

# The Spangled Tortoise: The Peculiar and Unusual Feature in Hermetic Modes of Exegesis

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## Introduction

In this brief article I wish to draw attention to a characteristic of traditional exegesis and symbolism that seems to be rarely appreciated. This characteristic is the importance that should properly be attached to some peculiar or unusual feature of that which is subject to exegesis. In fact, I wish to establish this as a principle: that very often in traditional exegesis - whether it be of a text or of an image or of some other order of things - the key to proper interpretation is to be found in the peculiar and unusual feature. This is a mark of uniqueness. It is the peculiar or unusual detail, perhaps the unaccountable adjective, that exposes the chain of associations necessary for the unfolding of the inner dimensions of that which is being studied or contemplated. The modern mind tends to skip over or explain away such details. In traditional modes of exegesis these seemingly insignificant and incongruous details trigger a transformation of understanding.

## Texts

There are countless literary examples that come to mind. In the Homeric Hymn to Hermes, to cite a particularly elegant one, we find a description of Hermes' antics with a tortoise, the shell of which the young god eventually turns into a seven-stringed lyre. Modern classical studies of this ancient Greek text are either unable to make any sense of this at all or they resort to bizarrely trivial explanations such as that offered in the Loeb edition of the Hymn, namely that the tortoise was regarded as some form of "good-luck" among the Greeks. The eye of the traditional reader, however - or the ear of the traditional listener, since this was first an oral Hymn before being written down - fixes upon a detail that the modern classicists treat as a mere annoyance, namely that the shell of this tortoise is described as "spangled". This word is elsewhere used to describe the starry heavens. Here - unaccountably, it seems - it is used to describe the shell of the tortoise that Hermes turns into his seven-stringed lyre. The classicists throw all manner of interpretations at this irritating detail, trying to dislodge it or explain it away, but to the

traditional reader it is the key they were waiting for. It suddenly becomes blindingly apparent (to use a phrase befitting Homer) that in this Hymn the tortoise is a symbol of the cosmos, much as it is in the Chinese tradition, and that when the god turns the shell into a seven-stringed lyre, the strings are transpositions of the seven planets, and the whole Hymn becomes an exposition of the Pythagorean and Hermetic theme, the Music of the Spheres. It is the peculiar and unusual detail in the description of the tortoise that both triggers and confirms this interpretation. And this in turn becomes the key for the clarification of scores more peculiar and unusual details later in the same Hymn.

Other Homeric literature is the same. The *Odyssey*, especially, is full of such seemingly unaccountable peculiar and unusual features. And thus too Greek mythology in general. In fact, any mythology, for it is a characteristic of myths in general, not just the colorful myths of the Greeks. Typically, it is the strange, odd detail that "gives it away" or, to resort to a more traditional but still current metaphor, it is the "loose threads" that unravel the warp and weft of the fabric. These loose threads in the weave of traditional stories and myths are vital to anagogical hermeneutics. Needless to say, the modern academic mind will have none of this and accuses traditional exegetes of engaging in some sort of game, importing their structures into the text, latching on to and exaggerating the importance of flimsy details while missing such vital considerations as the "socio-economic context" and so forth. There is indeed something playful and game-like about this aspect of traditional exegesis - it involves an intellectual delight and playfulness that is conspicuously lacking from the modern academic milieu - not to mention a sense of humor. The peculiar and unusual feature is often funny and is sometimes absurd. One must engage with the text in the right spirit to participate in the game. This is as much as to say, "Those with ears to hear, let them hear." The peculiar and unusual features is a key into an esoteric dimension of the text that is not explicit on the literal level. What the modern critic fails to appreciate in this mode of exegesis is that the chain of associations that opens out from the text and the depth of meaning revealed in the text is so bountiful, that in traditional exegesis even some mild violations and reconstruing of the literal text is permitted if one must sacrifice a lesser meaning for a greater. But textual contortions are often unnecessary. None are needed in our example of the Homeric Hymn to Hermes. It is plain enough, and immediately the full depth and richness of the Hymn, as an esoteric text, becomes obvious. The "spangled" tortoise shell is the loose thread that unravels the inner meaning of the whole work, and it illuminates the whole work so that it shines from within with profound meanings, rehabilitated from the dusty mausoleums of the "classics".

