Fictions of Freemasonry: Chapter 1, 18th-Century Freemasonry

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ever, fill in many of those gaps, and supplementary studies will surely result.

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CHAPTER ONE

Eighteenth-Century Freemasonry: Politics and Semiotics

Es ist wohl denkbar: daß die öffentliche Geschichte sich aus der geheimen werde erklären lassen können.
—Fichte, Philosophie der Maurerei

If history be no ancient Fable / Free Masons came from Tower of Babel.
—“The Freemasons: an Hudibrastic poem,” London, 1723

FREEMASONIC HISTORY

An early description of Freemasonry declares it an “ancient and honourable institution: ancient no doubt it is, as having subsisted from time immemorial; and honourable it must be acknowledged to be, as by a natural tendency it conduces to make those so who are obedient to its precepts.” Both assertions make sense: for Freemasonry has roots in stonemason guilds that date back through the centuries; and the moral precepts of the order are indeed conducive to an “honourable” life. But in both cases one can affirm the opposite as well: for Freemasonry is a distinctly modern institution, closely tied to the eighteenth century in which it experienced its greatest successes; and in reference to its honor, like most institutions Freemasonry has given rise to its share of scandals, having, in fact, harbored some of the great charlatans of the last three centuries. These and related dualities—ancient and modern, moral and immoral, secret and public, literal and symbolic, democratic and authoritarian—characterize a complex, constantly shifting Freemasonic movement.
Freemasons trace their official beginning to a historical act: at a 1717 meeting in London several Masonic lodges joined to form a Grand Lodge. The lodges represented in the 1717 merger had developed out of guilds of “operative” stonemasons which began to admit aristocrats, intellectual and business leaders, and men of other trades as honorary or “speculative” masons. The purely speculative, nonoperative lodges that finally resulted lost contact with the actual building trades, retaining the compass, square, trowel, apron, columns, steps, and other masonic and architectural tools and structures as symbols of their new enterprise. The building of Solomon’s temple became an allegory for the inner, moral development of a brother; and the stone-by-stone erection of Europe’s cathedrals was ritually evoked as initiates ceremonially established harmonious inner edifices.

Six years after the Grand Lodge was formed, Anderson’s Constitutions of the Free-Masons, containing the History, Charges, Regulations etc. of that most Ancient and Right Worshipful Fraternity (London, 1723) presented a blueprint for the moral structure of the growing fraternity. In the document’s first “Charge,” Masons are directed to obey moral laws and to subscribe to that religion on which all men can agree. On that basis, the document promises, Masonry will emerge as a harmonizing influence, promoting friendships among those whom sectarian religion separates. The second charge asserts that the Mason is a peaceful subject of civil authority and that he must never take part in conspiracies against the freedom and welfare of his nation. The promised consequence is that rulers will support and promote the brotherhood in times of peace. The third charge requires that only free-born, mature men of good reputation be admitted as members of a lodge; women are explicitly excluded. Further charges address how Masons should relate to one another within and outside the lodge: there should be no arguments over religion or politics in the lodge, all Masons are brothers and should be treated equally, and brothers should aid one another whenever possible.

The organization this document helped to foster appealed strongly to men of the Enlightenment; and soon Freemasonry could claim influential members throughout Europe and America. Even an abbreviated list of eighteenth-century Freemasons is truly extraordinary. Wren, Pope, Hogarth, Scott, Boswell, and Burns were all Masons. Franklin, Washington, and Revere were American Masons. Lafayette, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Beaumarchais, and the Montgolfier brothers were among the many influential French Masons. And Klopstock, Klinger, Nicolai, Moritz, Kotzebue, Iffland, Forster, Mesmer, Haydn, Mozart, Wieland, Claudius, Lessing, Herder, Fichte, Goethe—and dozens of monarchs and princes, including Frederick the Great and several of his successors—were German-speaking Freemasons.

