Fictions of Freemasonry: Chapter 2, Schiller's The Ghost-Seer

Scott Abbott, Utah Valley University
himself, he wrote that this, in August 1785, would be the last article he prints on the subject.

As early as October of that year there appeared a “New Contribution to Some Knowledge of Different Contemporary Secret Societies” (Neuer Beitrag zu einiger Kenntniss verschiedener jetzt existirenden Geheimen Gesellschaften”), as well as “Superstition and Enthusiasm as They Act and React on One Another” (Aberglauben und Schwärmerei in Wirkung und Rückwirkung auf einander). Introducing the “New Contribution,” Biester explained his renewed interest: “The existence of numerous secret societies in D., about which many know nothing and many do not even want to know anything, is, for us, the most important aspect of the essay.” In the November issue there are three articles on Jesuits and/or secret societies; in December three more appeared, including another protesting letter from Garve and Biester’s fiery answer stating that the Enlightenment must be defended against the Jesuits. From this new beginning, after the judicious attempt to end the discussion, until the journal’s final number in December 1796, Biester printed more than thirty articles (several of which run more than a hundred pages) on various secret societies and the malevolent Jesuitical influence on and through these societies.

The fact that the Enlightenment journal in Germany would engage in such a substantial crusade against what its editors saw as aberrant forms of Freemasonry indicates the passions the subject aroused. It also attracted parodists. Claiming to be the author of the Cosmopolitan Republic, one such author wrote a “disclosure” of the extraordinary Jesuit or Freemasonic influence on everything from the fashionable wearing of wigs (introduced so Jesuits incognito could hide their tonsured heads) to a proof that corsets are a defense against Jesuits. And alongside the historical debates and the parodies, there was also a strong literary response to the theory of Jesuit infiltration of Freemasonry. In the following chapter I discuss how Schiller used the story he read in the pages of the Berlinische Monatsschrift to fashion a novel in which he examines the political misuse of art. In many ways Schiller’s novel serves as a paradigm for all later novels in which Freemasons play a role, for it features the politics and semiotics this introductory chapter has identified as key to the interdependent relationships between historical and fictional Freemasonry.

CHAPTER TWO

“Art Viewed as an (Im)moral Institution”: Schiller’s The Ghost-Seer

“Das Schlimmste und eigentlich Gottlose an der Freimaurerei ist, dass sie die Vorsicht auf Erden spielen wollen.”
—Friedrich Schlegel

“I must inform you further,” said the tyler, “that our Craft promulgates its teaching not by word only but makes use of certain other means which may perhaps have a more potent effect on the earnest seeker after wisdom and virtue than merely verbal explanations. . . . Our Craft follows the usage of ancient societies which explained their teaching through hieroglyphs. A hieroglyph,” said the tyler, “is the image of an abstract idea, embodying in itself the properties of the thing it symbolizes.”

Pierre knew very well what a hieroglyph was, but he did not venture to speak.
—Tolstoy, War and Peace

Schiller’s only novel, The Ghost-Seer (Der Geisterseher), was written to boost circulation of his journal Thalia, or so he wrote to his friend Körner. In response to the highbrow material Körner had suggested to him, Schiller listed the proper subjects for a journal: “Cagliostros and Starks, Flamels, ghost-seers, secret chronicles, travel reports, in any case piquant stories, fleeting journeys through the contemporary political world and into the ancient world of history—those are objects for journals” (12 June 1788).
SCHILLER'S THE GHOST-SEEER

After Schiller himself so trivially situated his novel, it is no wonder that The Ghost-Seer has long been neglected as a minor embarrassment. At best, scholars have labored in introductions or comprehensive surveys to draw wisdom from the novel's "philosophical conversation," or they have focused on how well Schiller mirrored the times, or they have pointed out the novel's importance in establishing the subgenre of the league novel or Gehemibundroman. The Ghost-Seer was indeed popular, it did make money for Schiller, it provides a telling depiction of the time, and it certainly occupies a pivotal position in the rise of the league novel. But one of the novel's most significant dimensions, the questions it raises about the morality of art, has been virtually ignored.

Work on The Ghost-Seer began in 1786, and the first installment appeared the next year in Thalia. That same issue also contained the third act of Don Carlos, the last of Schiller's plays before his six-year hiatus in literary production, the six years in which he studied Kant and wrote on aesthetics and history. The Ghost-Seer thus stands between a predominantly literary period and an equally distinctive historical/philosophical period in Schiller's life. That chronological position, the admitted use of popular subject matter to sell a journal, and, most important, provocative questions raised in the novel about artists, all point to The Ghost-Seer as a key manifestation of Schiller's thoughts on the ambivalent morality of art.