### **Iconography**

We also witness the peculiar and unusual feature in traditional iconography. There are many examples in Christian art. Here we need to distinguish between the clever games of Renaissance art and a more traditional order of Christian iconography. We are not thinking of the clever allusiveness and "secret meanings" in Piero's Flagellation. Rather we are thinking of the icons, quite widespread, in which the child Jesus in the arms of the Madonna is mysteriously losing a sandal from one foot. This is the peculiar and unusual feature. In all other respects these icons are a straightforward rendering of Madonna and Child. But, unaccountably, Jesus has lost or is losing one sandal. Why? There is a deep and profound symbolism attached to this "loose thread" that awaits those that care to contemplate it. It is a simple detail but of the same order as the "spangled" tortoise shell. Such details often seem very clumsy. In the less subtle cases of medieval art it may be simply a case of making one character in a painting much bigger than the others, or giving them a different nimbus or a distinguishing coloring of red and blue over and undergarments. This is a vocabulary of symbols and symbolic devices, and one of the uses to which it is put to is to leave "clues" to deeper meanings in what seem strange and incongruous details. So-called "occult" illustrations in later times exalted in this device, but increasingly as an empty gesture.

### **Astrology**

In this article, however, I want to suggest that we meet the peculiar and unusual feature in areas of exegesis beyond text or image, even to the extent that it appears to be an hermetic function, woven into nature as much as in the sacred orders revealed to man. It is not merely a game devised and played by writers and readers of arcane texts and painters and viewers of religious icons, but rather something more integral. And as a principle, and as a tool of exegesis, it should be seen as having wider applications. For example, to continue with the "Music of the Spheres", we meet the peculiar and unusual feature in the modes of exegesis brought to traditional astrology and horoscopy. In the astrological chart of the heavens, regardless of whether we consult it for noble or ignoble purposes, we encounter an array of planetary and other configurations, some of which are common and some of which are unusual and rare. The astrologer cannot make much of the fact that the Moon is in Aries at any given time because the Moon is in Aries once a

month, every month. But if the Moon, Mars, Venus and Mercury are all in Aries - that is peculiar and unusual, and the astrologer therefore grants it a greater significance. All the factors in a chart of the heavens and weighed up in this manner. This is because the astrologer is searching for the unique quality of a particular moment frozen in time. The astrological chart of the heavens is a graphic and symbolic representation of a unique moment, and it is the essence of that uniqueness that the astrologer seeks to divine in his art. But, in any given case, there are so many factors to be considered, so many possible permutations of the data, the multiplicity of symbols becomes overwhelming. Astrology is prone to this. The key to exegesis, then, is to find the peculiar and unusual feature in the case at hand. The astrologer works by considering all the major factors, then other possibilities, attempting to reach a synthesis. But in any given chart of the heavens there will be one thing that stands out, one thing that particularizes that chart. The experienced astrologer will have seen thousands of charts of the heavens. What then is peculiar and unusual about this one? That is always the question to be answered. That is how the astrologer grasps for the Unique. When that is grasped, all the symbols of the chart are illuminated from within by profound significances and an overwhelming internal coherence. It is the same method by which one reads such a text as the Homeric Hymn to Hermes or understands a motif in Christian iconography; by noting the peculiar and unusual feature. It is a sad fact that modern astrologers are too hell-bent on being "scientists" or at least "psychologists" to detect any levels of cosmic humor in their horoscopes and nativities, but there is plenty to be found. The ancients described the planet's courses as a race track, but the Sun and Moon are also Punch and Judy, and Venus and Mars fall in and out of love, are faithful and not, by season. One must see the fabric before one can see the loose threads. In astrology's integral form, there is a type of intimate humor and playfulness - Hermetic in principle - that happens between the astrologer and his charts. In some respects, until this quality develops in an astrologer - a sense of the cosmos' humor without which one cannot see the peculiar and unusual - he is only an apprentice.

### **Dreams**

Directly analogous to this is the art of dream interpretation. Properly understood, this is not a formulaic or mechanical matter, but a case of learning the particular "language" of dreams, its grammar and structure and its typical modes and techniques of communication. Here again we find that the peculiar and unusual feature is the key to a great deal of understanding. Needless to say, this is almost entirely a lost art in the modern West but is still to be found in cultures informed by tradition where the dream is