Frederick’s initiative into the brotherhood in 1738, less than a year after the Hamburg lodge had been founded as the first on German soil, was a key event for German Freemasonry. Frederick became the master of his own lodge and took an active part in Freemasonry for years after assuming the throne in 1740. During his reign he protected and supported the order, writing, for example, of Maria Theresa’s intermittent attacks on Freemasonry: “The Empress is exactly right, for if she cannot know what is occurring in the lodges she is not required to put up with them. I, however, who know [the lodges], should not only put up with them, but must also justly protect and maintain them.” In a 1777 correspondence with the lodge La Royale York de l’Amitié, Frederick renewed his commitment to the brotherhood, while issuing a veiled warning: “A society whose only work is to fruitfully bring forth all the virtues in my states can always count on my protection. This is a laudable task for every good ruler, and I will never cease fulfilling it.” Frederick’s participation in the lodge underscores its social importance, and his need to limit its functions to advancing moral virtues indicates the political potential of the secret society.

In the decade following establishment of the first German lodge, further lodges were founded in Dresden, Berlin, Bayreuth, Leipzig, Frankfurt am Main, and Vienna, usually with English permission. In the early years, following the English pattern, German lodges raised their members to three degrees: Apprentice, Journeyman (or Fellow Craft), and Master. But as early as 1742, French-inspired “Scottish” lodges were established in Berlin and Hamburg, introducing degrees beyond the original three; and that break from tradition set off an explosion of changes and competing systems. Some orders accepted women. Others developed rituals based on Rosicrucian lore, stories of the Knights Templar, and Catholic doctrine. Among the more notorious of these were the Clermont System (a “Catholic” order), the occult Gold- und Rosenkreuzer (whose proponents Wölfler and Bischoffswerder were influential advisers to mystically inclined Frederick Wilhelm II, Frederick the Great’s successor), the Mopsorden (an order of “adoption” that accepted women
and gave rise to much gossip), and the powerful Strict Observance. Perhaps the best known of all the Masonic offshoots was the order of Illuminati, a radical political order founded in Bavaria by Jesuit-educated Adam Weishaupt.3

With the rise of such widely diverse systems (many of them spectacularly opposed to the rationalist, nonpolitical, nonsectarian early order), with a rapid increase in membership, and with growing public belief that Freemasons were involved in conspiracies against church and state,4 attempts at reform were inevitable. Leading Masons gathered in Wilhelmsbad in 1782 to rectify the brotherhood, an effort that met some success. After that reform, throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, Freemasonry continued to grow in terms of pure numbers, but it has never again reached the levels of influence it enjoyed in the eighteenth century. Why, then, was Freemasonry so attractive in that century? And why did it become the Enlightenment institution par excellence?

THE ATTRACTION OF FREEMASONRY

In the fall of 1792, the idealist philosopher Johann Gottlob Fichte responded to a friend’s questions concerning his Masonic affiliation:

I am not a Mason. Irrespective of the many inducements to become one, I had important reasons to avoid them. . . . As a means to acquire acquaintances and helpful connections it is excellent, and for this purpose I recommend it strongly. . . . It seems to me, namely, that in our age, brought by luxury to slavery and by slavery to all manner of corruption, we are in dire need . . . of a society as a seed of goodness; and for that purpose Freemasonry—not in its present form, but at least in its already authorized husk—could qualify. . . . If you become a Freemason, then, we shall, God willing, one day meet.5

Despite his reservations, Fichte did become a Mason, and during the seven years he was active in the brotherhood, he used lodges in various cities to establish contact with influential Masons. He also expanded and specified (most specifically in the Masonic lectures he gave in Berlin)6 his view of the brotherhood.