SCHILLER AND FREEMASONRY

These years, as noted in the previous chapter, were marked by a public uproar over the purported Jesuit infiltration of Masonic lodges in Protestant Germany. That articles about the subject in the Berlinische Monatsschrift strongly influenced The Ghost-Seer has been well documented. In lieu of repeating that information, two of Schiller's letters—the first about an early contact with Freemasonry, the second a response to a conversation with one of Europe's leading Freemasons—provide a representative sense for Schiller's Masonic contacts.

Like other influential men of the time, Schiller was marked for membership in the fraternity, as he wrote to Henriette von Wollzogen:

Schiller's The Ghost-Seer

We once spoke together about Freemasonry. A few days ago a travelling Mason visited me, a man with most extensive knowledge and with a great, hidden influence who told me that I am already on several different Masonic lists, and who implored me to let him know about every step I might take in this capacity; he assures me also, that I have extraordinary prospects in that regard.

The second letter, sent to Körner in 1787 while The Ghost-Seer was being written, expresses Schiller's interest in the Masonic activities of Johann Joachim Christoph Bode, a leading Mason, translator, and publisher of the time, especially Bode's account of Jesuits and Freemasons and the recent politically forced demise of Weishaupt's Illuminati in Bavaria:

Bode told me that he had brought along something weighty from Paris concerning Freemasonry. He heartily agrees with the Berliners about the threatening danger of Catholicism... The present anarchy of the Enlightenment, he thinks, is primarily the work of Jesuits.

Weishaupt is now the topic of discussion of the whole world. All Masons whom I have yet heard condemn him and want him destroyed socially, without mercy.

Bode sounded me out as to whether I might not want to become a Mason. Here he is thought to be one of the most important in the entire order. What do you know about him?

Schiller never became a Mason; but as these letters show, he had contact with and a ready interest in the controversies surrounding Freemasonry. In that environment, with a keen sense for public taste, and with questions about his own profession, Schiller wrote The Ghost-Seer, a novel fragment in two books.

THE STORY

As the story begins, the Count von O., whose memoirs constitute the novel, joins a young Protestant prince in Venice and finds himself immediately involved in a rather perplexing mystery. An Armenian accosts the two men on the street one evening, just before disappearing, says without context: "He died at nine o'clock." Several days later the prince receives news that a cousin standing between him and the throne died at nine o'clock on the day the Armenian appeared.
Soon thereafter the prince takes part in an elaborate pseudo-Masonic ceremony during which a Sicilian conjures up a ghost. At a crucial moment the Armenian steps in, discloses the séance as a fraud, and delivers the Sicilian to officers of the inquisition. The prince and Count von O. . visit the Sicilian in prison, and he tells them about the Armenian, claiming that the mysterious man has lived everywhere—especially in Egypt, where he gained his boundless wisdom. He is supposedly ageless. Poison, daggers, and fire are said to have no effect on him. He never touches food or women, and he never sleeps. The prince, naturally a little sceptical, asks if the Sicilian has more than second-hand information on this man of marvels. The Sicilian then tells a story of a complicated and skillful confidence scheme broken up by the Armenian in a manner reminiscent of the present case.

The prince detects a serious flaw in the story, and after they leave he lectures the count at length on rational explanations for the mysterious events related by the obviously conniving Sicilian. By now, the narrator writes, the credulous prince has become an outright sceptic, sure of his ability to unmask superstition and fraud.

In the second book the count describes a pseudo-Masonic secret society into which the prince is initiated. Associations there lead him from his once simple mode of existence. Soon the count has to leave Venice, but he continues his account by inserting letters from the Baron von F. . , who tells of parties, concerts, gambling, and even greater expenses. When the prince rescues the nephew of a rich and powerful churchman from "certain death" he finds a welcome answer to his money problems; but even so he approaches ruin as he borrows huge sums of money from the grateful uncle and mindlessly gambles them away.

Finally the prince falls in love with a beautiful woman he knows only by sight, and he pursues her madly. The Baron writes frantically about lost letters, intrigues, and radical changes in the prince, and he calls for help. The count rushes back to Venice, but he arrives too late. A letter informs him that the prince is a newly christened Catholic, embraced now by the scheming arms of the Armenian. Only now does he sense that the Armenian has directed the actions of the Sicilian, the beautiful woman, the secret society—in fact, nearly every influence on the prince throughout the book—all in an effort to make the young ruler a Catholic and thus gain influence in another Protestant country. The novel ends a fragment as the count promises to tell the story in full.

