

The Symbolism of the Hourglass

by

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The hourglass is usually a symbol of time and death: the flowing sand, which measures duration, does indeed suggest time in its fatal and irreversible aspect—a slipping away that nothing can stop and whose finalities no one has the power to annul. Moreover the sterility of sand evokes the nothingness of things as mere earthly accidents, and the cessation of movement reminds us that the heart will stop and life will end.

From another point of view the symbolism of the hourglass is drawn mainly from its very form: the two compartments that compose it represent the high and the low, heaven and earth,¹ and the movement of the sand indicates a pole of attraction, that of the lower, which is the only pole the physical plane can offer us; but in reality there are two poles, one earthly and one heavenly, so that heavenly attraction should be represented by an ascending movement of the sand toward the upper compartment; since this is physically impossible, what symbolizes it in fact is the act of turning the hourglass upside down, an action that in a sense manifests the object’s very reason for being. Spiritually, a movement toward the higher is always a sort of

¹ We might point out that in Muslim countries there are drums having the same shape as an hourglass, one side called “earth” and the other “heaven”; in the Far East there are similar drums, which are marked on their two skins with a sign derived from the *Yin-Yang*, a visual symbol composed of two compartments with different colors, each of which contains a point of the opposite color.

turning upside down, for the soul turns away from the world, which imprisons and disperses it, thus reversing the movement of its will or love.²

The expression “pole of attraction” calls to mind the image of two magnetic centers, one above and one below, though this may lead to the objection that heaven and earth are not “points” but “spaces”; the response, however, is that above and below—and by extension inward and outward—each possesses two aspects, one reductive and one expansive: the world attracts like a magnetic center, but at the same time it is diverse and it disperses; the “Kingdom of Heaven” also attracts like a magnet, but at the same time it is infinite and it expands. What is opposed to the space “world”—or what this space opposes—is the point “spirit”: the “strait gate”; and what is opposed to the space “spirit”, to the “Kingdom of Heaven” that is “within you”, is the point “world”: sin, luciferian and passional contraction.³ There is no point of contact between the world as such and Heaven as such: each will always appear as a bottleneck or prison to the other. At least this is so at the level of moral alternatives, though beyond this plane an immediate encounter—or a sort of coincidence—does come about between the two opposed points or between the spaces, especially in contemplative alchemy and by virtue of the metaphysical transparency of things; in this case, however, there is no longer an opposition but simply a difference of degree, mode, manifestation. Clearly earthly beauty cannot be identified with sin; it manifests heavenly Beauty and may for this reason serve as a spiritual leaven, as sacred art and the innocent harmony of nature both prove.

The compressive force of sin is the inverted shadow of the beatific attraction of the “strait gate” just as passional dispersion is the inverted shadow of inward expansion toward the Infinite. The “lower compartment” is made of either inertia or weight, agitation or volatilization; inverting the hourglass—that is, choosing the other pole of attraction or changing direction—is pacification for the agitated soul and activation for the languid soul.

Spiritual reality implies both the calm of the “motionless mover” and the life of the “central fire”; this is what the Song of Solomon expresses when it says: “I sleep, but my heart waketh.”

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² The conical tent of the nomadic Indians of North America contains the same symbolism: in the Indian tipi, the poles are placed in such a way that the ends extend considerably beyond their point of junction or crossing, and this represents the heavenly dimension; the point where the poles cross is not unlike the Gordian knot or the labyrinth, and it is considered by the Indians to be the passage along which souls escape to the Beyond.

³ “Scripture, Faith, and Truth bear witness that sin is nothing else on the part of the creature than the fact of turning away from the unchangeable Good and turning toward the changeable good; the creature turns away from the Perfect in order to turn toward ‘what is partial’ and imperfect, and most often toward itself” (*Theologia Germanica*, 2).

There is an analogical relationship between the “high” and the “inward” and between the “low” and the “outward”: what is inward is manifested by height, and conversely, depending on the planes or circumstances; the same is true *mutatis mutandis* for outwardness and depth, taking these words in their cosmic sense. When Christ or the Virgin depart from the visible world, they begin by “ascending” whereas the angels “descend”, and Christ will come again by “descending”; one speaks of the “descent” of a Revelation and an “ascension” into Heaven. Height suggests the abyss between man and God, for the servant is below and the Lord above; inwardness refers more to Selfhood or the Self: the outward is the shell or form; the inward is the Kernel or Essence.

