

The Ethical Function of Masonic Art

We often hear it said that art is an end in itself, that it is self-sufficient, that it needs no justification beyond pure aesthetic contemplation. This is a point of view that I share, but it does not imply that it cannot also exercise other functions such as religious, political, social and ethical ones. It is precisely with reference to the latter that we wish to highlight the moral role of many Masonic works of art.

Unfortunately, art is still perceived as an essentially useless activity, a time pass to forget the harsh reality of everyday life. In art, as Freud claimed, we can sublimate the frustrations of real life and find fulfilment for our desires, our dreams. Even today in schools, many professors believe, for example, that literature is useless. If anything, it could be useful as a tool, as a model for learning how to write correctly. Well, we are convinced that artistic activity is not reduced to a pleasant escape from reality, but is also an irreplaceable form of knowledge.

The knowledge that art can give us

The argument used to deprive art of a cognitive value could be summarised as follows: science aims to describe and explain things as they really are, which gives it an unquestionably cognitive power. Art, on the other hand, invents fictitious realities, possible worlds that do not exist and therefore cannot make us know the real world. The fragile assumption of this argument is that a discourse, a teaching can only be true if it refers to a historically existent or existing reality. But it is difficult to argue that masterpieces of literature do not contain truth just because they represent imagined realities. I think one can learn more about the psychology of man from a novel like *The Betrothed* rather than from many modest treatises on psychology. If I want to get an idea of what it was like to be in a Nazi concentration camp during the Second World War, I would do better to read Primo Levi instead of listening to books that just spout figures, statistics and percentages. At school, when it comes to choosing a subject for in-depth work, many pupils propose the subject of the Mafia. I then tell them that they will learn to understand this complex phenomenon better if they read the novels of Leonardo Sciascia instead of limiting themselves to some even rigorous and objective historical reconstruction.

The ethical value of Masonic art

The artistic universe of Freemasonry is very varied: paintings, frescoes, sculptures, artefacts, tablets...In most cases, these are symbols that allude to virtuous behaviour. The rough stone represents our imperfect being which, thanks to initiation, to assiduous work in one's own workshop, can be transformed into a perfect cubic stone. The Levella symbolises equality, the Chain the Masonic Brotherhood, the plumb line righteousness... All this iconography is very evocative, it imprints itself on our minds and hearts, always suggesting to us, in the various situations of our lives, the behaviour to assume, the duty to perform, the objective to achieve. These are informations that can be decoded progressively through a gradual path of teaching that goes from the Apprentice to the Master via the Companion.

To remain in the literary field, think of a story like *Pi.nocchio*. For both the profane and the Free Mason, the text is littered with moral teachings: lies have short legs, easy money is a dangerous mirage, an existence consecrated to entertainment is empty and gives no real satisfaction, the world is full of pitfalls and cunning villains ready to immediately exploit our frailties and naivety. Once, to emphasise the goodness and strength of our ideal of brotherhood and friendship, I quoted in a Tablet, an ancient African parable that we could summarise in these terms.

At the time of his death, an old man called his seven sons to him. He took seven small sticks, gathered them into a bag and then asked the eldest son to break them. The eldest son tried, but to no avail. All the other sons tried but none succeeded. The old man took the bag back and handed them a stick separately. Each of them was now able to break the separate stick without difficulty.

The moral of this ancient tale is simple but profound. If we remain separate, like these pieces of wood, we realise that we can easily break apart. But if we know how to stick together, it will be much harder to get into trouble. If we take on a great undertaking alone, we will not succeed, but we will succeed if we tackle it together. Thus spoke the wise old man! And when he had left this world, his children no longer forgot this far-sighted lesson.

In Freemasonry it is the same. Isolated and scattered, each in search of our own personal comebacks, we are fragile and vulnerable. United together, focused on pursuing common ideals and goals, we become strong and successful.

Many people believe that short stories, like fairy tales, represent a literary genre intended for children, where the protagonists include talking animals that feed the children's imagination. This conception of the fairy tale

is only partially true, as the contents of these short stories are predominantly moral and thus indirectly function as a source of ethical reflection also in adults. The desire to denounce the injustices and abuses of the powerful, to ridicule man's faults, to blame his vices, gives the fable a specific moral teaching function, sometimes implied, sometimes made explicit by the narrator himself. The weapon of irony, which is especially frequent in more modern fairy tales, adds a character of pleasantness and easy usability also thanks to the simplicity and incisiveness of the tale. If Freemasonry can be considered a set of moral teachings, presented and explained with symbols and allegories, then art, and literature in particular, still represent a useful didactic aid for teaching Masonic values and principles. D.B.