THE LEAGUE NOVEL

The story just related could be straight from the pages of the Berlinische Monatsschrift. A Jesuit with Freemasonic connections and uncanny abilities craftily leads a Protestant prince away from his religion and political indifference to scepticism, to a will to power, and finally into the Catholic church. The novel fragment proved extremely popular, as numerous editions, both legal and pirated, show. Friedrich Wilhelm II, with his penchant for ghosts and mysteries, never forgave Schiller for leaving the novel a fragment; and when it became apparent that Schiller had no desire to finish it, several lesser writers stepped in to try.10

Besides those continuations, various popular novels of the time, as Marianne Thalmann has shown, slavishly borrow the Armenian's characteristics for their mentor figures: flashing eyes, non-European appearance and Eastern education, powerful presence, and paradoxical traits.11 Although not central to even the worst of these novels, such motifs often accompany a common theme—the education, for better or worse, of a young man at the hands of powerful emissaries of a secret society. This is, of course, the story of the Rosicrucian fictions, of much Freemasonic ritual, and of various confidence men.

Although The Ghost-Seer (1787–1789) was not the first eighteenth-century literary work to exploit this theme (cf. also novels by Terrasson, Stark, Knigge, Jung-Stilling, Bahrdt, Wieland, and Moritz in preceding years), it acted as the primary model and catalyst for the flood of novels that began to appear even before Schiller brought his novel to its fragmentary close. The following list contains representative novels that incorporate the theme and motifs of what has come to be known as the Geheimbundroman, Bundesroman, or league novel:12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1787–1789</td>
<td>Schiller, Der Geisterseher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1787–1791</td>
<td>Meyern, Dyad-Na-Sore (Schiller reviewed this very critically in the Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung in 1788)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1789</td>
<td>Naubert, Hermann von Unna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1789–1792</td>
<td>Fessler, Marc-Aurel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1790–1793</td>
<td>Tschink, Geschichte eines Geistersehers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1791</td>
<td>Wieland, Peregrinus Proteus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1791–1792</td>
<td>Mozart and Schickaneder, Die Zauberflüte</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1793</td>
<td>Grosse, Der Genius</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jean Paul, Die unsichtbare Loge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Schiller's The Ghost-Seeker

The moral destiny of the human race demands total independence of the will from all influence of sensuous stimuli, and taste, as we know, works uneasingly to make the bond between reason and the senses more and more intimate. Taste does thereby bring the desires to refine themselves and become more in harmony with the demands of reason, but even out of this can arise, in the end, great danger for morality. (NA XXI, 21–22)

Of course, Schiller elsewhere deals with a positive moral role of art—in, for example, “The Stage Viewed as a Moral Institution” (“Die Schaubühne als eine moralische Anstalt betrachtet,” 1784), or “On the Aesthetic Education of Humanity in a Series of Letters” (“Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen,” 1795). There is no need to take issue with that. But as the statement just quoted demonstrates, and as the following interpretation makes clear, Schiller was also concerned with the powerful negative force art can exert.

One need only compare the Prince’s simple life-style with the prodigious artistic skill of those plotting against him to recognize that this novel pits a rather simple man against artistic genius. In the terms of “The Necessary Limits” essay, the prince’s already weak moral will, under extraordinary attack by sensuous artistic forces, loses its power as the novel progresses.

Early descriptions of the prince depict him as modest, retiring, continent, politically unambitious, self-sufficient, and a man of few words. The people banded together to gain control of the prince, however, have a different set of proclivities. The Armenian, for example, far from retiring, exerts a powerful influence on everyone around him: “The physiognomy of the latter had something very unusual which drew our attention to itself. Never in my life have I seen so many features and so little character, so much seductive well-meaning dwelling together with so much repelling frost in one human face” (NA XVI, 53–54). Note here especially the phrases referring to this man as formally powerful but lacking substance: “so many features and so much character.” The straightforward prince, “[who] wanted to live by and for himself” ([der] sich selbst leben wollte), at least as the novel begins, thus contrasts severely with the Armenian, the ultimate artist, for whom pliable appearance means power.

The men and women who aid the Armenian share his ability to control form and manipulate reality; and the prince responds to the features, the dress, the linguistic facility, and the other formal

THE CONFIDENCE MAN AS ARTIST

Even on first reading one recognizes that The Ghost-Seeker is about power: a secret emissary of the Catholic church, with unlimited resources, forcefully converts a Protestant prince in an apparently successful attempt to gain power in a Protestant country. But more specifically, the novel focuses on how the emissary gains control of the prince, a point largely ignored in criticism. What really interests Schiller here is the artistry of the fraud, for the persuasive methods employed in winning over the prince involve the very theatrical, rhetorical media in which Schiller himself had been working for a decade.

Several years after The Ghost-Seeker was written, Schiller’s essay “On the Necessary Limits in the Use of Beautiful Forms” (“Über die notwendigen Grenzen beim Gebrauch schöner Formen,” 1795) directly questioned the place of art in the moral realm:

46

47
attributes of the men who seek to influence him. Even the reading material he chooses, or is led to choose, formally undermines his already suspect powers of reasoning: "the blinding style of the one pulled his imagination in that direction, while the sophistry of the other entangled his reason" (NA XVI, 106).