Fichte’s lectures begin with a short description of recent events, emphasizing the persecutions the order has suffered from hostile governments and the Catholic church. He then discusses the chaos caused by competing sects of Masons and reminds his listeners of recent public disclosures and ridicule. In the face of all this, however, talented, intelligent men of character continue to gather in Masonic lodges. Why? Fichte’s answer, put most simply, is that Freemasonry provides educational opportunities not available elsewhere. In society at large each man trains for a certain profession and receives a one-sided education. The separate professions are at odds with one another and work to fragment rather than unify society. Freemasonry’s purpose, Fichte states, is education of the whole man.7 Masonry is a “training ground for versatility.” As such it supplements religious education by teaching the nonsectarian essence of religion; and it perfects political education by uniting patriotic and cosmopolitan views, making Masons good citizens of their states and the world as well.

These themes—of unification and wholeness, of Freemasonry as a counterweight to sectarian religion, of healing a split between nationalism and cosmopolitanism, of moral education—reiterate a view of Freemasonry set forth two decades earlier by a character in Lessing’s Ernst and Falk, Dialogues for Freemasons (Ernst und Falk, Gespräche für Freimüther, 1778, 1780). Falk, a Mason conversing with his non-Mason friend Ernst, points out that humanity is divided into warring states, competing social classes, and various religions. Freemasons work to lessen the negative impact of these three destructive divisions. In the lodge Masons learn to be cosmopolitan, socially equal, and nonsectarian.8

Fichte’s and Lessing’s descriptions of Freemasonry as cosmopolitan and nationalistic, democratic and nonpolitical reveal a series of tensions that may provide a key to the order’s phenomenal eighteenth-century success. In assessing that tension, Reinhart Koselleck describes Freemasonry as “a specific answer to the system of absolutism” prevalent in eighteenth-century Europe.9 According to Koselleck’s theory, men of intellect and economic influence, denied direct political power by the prevailing system, found in Masonry an avenue to indirect power. Masons appropriated the only sphere available to them, “den ausserstaatlichen geistigen Innenraum” (56), setting themselves off, in this “moral innerspace outside the state,” from church and state to form a third axis of power in society. The secrecy by which the new moral realm was set apart, so antithetical to the openness of the Enlightenment, draws Koselleck’s special attention, for the Masonic secret leads, in his analysis, into the center of the dialectic between morality and politics.
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The mystery promised by the secret society was different in each Masonic system; but in the secrecy protecting that mystery “lay the promise of... a new, better, and previously unknown life. The initiation meant ‘the discovery of a new world hidden in the midst of the old one’” (61). Such promises appealed, of course, not only to advocates of the Enlightenment but also to men interested in alchemy, mystical religion, and hierarchical power; many of the systems that sprang up played on such desires. In this sense, the new secret societies threatened advances Enlightenment thinkers believed they had made. But Koselleck is interested in another sort of mystery, a moral, political “critique” that leads to an eventual “crisis”: the overthrow of absolutist governments.

From the beginning, Freemasons separated themselves from any overt political activity, expressly forbidding politics in their lodges. Their task, they said, was not to reform the state but rather to change the individual. This moral focus, along with the secrecy cloaking the lodges, gave Masons various freedoms unavailable outside the lodge. In the lodge “Noblemen, gentlemen and working men” met and dealt with one another on an equal social footing, an impossibility in a state that recognized and legitimized differences in class. Such moral freedom, Koselleck suggests, undermined the rule of the state and became the secret of Freemasonry. And that secret was very attractive: “Under the sign of the Masonic mystery arose the social structure of the moral international... The lodges became the most powerful social institution of the moral world in the eighteenth century” (64).

As an institution of the moral world, Freemasonry’s political influence was necessarily indirect, but nonetheless potent:

Directly, the Masons have nothing to do with politics, but they live according to a law which, when it prevails, makes an overthrow superfluous. They withdraw from the state and from the government and form an indirect power which threatens sovereignty, but only morally... Morality is the presumptive sovereign. Directly unpolitical, the Mason is, in fact, indirectly political. Morality remains indeed non-violent and peaceful, but in that very mode, through its polarisation to politics, it calls the state into question. (68)

Koselleck’s theoretical construct makes sense of, and in return is legitimized by, various ritual practices that served as vehicles or expressions of Freemasonry’s politically subversive moral law. One of the most interesting expressions was Masonic landscape gardening.10

