



The Philosophical Stone

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Hieronymus Bosch has a mysterious painting entitled *The Extraction of the Stone of Madness* (*The Cure of Folly*). The image is accompanied by an inscription: *Meester snijt die keye ras / Mijne name is lubbert das*". The translation would be as follows: "Master, take away the stone in haste / My name is Lubbert Das". The patient's name means "fool", "lazy lump", and "stupid idiot".



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The “folly” from the title refers to intellectual ignorance, to opacity. Indeed, this sin can be “cured” by extracting the “stone of madness” (the state in which one loses his mind¹); but not in the way one would extirpate an evil part, as the stone is not the cause of ignorance, but the way to release the “good” inside.

The fortress within the soul is called Luz in the Hebrew tradition². The following passage can be found in Genesis: “And Jacob went out from Beer-Sheba, and went toward Haran. And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep. And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not. And he was afraid, and said, how dreadful this place is! This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven. And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put for his pillows, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil upon the top of it. And he called the name of that place Bethel: but the name of that city was called Luz at the first”. (**Genesis** 28; 10-12, 16-19).

The setting sun descends towards the Nadir, entering the house of the Capricorn³, where the Gate of Gods is [*this is the gate of heaven*] (Christ entered the world through this gate on the 25th of December). This Gate is the way out from the manifested state (only *Avatāra* use it in order to enter). It is also called *The Eye of the World* and its microcosmic correspondent is Brahma-randhra, the fontanelle.⁴

Jacob sleeps with his head on the stone of Luz [*and he took off the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows*]. But this “pillow” is also a *capstone*, i. e. Jacob’s top of the head, the fontanelle. Luz is Bethel and Guénon notices⁵ that the sacred stones are called *betyl* and Beith-El (Betel), “The House of God”. It is possible then to consider a comparison between Jacob’s *betyl* and the stone extracted from the patient’s head.

There are three more characters in Bosch’s painting and each of them has the top of the head distinctly marked. They are represented in a hierarchy, their height growing gradually from right to left. This suggests an intellectual hierarchy and the woman with a book on her head is the scholar whose *sushumna* is blocked by the individual knowledge. She is the respectable, reasonable, well-read man / woman, the philosopher who will never know to look upward. She is opaque and will not be able to see anything until she takes the book off her head. Furthermore, the character is a woman and the woman is connected to the symbolism of passivity, of waters and earth; in other words it is a symbolism belonging to the *prakriti*.

The second character, hierarchically superior to the philosopher, is the priest whose specific haircut is meant to reveal the top of his head. Unlike the apathetic philosopher, only interested in his own words, the priest is intrigued by what happens. He does not quite understand what is going on, but he is excited by it. He obviously considers it an event worthy of his attention.

¹ He who loses reason, common sense, decency, his comfortable ordinary customs, loses his ego (*ahankara* being united directly with *manas*). It is the kind of state in which one is crucified by the Pharisees.

² See Guénon, *The man and his becoming according to Vēdānta*,; and Guénon, *The Lord of the World*.

³ See Guénon, *Symbols of the Sacred Science*, the chapters *The Solstitial Gates*, *The Narrow Gate*, *Janua Coeli*, also for the next considerations.

⁴ According to the Masonic symbolism, the keystone represents The Eye of God.

⁵ **The Lord of the World.**

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The cup he holds in his hands symbolises the heart and, by extension, the soul (*jīvātmā*), which must be released through the descent of the *nous* symbolized by the flower stone that the priest wants to reach with his other hand.⁶

The cup will keep the stone flower when the man wears the jester's pointy cap. Speaking about the jester's cap, painted by Bosch like a funnel, we must also notice the double clue that leads to the analogy between the priest's cup and the Holy Grail. The Celts identified the jester with the druid⁷ (*druī* - druid; *druth* - jester)⁸, and the cup used at the Last Supper, in which Joseph of Arimathea had collected Jesus' blood, belongs to the pre-Christian Celtic tradition.⁹ The Grail is also a stone carved from the emerald that came off Lucifer's forehead during his fall. It is, as shown by Guénon¹⁰, the symbolism of the third eye, the state prior to the *brahmarandhra* (reached only by the metaphysician).¹¹ The content of the Holy Grail changes into flowers and the connection between flower and cup is explained by Guénon in the article mentioned above.