The emphasis on form continues as the prince is drawn into a secret society. Early in the story several servants of the state inquisition mysteriously lead the prince to the canal, transport him in a gondola, blindfold him before he gets out, lead him up a large stairway and through a long winding passageway until he reaches twenty-six steps which take him down into a hall where the blindfold is removed. There sits a circle of "honorable old men, all dressed in black, the entire hall hung with black tapestries" (NA XVI, 50). Such a ritual route—with blindfolding, long hall, numbered steps, and a circle of men in a symbolically decorated hall—proves a major factor in my interpretation of two of Goethe's novels. Here it serves as an early acclimatization of the prince to the powerful symbols of Freemasonry. This is not to say that the prince is standing in a Freemasonic lodge but rather that these men of the state inquisition impress the prince with "Masonic" ritual in order to make the supposedly enlightened prince more susceptible to the elaborate ritual with which the Sicilian conjures up the ghost.

In that scene, which follows shortly, the prince and his companions take off their shoes and outer clothing and enter a circle drawn with charcoal on the floor:

An altar, hung with black cloth, was erected in the center of the circle, and under the altar a rug of red satin was spread. A Chaldean Bible lay opened on the altar near a skull, and a silver crucifix was fastened to it... Like us, the conjurer was dressed, but barefoot. Around his naked neck he wore an amulet on a chain of human hair, around his loins he had tied a white apron which was marked with secret chiffres and symbolic figures. (NA XVI, 60)

The disrobing, Bible, skull, and symbolic apron of this scene are clearly Freemasonic. The Sicilian later admits that these ritual details were designed "merely to give the performance yet more ceremony and to excite your imagination through the unusual" (NA XVI, 73). 16

Thus the "secret chiffres and symbolic figures" that make up Freemasonry's semiotic system are used to excite the prince's imagi-

nation. The signs promise a (nonexistent) mystery behind themselves while concealing the real mystery of political manipulation.

Describing another scheme in which he was involved, the Sicilian mentions a second way Freemasonry has been useful to him. He first gained some fame among Masonic lodges, he reports, and then used that fraternal base to increase the trust of the old man who was his mark (NA XVI, 81). The prince now has two examples, one semiotic and one fraternal, of how the Sicilian has used Freemasonry to influence him and others. Nonetheless, he unconcernedly lets himself be led into a secret society that further binds him to the Armenian:

... This is also a certain closed society, named the "Bucenato," with the outward appearance of a noble, rational freedom of intellect, promoted the most unbridled licence of opinion and of morals....

The society prided itself on the finest tone and the most cultivated taste, and in fact really had this reputation in all of Venice. This, as well as the appearance of equality which prevailed there, attracted the Prince irresistibly. (NA XVI, 106; emphasis added)

It is clear that in this society "the necessary limits in the use of beautiful forms" have been crossed, that the "influence of sensuous stimuli" has affected the prince's tender morality. Freemasonry's enlightenment and equality, which helped undermine the very authoritarian political and religious system the Armenian wants to reaffirm, are now the means to attract the prince. But in the Bucenato the semblance of enlightenment and the appearance of equality are masks for unchecked immorality. The effect on the prince is disastrous, according to the Count von O.: "But already, through the mere familiarity with this class of people and with their ways of thinking... the pure, beautiful simplicity of his character and the delicacy of his moral feelings were lost" (NA XVI, 107). As a result, the prince loses his sense of self: "He feels that he is not what he otherwise was—he seeks himself—he is dissatisfied with himself" (NA XVI, 120). Now that the prince has been maneuvered from his original wish "to live by and for himself" (NA XVI, 45) to the declaration "everything that distracted me from myself was welcome" (NA XVI, 125), he is ready for the final twist in the Armenian's plot, a scene in which the prince's aesthetic education reaches a climax, in which he meets the last conspirator, a woman whose beautiful form will overwhelm him.
SCHILLER'S THE GHOST-SEER

About to leave Venice and finally to escape the intrigues there, the prince enters a church one conspirator has pointed out and there undergoes a grand aesthetic experience. Already stimulated by that vision, by the beauty surrounding him, he finds a beautiful woman praying in a side chapel and is overwhelmed. Later, hoping to help the prince gain some distance from the event, Baron von F. . . suggests that the prince had been understandably susceptible to the woman’s beauty: “‘what was more natural than that your inflamed imagination created something ideal, something divinely perfect out of it?” (NA XVI, 133). This tendency toward (unearthly) perfection, analogous to the expectation of final disclosure of mystery set up by the séance and the accompanying secret Masonic symbols, finally proves the prince’s undoing. Responding to a question about why he wants to see her again, the prince expresses how strongly this woman’s beauty affects him and how little he cares who she is: “I shall see her. I shall seek out her residence. I shall discover who she is.—Who she is?—What can that matter to me? What I saw, made me happy” (NA XVI, 135). This final turn from being to appearance results, of course, from one more strand in the web of artifice the Armenian has spun around the prince, for the woman too is his tool. The Freemasonic/Jesuitical characters who so skillfully carry out this plot have full confidence in their artistic abilities and the reasons for their performance. The Sicilian, for instance, insists that “doubt of my art . . . was the only obstacle which I did not have to overcome” (NA XVI, 844). But how must the artist who portrays such Machiavellian use of art? How does Schiller feel about his own novel? The answer, as well as the question, lies ultimately in The Ghost-Seer itself. But first, a passage from another story illuminates Schiller’s views on history and art during this time of transition from belles lettres to history and philosophy.