The eighteenth-century change in taste from highly formal, geometrically designed baroque gardens to more natural “English” gardens was in part an expression of changes in political preference.11 Baroque gardens, of which Louis XIV’s gardens at Versailles were the most prominent, were seen by Shaftesbury, Addison, Pope, Rousseau, Herder, Schiller, and others as allegories of absolutist monarchies: “Where nature seemed alienated from its own being, as in the baroque garden, it came to be a symbol of political oppression and arbitrariness, a synonym for the despotic order” (Buttlar, Der Landschaftsgarten, 11). English liberals, influenced in part by architectural symbols in the Freemasonic ritual many of them knew, developed gardens in which the architecture of the landscape was intended to reflect and inspire a moral, naturally human, nonabsolutist pattern. Tracing a ritual route in a Masonic initiation, or following the “belt-walk” or “circuit” of an English garden, the initiate was meant to undergo a moral education.12 Other Europeans followed the English lead; and the Wirlitz gardens near Dessau, for example, were constructed with such Masonic pedagogical practice in mind.13

These gardens, like other manifestations of Enlightenment Freemasonry, are still indirect political statements. The Illuminati, however, provide Koselleck with an excellent historical example of the progression from a moral concern to direct criticism of the state. Considering themselves more qualified morally to lead the state than those in power and protected by the secrecy of their lodges, the Illuminati planned to take over the state by gradually filling the state bureaucracy with worthy members of the order. The time would eventually come, then, when they would, de facto, be the state. The plan never came to fruition, for the Bavarian government exposed the Illuminati and exacted harsh penalties from the conspirators. But, as Koselleck points out, there were still significant results.

In the polemics against secret societies that followed the Bavarian crackdown, “the first political camps driven by the consciousness of being in a latently critical situation formed” (106). Warring factions joined together to defend the structure of the absolutist state against the enemy supposedly lurking in secret societies. Secret societies were branded states within states (which, in a sense, they were), and in the struggle for power between the state and the secret state it harbored revolution was (correctly) foreseen.
Contemporary fears were not only limited to the sphere of politics but also to religion. Official Masonic policy required lodges to accept anyone who professed some belief in the “Great Architect of the Universe,” a practice indirectly undercutting sectarian religion in the same way democratic ideals in the lodge undermined state authority. Friedrich Schlegel made this point while warning against Freemasonry in his Philosophy of History (1828): “For this reason, in a Revelation imparted to all, there can be no secrecy. . . . This would be to constitute a church within a church—a measure to be as little tolerated or justified as an imperium in imperio. . . . such a secret parastitical church would unquestionably be very soon transformed into a secret directory for political changes and revolutions.” But just why, Koselleck asks, did indirectly exerted power, both political and religious, arouse such great fears of overthrowing throne and altar?

The moral emphasis alone would not have raised fears of imminent political change. But a philosophy of history developed in part from Enlightenment secret societies indeed caused anxiety. From the beginning Freemasons reinterpreted the history of the world, highlighting masonic events (e.g., great architectural achievements) that led from Adam to the Masonic success in eighteenth-century England. The newly written history gave legitimacy to Masonic plans for the future. In Germany, Koselleck argues, this involves transforming the Leibnizian theodicy. Masons themselves, working in secret (as had divine providence), become the new gods who guide history: “It is, henceforth, the Masonic order which provides that the harmony of the cosmos really rules on this earth” (109).

Schiller touches on the (fictional) replacement of gods by emissaries of a secret society in a letter to Goethe about the Society of the Tower in Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship: “The novel . . . approaches the epic in several ways, among them, in that it has machines that, in a certain sense, represent the gods or ruling fate.” The Illuminati finally fulfilled this sort of thinking, combining Rousseauian ideas about nature, a moralized Christianity, and the contemporary ideal of progress into a philosophy of history. A knowledge of the Illuminati’s role in bringing that philosophy of history to fruition was the final secret toward which initiates of that order worked.

