the Craft and, inwardly, to be held upright upon the foundations of a Moral Man.

The Entered Apprentice should be made to know that he is, like the freshly-applied mortar, an essential part of the structure, and will become a vital protector of the Craft when acting in concert with his Brethren. The Rope and the Sword are his first encounters with the high expectations that will be placed upon him, but they are only a danger to him if he lacks the humility and courage required to learn, to think for himself, and to grow as a Mason. This is nothing more than odd coincidence and generous amounts of surmise, ultimately - but let us use the impression made upon him by the Rope and the Sword to nevertheless act upon the Candidate's soul, in a manner similar to those Templar examples impressed upon the pointing mortar of the fortress wall. If the Templars' use of these two articles of our current practices were merely decorative, serving no purpose other than adding a pleasing effect to dull cement, why then were they applied only to one particular room, in one particular building? Would they have risked the integrity of the entire structure on something superfluous that might in fact weaken, crumble, and threaten the continued existence of the results of their labours? They would not; and neither should we. Let us ensure that our Candidates are aware that they are there not merely to decorously fill the room but also, so to speak, to hold up the walls.

References

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