THE ARTIST AS CONFIDENCE MAN

“The Criminal Because of Lost Honor—A True Story” (“Der Verbrecher aus verlorener Ehre—Eine wahre Geschichte”) appeared in Schiller’s Thalia in 1786, the same year he began writing The Ghost-Seer. The introductory paragraphs ask how the enormous gap between the strong passion of the acting character and the quiet mood of the reader can be lessened so as to avoid a negative reaction. Two possibilities exist, the narrator states:

Schiller’s The Ghost-Seer

Either the reader must grow warm like the hero, or the hero must grow cold like the reader.

I know that of the best writers of history of recent time and of antiquity many have held to the first method and have seduced the heart of their reader through overpowering rhetoric [durch hinreissenden Vortrag]. But this style is a usurpation of the rights of the (creative) writer and wrongs the republican freedom of the reading public, which has the right to judge for itself; it is, at the same time, an infringement on the rights of genre, for this method belongs exclusively and specifically to the orator and poet. Only the latter method remains for the writer of history. (NA XVI, 8)

At a time when Schiller was choosing history over literature, this identification of “overpowering rhetoric” with an attack on republican freedom and its relegation to orators and poets is telling. The phrase “overpowering rhetoric” has close parallels in The Ghost-Seer’s repeated references to the confidence-artists’ powerful but morally questionable facility with language:

- an heroic confidence in himself and an overpowering eloquence [eine alles niedernden Beredsamkeit]. (NA XVI, 112)
- imagine the most enchanting figure . . . a flattering tone of voice, the most fluent eloquence [die fliessendste Beredsamkeit]. (NA XVI, 118)
- She passed away like a saint, and her final, dying eloquence [Beredsamkeit] exhausted itself leading her beloved on the path which she was traversing to heaven. (NA XVI, 158)

Such persuasion destroys the prince’s republican freedom in favor of “Catholic” despotism. But these artistic confidence men and women have no monopoly on morally reprehensible rhetoric. The narrators who tell the story are just as guilty.

The novel’s opening paragraph, from the pen of the Count von O. . . inadvertently reveals similarities between his project and the fraud being perpetrated in the story he tells:

I am recounting an event which will seem unbelievable to many, and of which I was, for the most part, myself an eyewitness. . . . [It is] a contribution to the history of fraud and of errors of the human spirit. . . . Pure, strict truth will guide my pen; for when these pages appear in the world, I will no longer exist and will stand neither to gain nor to lose through the report which I am making. (NA XVI, 45)
SCHILLER’S THE GHOST-SEER

Comparing this statement of purpose with the Sicilian’s assertions concerning his own clever story, one finds some surprising congruences:

[Count von O. . ] I am recounting an event which will seem unbelievable to many, and of which I was, for the most part, myself an eyewitness. . . .

[Sicilian] . . . so I want to recount to you a peculiar event concerning this Armenian, of which I was an eyewitness.

Both stories indeed recount a noteworthy event, but the Sicilian dissembles throughout his story, and the count is hardly truthful about how much of the event he saw himself, for almost the entire second half of the story is told in letters by a friend of the count. The similarities continue, for where the count claimed that he had nothing to gain by publishing his account, the Sicilian says, “I am ready to answer, for I have nothing more to lose.”

The Sicilian’s statement is a lie, for his imprisonment is nothing but a ploy to allow him to tell the prince his story. The count’s claim of disinterestedness is also less than true. He knows well that prizes remain to be won after death, especially in the literary world, for he has in hand the Baron von F. . . .’s report on a conversation with the prince in which they discussed “planting seeds for the future” (NA XVI, 124, 161) and also spoke of the immortality achieved by Lycurgus, Socrates, and Aristides (NA XVI, 162).²⁰

Once it is clear that the Count von O. . . and the Sicilian are involved in the same tricky business as they tell their respective stories, there is good reason to examine the count’s motives. The count reveals his purpose when he states that he wants to defend and purify the prince’s historical image by exposing the extraordinary plot against him (NA XVI, 102). He wants to “guide justice,” to change the world’s image of his dearest friend (a man the reader recognizes as weak, easily swayed, fickle, conceited, disloyal, and an enthusiast who lets himself be “misled” into committing a political crime against his own family). After observing powerful artists working to change the prince’s beliefs, can the reader now fail to see similar forces at work in this report from the Count von O. . .?²¹ The count wrote as he began that his readers would be amazed at the “peculiarity of the means” and the “boldness of the goal” which the characters use and pursue in the course of the story. As his narrative unfolds, the count does disclose the artistic methods the conspirators employ in their plot, but he also unwittingly reveals his own clever narrative means. And while he portrays the conspirators’ cunning goal, he simultaneously exposes his own “enlightened” bias against Freemasonry and its offshoots.