Despite Masonic protestations to the contrary, then, the seeds of revolt were nurtured in Freemasonry and its offshoots, most clearly in the Illuminati. Exposés like Ernst August Anton von Güchhausen’s “Disclosure of the System of the Cosmopolitan Republic” (“Entüllung des System der Weltbürger-Republik,” 1780), despite their misreadings of the Jesuits’ role in the process, are correct in revealing the political implications of Freemasonry’s moral goals: that “the existence of the secret society would lead to the dissolution of the existing order, irrespective of what the Masons themselves have in mind.”

In terms slightly different from those with which Koselleck works, Jürgen Habermas describes Freemasonry as one of several seventeenth- and eighteenth-century institutions—including coffee houses in England, salons in France, and language societies in Germany—which met the developing need for a public sphere (Öffentlichkeit). The social equality ruling in Masonic lodges, as well as their open discussions, could occur only outside the absolutist political arena. According to Kant, the limitation of the public sphere was “the effective cause of all secret societies. For it is a natural function of humanity to communicate with one another, primarily about what concerns humanity in general” (Habermas, 133). Ironically, then, these early steps toward a public sphere took place in a jealously guarded private sphere. The rational communication that marks a public sphere is normally furthered by open publication; but in the eighteenth century that communication required the protection from publication afforded by the secrecy of the lodge. Habermas points out that Lessing’s character Falk draws attention to a secret origin of the public sphere when he claims that Freemasonry is just as ancient as bourgeois society, “if bourgeois society is not, in fact, but a descendant of Freemasonry” (51).

In the historical development Habermas and Koselleck describe, the gradual development of the public sphere lessens the need for secrecy and isolation. Exclusive, ritualistic Freemasonry becomes an anachronism attracting those who are fleeing rather than pursuing an increasing public sphere. Among others, Herder recognized and welcomed changes in Freemasonry. In his “Dialogue on an Invisible-Visible Society” (“Gespräch über eine unsichtbar-sichtbare Gesellschaft,” 1793), written as a continuation of Lessing’s Ernst and Falk, he argues for opening up the Freemasonry that, as a secret society, helped prepare for the Enlightenment. Now that it has achieved its goals, he writes, Masonry should become a German Academy or Humanitarian Society. The lodge should become a library to propagate truth openly.
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But Herder's progressive attitude toward the new public sphere was not universally shared. Friedrich Schlegel, for example, continued Lessing's Masonic dialogue in quite another vein in his "Ernst und Falk, Fragment of a Third Dialogue on Freemasonry" ("Ernst und Falk, Bruchstück eines dritten Gesprächs über Freimaurerei," 1804). Angered by the increased democracy inspired by the French Revolution, he argued for a renewal of secrecy. Scientific, artistic, and mystical knowledge, he suggested, should be kept from the democratic hordes. But even while arguing opposite sides of the question, both Herder and Schlegel show the contemporary secret society to be the institution of political opposition (whether reactionary or progressive) Koselleck and Habermas describe.

Throughout this discussion of Freemasonry as a nonpolitical political institution, the focus has been on moral laws taught under the cover of secrecy. By changing that focus slightly, from the moral laws to the semiotic system through which they are taught, we can open up a second area of investigation, one quite different from, yet related to, the first.

In 1810 Karl Christian Friedrich Krause, a philosopher and leading Dresden Freemason, published a book very much in the spirit of Herder’s recommendation for Masonic progression from a secret society to a German Academy.17 Krause sees Freemasonry as a necessary step toward a universal Menschheitsbund (league of humanity). To move toward this final goal, he makes public what he calls “The Three Oldest Documents of the Craft of the Masonic Brotherhood” ("Die drei ältesten Kunsturkunden der Freimaurerbruderschaft"), pointing out that the rituals contained therein have already been published in England. The “secret” symbols involved are not the essence of Freemasonry, he argues, and the (political) oath of secrecy sworn as part of the ritual is a lamentable intrusion. It is a disservice to both the brotherhood and humanity to pretend there is a great secret—whether political, alchemical, or theosophical—hidden behind a final ritual curtain. To cure such esoteric tendencies, Krause presents a “higher spiritualization of the most important symbols and customs of old-English Freemasonry handed down in the three oldest documents of the craft." This “spiritualization” of symbols is presented in the catechetical form of Freemasonic ritual.

