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Fictions of Freemasonry: Afterword

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Afterword: "So we will get, in any case, profound and religious philosophy and Freemasonry"

Ludwig Tieck's play *Der gestiefelte Kater* (1797), a complex romantic *Puss-in-Boots*, begins with a discussion among several audience members as to what sort of play the strange title suggests. One of them shows himself a true son of his age when he claims that the booted cat can only be a trick—the play is surely about revolution and Freemasonry: "See if I am not right. A revolutionary play, as far as I can tell, with abominable princes and ministers, and then a highly mysterious man who meets with a secret society deep, deep down in a basement where he, as president, is disguised to make the common crowd think he is a cat. So we will get, in any case, profound and religious philosophy and Freemasonry."¹

Like the audience in Tieck's play, the non-Masonic public has been fascinated by the secret brotherhood for three centuries. In the public's mind Freemasonry has represented both the admirable and the ridiculous, what we at once both fear and long for.² Conspiracies against "throne and altar" can be supposed to originate in secretive lodges. Cities and countries, economies and justice systems are all conceivably manipulated by conspiring brothers. But Masons exhibit remarkable charity and intellect and take productive part in community and national events, leading some to envision the lodge as a place of moral education, a school of humanity. Others suppose it to be a repository for grand esoteric truths. Contemporary Freemasonry is a rather conservative social organization with charitable and educational goals; but there remain, somewhere in Masonry's colorful past, historical precedents for even the wildest suppositions. It requires only a single incident like the conspiracy recently uncovered in Italy's P-2 lodge to revive intense public conjecture.

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By virtue of its origins at the beginning of the modern period, Freemasonry has a distinctly dual nature, both semiotically and politically. It expresses Enlightenment ideals but does so through symbols and rituals developed in what Frances Yates calls the Rosicrucian Enlightenment. It has roots in the "sacred" seventeenth century, takes part in the desacralizing movement of the Enlightenment, and then plays a strong role in romantic resacralizing. Further, it is among the most influential nonpolitical, yet political, institutions of the century, helping to affect early transitions from authoritarian to democratic governments and figuring, at least in theory, in American, French, Italian, and German revolutions.

The mania for closure Schiller saw in contemporary high-grade Masonic orders figures large in *The Ghost-Seer*, written just as he left off writing poetry and drama to study Kant and write philosophy and history. The novel depicts semiotic manipulation of a prince starving for transcendence, while itself refusing the saccharine pleasures of closure. Concurrently, it unmasks the "enlightened" narrators who find their own false closure in placing complete blame for the "anarchy of the Enlightenment" on an evil Masonic/Jesuitical conspiracy.

Like Schiller, Goethe warns in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* and *Travels* against addiction to transcendence, against attempted leaps from idea through symbol to transcendent actuality (as in alchemy). But even while drawing attention to the arbitrary nature of symbols, Goethe motivates the symbols with reference to their long traditions. The chapel on the Masonic ritual route is indeed a *secularized* chapel; but it is also a *chapel* secularized. The esoteric is bracketed out as actuality and simultaneously drawn in as possibility. As an institution balanced between the sacred and secular, Freemasonry supplies potent figures for a novel self-reflexively concerned with its own figuration.

Karl Gutzkow's "political *Wilhelm Meister*" also makes use of Freemasonry's dualities. After the disappointments of 1848, the neo-Masonic Knights of Spirit represent an opposition party under an absolutist government, as did Freemasons during the eighteenth century. But Gutzkow, neither willing to settle for indirect political activity nor ready to advocate violent overthrow of the government, depicts both an Enlightenment secret society, only indirectly political and utterly rational, and a radical conspiracy that frightened authorities connect with communism. Memories of the Illuminati and Carbonari make the conspiracy theory a potent force in the novel;

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and the moderate Knights of Spirit are meant as an attractive alternative. In addition, Gutzkow establishes political legitimacy for his Knights of Spirit by pitting the (semi-) historical chain from Knights Templar through Freemasonry against the inherited right of kings, a move that bears some resemblance to Goethe's motivation of otherwise arbitrary signs with reference to Masonic and Rosicrucian tradition. Finally, Gutzkow endows his secret society with rituals and symbols endemic to such societies, aware that they will enhance the political impact, evidently unconcerned that political use of symbols preys on what Schiller called the "republican freedom" of the public.

Unwilling totally to concede to the apparent arbitrariness of language and drawing on the Rosicrucian and Freemasonic metaphors he found in works by Schiller and Goethe and in twentieth-century accounts of eighteenth-century secret societies, Hofmannsthal, like Goethe, finds qualified motivation in the eighteenth-century Masonic symbols situated between motivated and arbitrary language. He finds meaning in a movement from mentor to disciple to mentor, from the disciple who believes in a transcendence behind the mentor's signs to the mentor who finds meaning in the disciple's gestures of faith.

Thomas Mann learned about the mystical, high-grade side of Freemasonry from a contemporary work of literary criticism about the league novel; and he opposed the romantic alchemy of the newly revealed Masonry to the politically liberal Masonry he had so hated in his brother Heinrich's novel. Then, however, he recognized in the romantic quest for transcendence through Masonic symbols an obsession fulfillable only through death; and the novel became "eine antiromantische Desillusionierung." As earlier for Goethe, Hofmannsthal, and even Gutzkow, Freemasonry's position between the mundane and the transcendent makes it attractive to a writer working on that boundary himself.

After Nazi manipulation of similar rituals and symbols in the service of absolutist power, postwar authors like Walser and Grass are seriously concerned with the immoral molding of political will through Masonic (or religious or capitalist) symbols. In the tradition of Schiller, Grass's novels are narrated by men anxious for closure, men who achieve power through their brilliant use of symbols. Even after their moral bankruptcy has been demonstrated, they turn once more to the same symbols to escape guilt, to "overcome the past," and to build a new base of power.³

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In "The Entered Apprentice's Lecture" the Mason swears, in reference to the "secret Mysteries," that he will

not write it, print it, cut it, paint it, or stint it, mark it, stain or engrave it, or cause it so to be done, upon any thing moveable or immoveable, under the Canopy of Heaven, whereby it may become legible or intelligible, or the least Appearance of the Character of a Letter, whereby the secret Art may be unlawfully obtained . . . under no less Penalty than to have my Throat cut across, my Tongue torn out by the Root, and that to be buried in the Sands of the Sea, at Low-Water Mark, a Cable's Length from the Shore, where the Tide ebbs and flows twice in twenty-four Hours.

Schiller, Goethe, Gutzkow, Hofmannsthal, Thomas Mann, and Grass, along with many other novelists, have indeed written it and printed it "whereby it may become legible or intelligible," and have done so in part because of the threat the violent oath expresses, because of the potent merging of word and deed in what claims to be a totally natural language, and because of the constant tension between politics and nonpolitics in Masonic ritual. That Freemasonry has been and remains a force in the Western world is due as much to their fictions as to the nonliterary history of the secret society.