When, in the opening paragraph, the count calls his work “a contribution to the history of fraud and of errors of the human spirit,” he sets himself up as an enlightener à la Nicolai and Biester. As noted in the first chapter, Biester proclaimed a similar goal for the Berlinische Monatschrift: “banishment of injurious and erroneous ideas.” In practice this goal soon led Biester to a fanatical crusade against Jesuitical Freemasonry; and Hans Heinrich Borcherdt ascribes this same paranoia to Schiller:

Jesuitism is for Schiller an intellectual and social form that, like the coquetry element in “Kabale und Liebe,” must be opposed in its inner mendacity. Also making this necessary was the union of the Jesuits with the magicians and secret societies. . . . Thus originated the beginning of the “Ghost-Seer,” with the intention of holding up a mirror to that time and showing it where it would arrive if it would continue along that path, showing itself credulously into the arms of frauds like Cagliostro, Schreiber and Saint Germain. (NA XVI, 392)

There is little doubt that Schiller was concerned with the Jesuits and their excesses. Don Carlos and The Ghost-Seer both manifest his preoccupation with the subject during these years. But a jump from that recognition of interest and concern to a statement like Borcherdt’s in which Schiller supposedly wrote the novel to warn against the wicked plots of Jesuitical Freemasons misses a major point of the novel. For the Count von O. . ., not Schiller, hates Jesuits and Freemasons and devotes his memoirs to defaming them. That can be made clear by focusing on a moment on a few specific references to Freemasonry.

After the count’s opening paragraph and a second paragraph in which he explains how he came to live in Venice, he sets out to describe the prince in some detail. Two paragraphs portray a man with strengths and weaknesses: the weaknesses allow the manipulations to follow; the strengths provide a firm basis for the count’s loyalty. The whole description ends with a very short paragraph admitting that the prince was once a religious enthusiast but abruptly denying that he was ever a Freemason: “He never became a Freemason, as far as I know” (NA XVI, 6). Why does this as the closing statement (for the moment) about the prince’s character? Why does
SCHILLER’S THE GHOST-SEEER

the count find it necessary to assert here that the prince was never a Freemason?

Richard Weissenfels refers to this as “a defence of Freemasonry in Körner’s, Biester’s, and Bode’s sense” (SA II, 417). In other words, the Enlightenment Freemasonry to which Schiller’s friends belonged was to be spared the stigma of identification with the Jesuitical secret society portrayed in the novel. But when one looks at the Count von O. as a prejudiced observer, when one recognizes his wish to clear the prince of as many embarrassing entanglements as possible, the denial takes on quite another meaning. The rest of the story shows the prince drawn, in fact, ever closer to the heart of Jesuitical Freemasonry. Hedging against that reality, the count wants to deny as far as possible any involvement the prince may have had with Freemasonry.

Later, after admitting that the prince indeed became a member of Bucentauro, the count hastens once again to save his prince’s reputation: “The society had its secret degrees, and I want to believe, considering the Prince’s honor, that he was never deemed worthy of the most inner sanctum” (NA XVI, 107). As he promised in the beginning, the Count von O. writes here and elsewhere in his memoirs to purify the prince’s reputation and to disclose the hated Jesuitical and Freemasonic conspiracy which leads him astray. Despite the count’s repeated protestations of noninvolvement, however, it is clear that the prince is overwhelmed by the artistry of Freemasonry.

As stated, the bias against Jesuitical Freemasonry was the Count von O.’s, not Schiller’s. Although little has been made of the conventional separation of author and narrator in previous readings of The Ghost-Seer, it is of utmost importance in this interpretation that seeks to read the novel as a comment on art as an immoral institution. The Ghost-Seer has, in fact, multiple narrators. As already pointed out, the Count von O. promises to tell a true story “of which I was, for the most part, myself an eyewitness” (NA XVI, 45). Early in his tale, however, he must let the Sicilian speak. The Sicilian, in almost the same words, likewise promises a true story by virtue of having been an eye witness. Not long thereafter the Count von O. admits that at this point he had to leave Venice and that the rest of the story will come through citations from letters written to him by the Baron von F. In turn, large parts of the baron’s account are retellings of stories related by the prince (his “vision” of the beautiful woman in the church), by Civitella (his ob-