Krause first discusses the main symbols of Freemasonry, the “three great lights”—Bible, square, compass—which teach, respectively, to live faithfully, to make one’s actions lawful, and to unite brothers within certain boundaries. The Bible is a good symbol, he writes, because it depicts pious people in “accurate images.” The square is called a natural, old figure of the law; and the compass is shown to work architecturally in ways that can be seen as analogues for society. Krause continues in this vein, explaining or “spiritualizing” the three smaller lights (sun, moon, and master mason) and many other symbols of Freemasonry. As Krause’s liturgical explanations illustrate, much of Masonic ritual consists of presentation of various symbols followed by explanations relating them to the moral education of the initiate.18

According to Krause, the symbols drawn from the craft of masonry are somewhat arbitrary. Any other craft or art (he mentions music, painting, and medicine) could likewise supply figures portraying and affecting human development. The symbols are not the essence, but they act as does the word for thought or a sound for emotion. But even as he stresses the arbitrariness of these signs, he wants to ground or motivate them, calling them “accurate images” (“treue Bilder”) and emphasizing their “natural, sincere, honorable origin” (31). By calling attention to the arbitrariness of Masonic symbols, Krause can discredit the nonexistent esoteric treasures so many seek in Freemasonry; and by emphasizing the natural suitability of the same symbols, he gains natural, moral authority for the teachings presented through the symbols.

In Lessing’s Ernst and Falk, as Alice Kuzniar has pointed out, Falk similarly “disparages masonic symbolic language because the essence of what masonry means cannot be revealed by its signs, texts, and customs,” and yet he also “delights in uncovering unconventional etymologies and shifting meanings in order to arrive at the true meaning of the word masonry.”19 “In the process,” Kuzniar concludes, “the initial mystery is necessarily lost, for the hidden origins of Freemasonry are disclosed as linguistic play. The letter replaces the spirit” (17).

There is, of course, a logical problem set up as Krause (or Lessing’s Falk) plays both sides. He tries to deal with this by describing a development from the arbitrary symbol, which is but a crutch, to an unmediated truth, which must nevertheless be poetically mediated. The seed that Freemasonic ritual presently is, he writes, will grow to maturity
when this representation is no longer only symbolic and allegorical, but also, most substantially, immediately artifical and representative; when it does not, as a product of the understanding, merely affect the understanding, but also, as a direct, substantial, nonfigurative expression of a human, beautifully modulated heart, affect the heart, and move and elevate the whole person; which is only possible through the help of the most beautiful arts. (36)

As Krause’s historical-liturgical essay draws to a close, he stresses again the arbitrariness of Masonic symbolism: “for a man is a Freemason because of his entire, human, universally healthy life, not through the arbitrary choice of his signs. He is a Freemason, independent of all symbols” (41). And Krause calls for the Mason to “spiritualize” his symbols: “that he seek to discern clearly what they intimate figuratively, but to do so without a figure, and to come to love what has been discerned in a pure heart” (43).

Krause’s struggle with this problem represents one side of the ongoing debate in Masonic circles over the status of the fraternity’s symbols. The other side of the discussion is well portrayed in the oath Krause prints, an oath that protects the brotherhood’s symbols with threats of violence, demonstrating in the process a linguistic idolatry from which Krause wants to free the institution: “I furthermore do swear, that I 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 anything moveable or immovable, 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” (164). The threatened penalty fits the crime, for the brother who reveals the Masonic symbols (raised to the status of magical signs by the oath) will have his throat cut and his “Tongue torn out by the Root, and that to be buried in the Sands of the Sea” (165). Krause’s point is that there are no “secret mysteries,” as the oath calls them, in Masonic symbolism, only moral teachings. And if there are no “secret mysteries” behind or in the signs, then the oath that protects the signs is superfluous, or to put it more strongly, politically and religiously misleading.