Tending toward the higher thus also means living toward the inward; now the inward unfolds from the point at which the outward is abolished or on the basis of a mental or moral “concentration”. The “strait gate” is *a priori* a sacrificial annihilation, but it also signifies—and more profoundly—a beatific annihilation. One recalls the analogy between death and love, *mors* and *amor*: like love death is a giving up of self, and like death love is generous; each is the model or mirror of the other. Man must “die to the world”, but the world may also “die to man” when he has found the beatific mystery of the “strait gate” and has seized it; the “strait gate” is then the seed of Heaven, an opening toward Plenitude.⁴

The “strait gate” reveals its beatific quality when it appears not as a dark passageway but as the Center or Present—as the point of contact between the world or life and the “divine Dimension”: the Center is the blessed point beneath the divine Axis, and the Present is the blessed instant that leads us back to the divine Origin. As the neck of the hourglass shows, this apparent contraction in space and time, which seems to desire our annihilation, opens in reality onto a “new space” and a “new time” and thus transmutes both space, which surrounds and limits us, and time, which sweeps us along and eats away at us: space is then situated as if within us, and time becomes a circular or spiral river flowing round a motionless center.

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⁴ “Verily with hardship goeth ease,” says the Koran (94:5, 6), and this is a further allusion to the mystery of the “strait gate”, especially since the same passage begins with the words: “Did We not expand thy breast?”—that is, the “inward”. Other Koranic passages refer to the same symbolism: “He produced the two seas that meet. Between them is an isthmus they cannot cross” (55:19-20). “And it is He who produced the two seas, one sweet and palatable, the other salt and bitter; and He put between them an isthmus and a closed barrier” (25:53). According to the non-canonical Book of Esdras, “The sea is set in a wide place, that it might be deep and great. But put the case the entrance were narrow, and like a river; who then could go into the sea to look upon it, and to rule it? if he went not through the narrow, how could he come into the broad? . . . Then [after the fall of Adam] were the entrances of this world made narrow, full of sorrow and travail . . . for the entrances of the elder world were wide and sure, and brought immortal fruit” (2 Esdras 7:3-5, 12-13).

In the hourglass one compartment empties, and the other fills: this is the very picture of spiritual choice, a choice that is inescapable because “no man can serve two masters”; it is in the nature of things that a superficially heterogeneous element may sometimes be combined with a spiritual attitude—for a man outwardly rich can be “poor in spirit”—but with regard to the very center of our being it is never possible to place ourselves simultaneously on two incompatible levels.

Another aspect of the symbolism of the hourglass—in this case cosmological—is the following: the flow of the grains of sand can be compared to the unfolding of all the possibilities included in a cycle of manifestation; when these possibilities are exhausted, the movement stops, and the cycle is closed.⁵ This is true not only of cosmic cycles but also—and in fact above all—of the divine Cycle, which comes to an end in the *Apocatastasis* after the passing of myriad subordinate cycles; from this point of view the shower of sand indicates the exhaustion of possibilities and, conversely, their final and total integration in the divine or nirvanic Dimension.

The key doctrine of the hourglass is briefly this: God is One; now the number 1 is quantitatively the smallest of all, appearing in fact as the exclusion of quantity, hence as the extreme of poverty; but beyond number and at the level of principles, which number reflects in an inverted sense, Unity coincides with the Absolute and therefore with the Infinite, and it is precisely numerical indeterminacy that reflects in its way divine Infinitude. All the positive qualities that we notice in the world are limited; they are like the extreme and in a certain sense inverted points of essences, which unfold beyond our sense experience and even beyond all earthly consciousness. The “strait gate” is inversion and analogy, darkness and light, death and birth.

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The hourglass also suggests a division of universal realities—or the sensory orders representing these realities—into two compartments, if one may express it this way; in other words the fundamental distinction between the relative and the Absolute, the outward and the Inward, the earthly and the Celestial may assume the following forms:

One may distinguish between the material or visible world and the immaterial and invisible world; *grosso modo* this is the perspective of shamanists, in which the animic powers are considered prolongations of Divinity.

⁵ At the beginning of the flow, the movement of sand is imperceptible whereas toward the end it becomes quicker and quicker; this phenomenon is strictly analogous to what occurs in the unfolding of a cycle.

A second distinction places the line of demarcation between the world and God beyond the animic domain and at the threshold of the angelic domain: in this perspective the angels are essentially divine aspects.⁶

A third way of distinguishing between the two great dimensions of the Universe is to draw the line of demarcation in such a way as to separate the material, animic, and angelic domains from the archangelic and divine domains:⁷ the divine Spirit, which appears at the center of the cosmos and which is as it were the Heart-Intellect of the world, encompasses the Archangels, who are its essential functions, and this Spirit is the Face of God turned toward the world; this perspective is to some extent adopted by Semitic monotheists, whose points of view vary in different cosmic or theophanic contexts. The Spirit of God is the great mystery the Koran refuses to define:⁸ this Spirit is either uncreated or created; it is the *Logos* or Word or Book, the archetype of every Revealer and every Revelation, containing the *Dhyāni-Buddhas* and their prolongations or functions as embodied in the great *Bodhisattvas*.