Schiller’s The Ghost-Seer

servation of the scene between the woman and the Armenian), and by Biondello (whose story “proves” what a faithful servant he is). And as if this chasm between deed and final telling were not already wide enough, an editor of the Count von O.’s memoirs also makes himself known, as in these two examples: “From the memoirs” (NA XVI, 45), or “—the Count von O. continues” (NA XVI, 102). Finally, one more narrator appears at the end of the original, long version of the philosophical conversation, signing a footnote “S” (NA XVI, 184). This ever expanding string of people bent on telling a true story about events they saw with their own eyes effectively removes the reader four and even five times from the event. “S,” a narrator, the Count von O. , and the Sicilian—or later “S,” a narrator, the Count von O., the Baron von F. , and the prince form chains so uncertain as to give certain pause to any reader. Although the reader inevitably senses a distance from the actual events, the various narrators work hard to relieve that unease and lead onward. They claim to be eyewitnesses, promise truth, and awaken a host of expectations that keep the reader following their story in search of satisfaction. And while the Baron von F. , the Count von O., S., and the other narrator play on the reader’s sensibilities, the Sicilian, the Armenian, Biondello, Civitelli, and the beautiful woman spin out a fiction for the prince.

One of their most effective ploys is to stimulate a series of expectations in him, which they themselves cleverly fulfill. This sequence of expectation and fulfillment, as it acts on both prince and reader, provides a final insight into the morality and proper use of art. The Armenian first raises an expectation in the prince by mysteriously stating—“Um neun Uhr ist er gestorben.” With no context, the prince can only wait until a letter arrives confirming that his cousin died on that day at that time. Next the Sicilian promises to produce the ghost of the friend, who, on his death bed, had called the prince to him and said: “I shall not see my fatherland again, and thus you will learn a secret to which no one but I has the key. In a monastery on the Flemish border lives a ——” here he died. The hand of death cut the thread of his speech; I would like to have him here and to hear the continuation” (NA XVI, 58). The prince wants to know how this story ended, he wants the fragment made whole, and he also wants his wish to see a ghost fulfilled. The Sicilian obliges and conjures up a ghost, which begins the story anew: “In a monastery on the Flemish border lives ——” At this moment, however, a second ghost appears and interrupts the scene.
The second ghost finishes the twice-broken story, giving the prince the answers he wants; but he also leaves him with an enigmatic warning, thus beginning the cycle anew.

The prince has longed for knowledge beyond rationality, for certainty beyond the grave (in his desire to see a ghost and to know the conclusion of his dying friend's story), and through their elaborate fiction the Sicilian and the Armenian have heightened his desire and then provided such knowledge. The entire process is closely tied to storytelling, as the prince's susceptibility to the flow of a story demonstrates. When the Sicilian momentarily breaks off his account, the prince can scarcely contain himself: "a shudder of expectation arrested our breath——" (NA XVI, 87). What the prince wants above all else, is closure, finality, fulfillment, whether rational or irrational, whether true or false, whether moral or immoral.

But all the satisfactions attained in the novel grow out of artificial constructs; all closure is fraudulent. The stories begin within the plot constructed by the Armenian and his friends, and the endings are all part of their scheme. Contrary to that tendency, however, the novel itself "ends" without closure. Its final phrase arouses expectations that are never fulfilled: "At the bed of my friend I finally heard the unprecedented story" (NA XVI, 159).

Surely the Count von O... is not to blame for the lack of closure here. His strongest desire is to exonerate the prince by disclosing the perfidy of Jesuitical Freemasons. He gains nothing by cutting off his story, and in fact this break causes him to lose power over his reader (the power to influence, the power to uncover the full plot and lead to perfect belief). Just as the prince has only been led part way toward the Armenian's goal (there remain, perhaps, a family murder and the taking of the throne), the reader too must be drawn to the end of the plot. So who cuts off the story here, and why?

I do not intend to suppress evidence that Schiller meant "to continue [the novel] further" (SA II, XXXI), although the reader should be aware by now that my interpretation has its own bias and that evidence is being manipulated to a calculated end. But the internal evidence hereof cited gives good reason to conclude that Schiller (as opposed to the various narrators) meant, for either artistic or antiartistic reasons, to leave the novel a fragment. He was, as Lotte had prophesied, "besieged for the continuation" ("um die Fortsetzung bestürmt," SA II, XXXVII); even princes(!) pressed him for a

continuation. But after so carefully exposing a fatal desire for closure and so fully undermining those who provide such fulfillment, how could he seriously consider continuing the story?