an important event and where the truth and power and transcendent origin of dreams is implicit. The dream interpreter, like the astrologer, and like the exegete of text or image, is confronted with an array of symbols and amongst them must find the key, the peculiar and unusual feature. Obviously dreams do not communicate in plain speech. They communicate in a language of symbols, but a key to understanding them is that the weave of the dream will leave loose threads, and it is what is peculiar, incongruous, odd that is most important. Much psychoanalytic theory and method acknowledges this simple fact too - the therapist latches on to the incongruous detail - but often (or even systematically) not the right one. The trained dream interpreter knows what to look for. Often the peculiar and unusual thing - the key - will only be peculiar and unusual in a sequence of dreams, or is subject to a "pun" or a play on words. Freud's explorations into these modes of the dream were counter-traditional; the "Freudian slip" (a loose end by which the therapist dismantles your personality) is inverse to the "peculiar and unusual feature" which reveals an abundance of higher, not baser, meanings. It is necessary to add that this principle of the peculiar and unusual feature should in no way be confused with a certain sociopathology of modernity that, for example, seeks to understand human beings in general by the study of mass murderers, child molesters, urban cannibals and the like. The peculiar and unusual should not be automatically identified with the morbid and perverse. Contrary to modern assumptions, beauty is as likely to be peculiar and unusual as ugliness.

### **Homoeopathy**

Finally, let us note another and very precise and pure application of the peculiar and unusual feature in a mode of traditional medicine, homoeopathy. Here, as it was reformulated in its modern practice by Samuel Hahnemann, the physician attains a full picture of the patient's symptoms, always searching for that one peculiar and unusual symptom that will lead the physician to the cure. Homoeopathy operates on the hermetic parallel between the microcosm and the macrocosm. The homoeopath searches for parallels between the symptomology of human pathology and the toxicology of natural substances relative to the healthy human organism. The object of the search is to determine the *similimum* - the remedy with the toxicology that is the nearest parallel to the symptoms of the patient. To such a parallel substance, homoeopathic theory maintains, the human organism is supersensitive and thus will respond to it in miniscule doses, the nearer the parallel the smaller the dose required, even to a point beyond which there are no physical molecules of the original substance remaining in the medicine.

But as in astrology, as in rich texts like the Homeric poems, as in dreams, one encounters a profusion of data, in this case a profusion of symptoms and an array of substances known to cause them in a healthy person. Anyone who has ever encountered the massive homoeopathic compendiums published its heyday before the ascendancy of modern industrial medicine (allopathy) can attest to this profusion. In his *Organon of Medicine* - still the bible of purists in the homoeopathic fraternity - Hahnemann formulated his "new" medical science in strict tenets and explained that the key to finding the similimum is to find, in any given case, the peculiar and unusual symptom. A patient who has fever and thirsts has nothing peculiar. There are any number of substances with fevered thirst in their toxicology. But a patient who has fever without thirst presents with a more useful symptom. There are fewer substances that induce a fever without an accompanying thirst. And fewer yet with fever accompanied by revulsion of drinking. And so on. Hahnemann was ridiculed for wanting to distinguish between an itch and a tickle, but he was searching for the strange and unusual symptom. It follows - it should be noted - that a homoeopath must therefore have an excellent knowledge of what is to be expected in pathology in order to be able to see what is peculiar and unusual in any given case. The homoeopath sees the symptoms of disease as a language by which the organism communicates the nature of its imbalance. The trained homoeopath reads these symptoms - very much, I contend, like an interpreter of dreams - watchful for the key. When the homoeopath finds the peculiar and unusual symptom it will point to one and only one remedy, and upon further investigation it is revealed to be a match for symptoms the patient had not even reported at first. The homoeopath has found the similimum, the nexus between micro- and macrocosms, by which he can heal. There are no generic medications in homoeopathy. Each case is highly particularized. If a dozen patients present with the flu, they may receive a dozen different remedies because the peculiar and unusual symptom in each case has led the homoeopath to twelve different similima.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of citing examples from such different endeavors as interpreting an Homeric text, casting a horoscope and homoeopathic diagnostics is to draw attention to the range and extent of the application of this principle. The cases of homoeopathy and dream interpretation demonstrate how even in the order of natural phenomenon certain keys occur for those with ears to hear and eyes to see. The reason we find it in sacred texts (and it is scandalous that the Homeric corpus is not routinely considered among sacred texts) is that such texts are effectively parallels to the natural order, or rather to the

translucid Nature that is the primordial revelation to which this principle is integral. The principle, in short, is that the peculiar and unusual features reveal the transcendent uniqueness of things, which uniqueness is the key to understanding not only the Unique but also the Universal. It may be the dogs guarding the gates of Alcinous' palace realized as the dog stars of Sirius that alert us the astronomical schema of Homer's Phaiacia, and then of the whole Odyssey, or it may be a remarkable angular relationship between planets in a geniture, or it may be a pun in a dream, or it may be the shade of blue of the lips of a patient presenting to a homoeopath for some seemingly unrelated ailment: in each case nature or scripture leaves keys or clues - certain peculiar and unusual details - to the inner illumination of the order of things beneath the level of surfaces.