According to a fourth perspective, which is metaphysical and represents the essential and invariable perspective of Semitic and Vishnuite monotheists, it is necessary to distinguish between manifestation and Principle, the existent cosmos and existentiating Being, creation and Creator—in short, between the world and God; a distinction is then drawn within God between the Qualities and the Essence.

A fifth perspective, which is that of Shaivite Vedantists, distinguishes between *Māyā* and *Paramātmā*: God the Creator is also included in *Māyā*, for *Paramātmā* alone is purely Absolute; but *Ātmā* encompasses at one and the same time the pure Absolute and the Absolute clothed in relativity: *Para-Brahma*, the “Supreme”, and *Apara-Brahma*, the “Non-Supreme”.

To summarize, the human mind is capable of making an essential distinction between the material or visible and the Immaterial or Invisible; or between the formal—matter, soul, spirits—and the angelic Non-formal, rooted in the Divine; or between the peripheral—extending from the physical cosmos to the angelic cosmos—and the Central, the manifested Spirit of God with its archangelic functions and metacosmic root; or between existence and Being, the created and the Creator, together with its Essence, which is Beyond-Being; or finally between Relativity—metacosmic as well as cosmic—and the Absolute as such.

⁶ When the Essence has been forgotten in practice, the result is an angelolatry or a form of polytheism in the ordinary meaning of the word.

⁷ Polytheism may come about in this case as well, and in fact it usually has its origin in the distinction in question; it must not be forgotten, however, that the Archangels have their roots in the divine Qualities or “Names”, hence in Being itself; it is therefore impossible to assign a clearly determined metaphysical plane to the polytheistic deviation properly so called.

⁸ *Al-Rūh*, the Angel who is greater than all the others put together; in Hebrew, *Ruah Elohim*.

But there are also two non-distinctions, one from below and the other from above. For the first, everything is God, and we are therefore parts of God; this amounts to pantheism unless one compensates for this perspective by emphasizing its transcendent complement, as does shamanism but not philosophical pantheism. According to the second non-distinction, nothing is except *Ātmā*; this is the Vedantic thesis, which never excludes distinctions wherever these can and should apply; it is also the Sufic thesis, according to which the world is Allah as *al-Zāhir*, the Outward.⁹ The same teaching is likewise found in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism: *Samsāra* is *Nirvāna*, and *Nirvāna* is *Samsāra*; Existence is an aspect of Beyond-Existence, the supreme “Void”, and it is for this reason that every consciousness contains in its substance a point of access to the “Void” or the Infinite, which is pure Beatitude. The interpenetration of the two Realities is depicted by the movement of the sand in the hourglass; but Reality is one just as the grains of sand are identical, and it is only differences of situation, if one may express it this way, that give rise to a disparity whose terms are incomparable, a disparity that is unilateral since one of the terms, even though it appears as “inward” in relation to the outwardness of the related term, is simply What is.

Explanatory Notes by Editor James S. Cutsinger

From Page 2 above:

- “Enter ye in at the *strait gate*: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (Matt. 7:13-14).
- “The *kingdom of God* is *within you*” (Luke 17:21).
- The “*motionless mover*”, or Unmoved Mover, is Aristotle’s (see editor’s note for “Rationalism Real and Apparent”, p. 30) classic expression for the divine Principle, as in the *Metaphysics*, 1072b.
- “*I sleep, but my heart waketh*” (Song of Sol. 5:2).
- Note 3: The *Theologia Germanica* (“German Theology”) is an anonymous treatise of the late fourteenth century, which follows in the mystical tradition of Dionysius the Areopagite (see editor’s note for “Oriental Dialectic and Its Roots in Faith”, p. 125) and shares the fundamental vision of Meister Eckhart (see editor’s note for “Evidence and Mystery”, p. 95, Note 18).

From Page 4 above:

⁹ It is this doctrine that allows Christ to identify “one of these little ones” with himself, hence with Divinity.

- “*No man can serve two masters*: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Matt. 6:24).

- “Blessed are the *poor in spirit*: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3).

From Page 6 above:

- Note 9: “Take heed that ye despise not *one of these little ones*; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 18:10).