A final clue as to Schiller's motivation lies in the original philosophical conversation between the prince and the Baron von F... , a passage written at a time when Schiller claimed to have lost interest in the story. The conversation is very long and seems unnecessarily tedious in its context. Besides that, as others have pointed out (NA XVI, 394), the ideas of the second half of the conversation are such as to lead the prince out of his spiritual slavery, not further into it as continuation of the novel would require. Recognizing both of these facts, Schiller severely cut the conversation in the second book edition (1792) and further cut it for the third (1798). The following passage, then, originally attributed to the Prince, was subsequently cut as unnecessary and/or not in character.

The Baron von F... has just commented on the utter perfection of God's creation, and the prince answers:

That upon which you and others base your hopes, that very thing has overthrown my own—this very sense of perfection of things. If everything were not so resolved in and of itself, if I only could see even a single disfiguring splinter rising out of this beautiful circle, that would, for me, prove immortality. But everything, everything that I see and take notice of falls back to this visible middlepoint, and our most noble intellectuality is a so absolutely necessary machine to drive this wheel of transitoriness. (NA XVI, 183)

Neither the Armenian nor the Count von O... has spared any effort to create a perfectly closed and affective system. But such perfection, the argument goes here, necessarily has an end. Any end can be seen. Closure is effable. Preferable to this finite "perfection" is a fragment, an unclosed system that allows for progression, that provokes questions and thoughts and learning. That The Ghost-Seer remains a fragment reflects Schiller's commitment to work against the grain of the characters and narrator he has created.

This leads finally back to Schiller's decision to feature the myth of Jesuit infiltration of Masonic lodges. The myth itself grew out of a desire to explain bewildering political, social, and intellectual changes in the latter part of the eighteenth century, the "anarchy of the Enlightenment" as Schiller describes it in his discussion of Bode. The most simple explanation of the threatening
changes was that someone had planned them, that a secret society had conspired to radically alter the course of history. This is, of course, precisely what the Count von O. would have the reader believe about the altered course of the prince's life, and his warnings concerning the Jesuitical and Freemasonic machinations of the Armenian and his friends take the same form as the conspiracy theory. The result is a false sense of knowledge, of closure, of satisfaction of desire.

The Freemasonry Biester and friends defended was a bastion of the Enlightenment, while the new, high-grade, Jesuit-inspired systems were seen as enemies. In Schiller's story the Armenian and his coconspirators indeed use Freemasonry's organization and semiotic system to disabuse the prince of Enlightenment ideals. But Schiller also exposes the conspiracy theory propagated by the narrators (and Biester), a theory that fixes blame on Jesuits and draws attention away from an even more acute problem: the prince's (and more generally, eighteenth-century society's) absolute need for closure, a need easily manipulated by artists and confidence men. Freemasonry may indirectly undermine an absolutist political system; but as Schiller demonstrates here, in its secrecy and gradually unfolding ritual, it also plays on a very human desire for closure. Such closure, politically speaking, is exemplified by the absolutist system the Armenian brilliantly reestablishes.

Setting out to write about an immoral, directly political use of art, Schiller found a perfect vehicle in the Freemasonry attacked in the Berlinische Monatschrift, for it featured a symbolic system employed for political ends. By focusing on the use of such symbols, by identifying his narrators with the Masonic and Jesuitical confidence artists and thus calling art into question, by pointing to conspiracy theories as satisfying but empty solutions, by leaving his own work a fragment, and finally by turning away from "immoral art" for nearly six years to study and write philosophy and history, Schiller proved his dedication to the "republican freedom" of the reading public.

CHAPTER THREE

Ritual Routes in
Wilhelm Meister's Travels

Des Maurers Wandel / Es gleicht dem Leben.
—Goethe, "Symbolum"

Welch ein schönes Symbol des unermüdlichen aber zugleich mit Gefahren umringten Lebens, sind diese Reisen mit dem auf die Brust gekehrten tödlichen Stahl.
—Karl Philipp Moritz,
Fragmente aus dem Tagebuche eines Geisterscheers

Karl Philipp Moritz published his "Masonic novel" Andreas Hartknopf in 1786, the year before Schiller's Ghost-Seer began to appear. Like the other authors who concern us here, Moritz was not primarily interested in holding up a mirror to contemporary Freemasonry, but found the fraternity a convenient vehicle for expressing other concerns: "The author of Andreas Hartknopf did not merely . . . choose the form of a novel to clothe certain concepts of Freemasonry, but the Freemasonic in his book is itself only clothing by which he wanted to disseminate . . . certain, still much misunderstood truths."

That precisely describes Schiller's novel, which depicts high-grade Freemasonry because its paradigmatic ritual, like much art, denies a democratic arbitrariness and promises mystery and authoritarian closure. The Ghost-Seer is not about Freemasons, but rather the production of signs, and in this it is closely related to Wilhelm Meister, both the Apprenticeship and the Travels, for Goethe's novels likewise use Freemasonry to examine arbitrary and natural figures.