Undoubtedly the image is sequential; it is a narrative, a text that requires reading.¹² We might call it a Bildungsroman of someone embarked on the journey of spiritual realization.

The metaphysician stands above all. How do we recognize him? First of all, he wears a *funnel* (!) on his head, and he is also the only one to have access to the stone of madness¹³ (exactly because he wears a funnel on his head); only he can operate on the *Brahma-randhra* and, by simplifying, only the metaphysician is a physician, a doctor.¹⁴

⁶ This is one of the reasons to consider that the characters are one and the same person in different *stages* of a spiritual journey.

⁷ This is similar to the game of chess because, under the Arabian influence, the Europeans called one of the chessmen Jester or Bishop.

⁸ Cf. Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, **Dictionary of Symbols**.

⁹ See Guénon, **The Holy Heart and the Legend of the Holy Grail**.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ Having in mind the previously quoted article by Guénon, we may wonder whether Bosch intended to point at a secondary spiritual centre; the scenery is descriptive enough to suggest a real location. We should also notice that in Bosch's painting, consistent with the idea of centre and the Grail, there is a round table whose central axis (*axis mundi*) springs out from a tulip bulb. At the same time it resembles the alchemical cup (a different cup, a different heart – the same symbolism of the centre), recipient of transmutations; further on, the Salt represented by the cubic *stone* that lies below the angular *stone* (4 and 3, as seen below) can be symbolized by the armchair the patient sits in (bearing in mind that the patient and the metaphysician are one and the same); one may conclude that not only the characters are identical but the objects as well; the metaphysician is equivalent to the Sulphur, the priest to the Mercury and the philosopher to the Salt - this comparison stands if we take into consideration the square shape of the book on the philosopher's head. This means that the patient is actually seated on the philosopher, because his armchair is the philosopher (here we have an assimilation object – character). The three characters can be hierarchically symbolized by the square (the book), the circle (the haircut) and the dot (the tip of the funnel).

¹² The way we read the images of the sacred writings' ideograms.

¹³ Since we speak about the Western civilization, where the Hermetic Philosophy was the form of esotericism, it can be called the Philosophers' Stone.

¹⁴ During the Christian Middle Ages, but mostly the Islamic ones, all the intellectuals, Rosicrucian or Sufi, were acknowledged as competent doctors and anatomists. Medicine is a sacerdotal art.

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The three characters also represent the three worlds (material, subtle and intelligible), and, of course, on a microcosmic level, *corpus*, *anima*, *spiritus*. It is interesting to notice that Bosch uses both the ternary and the quaternary. The fourth character plays in turn the role of the fool and of the Liberated.¹⁵

At this point, the patient is identical with the surgeon.

¹⁵ We are dealing here with a rich symbolism connected to 1 (identity), 2 (duality), 3 (ternary) and 4 (quaternary) and the return to 1; the patient plays parts, wears masks on and off, but stays the same all this time. We could even say that all the characters are one. At this point we could ask which is the mask and which is the face (the mask has a double quality, that of hiding and that of deceiving). The mask appears only to the one who perceives *maya* as reality – only from this perspective what is behind the veil is perceived as deceptive (in Bosch's work, the funnel marks the swindler, the charlatan). Brahma is depicted as having four faces, but he also appears in the Trimurti variant; he is 4 (the number of the characters in Bosch's painting, symbolizing the quaternary), 3 (the number of the characters with the patient and the metaphysician as one) and 1: all are one, just like the three musketeers who actually are four.