

INTRODUCTION

This book will argue in detail that the Coen brothers are symbolist film makers; that is, that the plots, characters and situations of their films exist primarily to convey their symbolic values. William Butler Yeats was a symbolist poet who drew his symbols from the rituals and esoteric symbolism of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, of which he was member from 1888-1901. In a similar way, the Coens draw their symbols from the Qabalah and Tarot, which belong to their Hebrew heritage. Kathleen Raine in her book *Yeats and the Tarot* eloquently counters those who would argue that a symbolist approach must detract from a work of art's humanity:

To those realists who find symbolist art lacking in 'humanity' (whatever that means to them), the initiate cannot but reply that the archetypal world of symbolic images is the form of our collective humanity: the symbolist poet is always addressing us at the level of that universal human experience of which every human life is at best a partial and imperfect expression.

.Dr. Barbara Thiering argues in her *The Book That Jesus Wrote*, that for a postulated allegory to be valid, it must be both internally and externally consistent. That is, the allegory must cohere internally, and there must be a good reason for the artist to have created it. Both of these conditions apply to the allegory of the Coens' films. Chapters 1-15 will examine in detail the central allegories of fifteen of the most prominent works, in their order of appearance; while Chapters 16-27 will examine a selection of their key symbolic motifs, all of which occur in multiple films.

Externally, the brothers' Jewishness is consistent with their choice of the Qabalah and Tarot as sources of the symbols. So too is it consistent with the key theme of the films, namely the spoken and written words as vectors of the heart and the silence, and so of love. There is massive consistency about the oeuvre seen in this way, as a unified vehicle for the message of love. Esoteric studies require a good deal of commitment and reasoning power, and the latter is certainly supplied by Ethan Coen, who holds an undergraduate degree in philosophy. Some of their references – for example, the reference to T. S. Eliot's poetry in *Inside Llewyn Davis* – have a distinctly scholarly air about them, but it is the scholarship of the enthusiast. Both of the Coens evidently possess 'soul in the game,' as distinct from 'skin in the game,' in spades. One might also mention that they came to maturity in the 1960s.

There are many delights in the films seen in this way. For the example, the heartless locution of the critical theorist is beautifully skewered in *The Big Lebowski*, in the character of Maude Lebowski. I term Lebowski and her kind 'chatterers,' as their speech is devoid of the heart and the silence. On the other hand there is the taciturn Johnny Five in *Inside Llewyn Davis*, whose Beat poetry elicits from the God figure Roland Turner a groan of pleasure. Music and poetry is everywhere in the films, and I for one am delighted to see them celebrated in this way. The Beat poets also appear in *The Hudsucker Proxy*, while Bob Dylan, the Clancy Brothers, Simon and Garfunkel, Santana, Jefferson Airplane, Kenny Rogers, Robert Johnson, Carmen Miranda, traditional Irish music, and Latin American music, amongst others, also appear at critical times. The attitude to marijuana, nicotine and alcohol expressed in the films is also very 1960s, refreshingly so, I suggest, in these puritanical and distinctly unspiritual times. They have a purpose though, as symbolic of communion with the heart and the silence, like so many other symbols in the films.

We shall note in the argument to come specific references to, amongst many other more general references, the Fool, Magician, Chariot, Devil, and Death cards of the Tarot; the paths of Aleph, Gimel, Daleth, Cheth, Ayin and Nun in the Tree of Life; and the Sephiroth of Kether, Chokmah, Binah, Geburah, Tiphareth, Hod, Yesod, and Malkuth. The significances of these references will be explained in the contexts of the films where they appear.