Krause’s discussion of Masonic symbols fits into a more general debate about signs and sign systems that took place during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Michel Foucault discusses some of the changes in how language was viewed in his The Order of Things, pointing out that signs seen as natural, akin with things, representative of the world, marks of truth, become arbitrary fictions that may or may not translate that truth. Where knowledge had earlier “always resided in the opening up of a discovered, affirmed, or secretly transmitted sign” (59), where knowledge had divined “signs that were absolute and older than itself” (60), it now became “a network of signs built up step by step in accordance with a knowledge of what is probable” (60). This discovery of probability in place of the absolute, of the necessarily arbitrary sign, has political as well as epistemological implications.

David Wellbery describes this shift in emphasis: “The desacralization of language is the extrication of language from its place within the ceremonies of religious and absolutist authority and its transformation into a medium of communication and debate among equal subjects.” This is exactly Krause’s project. By publishing several Masonic rites he hopes to desacralize symbols that, hidden and mystified, work to set Masonry up as a particular absolutist power. Contending that the various symbols are arbitrary, he argues (in Wellbery’s words), that “it is only the ideas that count and they must exhibit rational coherence if they are to be acceptable” (36). No fear here of writing it, printing it, cutting it “whereby it may become legible... whereby the secret Art, may be unlawfully obtained.” There simply is no secret art, and no signs that could absolutely reveal it.

Nevertheless, Krause insists on a natural, affective ritual, appealing to both reason and emotion “with the aid of all the fine arts.” Much of Masonic appeal comes through the aesthetic quality of its ritual; and it is no accident that literary figures like Friedrich Ludwig Schröder and Adolph Freiherr von Knigge were involved in creating and recreating various rites. In the wake of competing mystical systems, Schröder, one of the century’s leading theater directors, simplified the ritual, making it more nearly resemble the original English system. Knigge, a popular novelist, worked in the opposite direction as he added Freemasonic symbolism to the stark, rationalistic system originally outlined by Weishaupt for the Illuminati, stimulating sudden growth in what had been a tiny fraternity. Whether simplifying or embellishing, whether desacralizing or mystifying, whether publishing or keeping secret, the philosophers, novelists, theatrical directors, educators, and others involved in forming Masonic symbolism were all intensely aware of the power residing in the semiotic systems they were creating.

By focusing on the secrecy that separates Freemasonry from the state and the church, and by emphasizing Masonic practices
(social equality, insistence on nonsectarianism, practiced democracy, moral criticism of the state) that question all absolutist states and religions, Koselleck and Habermas enable us to see Freemasonry as a particularly influential Enlightenment institution responsible, in part, for political advances made during the eighteenth century. And Krause, with his insistence on Masonic ritual as an arbitrary semiotic system, likewise places Masonry in a desacralized, nonabsolutist context. However, opposing these "enlightened" tendencies toward political and religious "democracy," the various hierarchical systems, unknown heads, fearful oaths, alchemical practices, and esoterically interpreted rituals promising absolute knowledge and power exerted semiotic and political forces of their own.

The political and semiotic oppositions found in eighteenth-century Freemasonry are thematic strands that can be followed from Schiller's Ghost-Seer through Goethe's Wilhelm Meister and Gutzkow's Knights of Spirit to Hofmannsthal's Andreas, Mann's Magic Mountain, and Grass's Dog Years. Before they became operative in major works of fiction, however, these themes were given early literary form by developments in Masonic historiography and the "Masonic novel," developments that, more often than not, left history and fiction productively intertwined.

FREEMASONIC (HI)STORIES

Although the formation of the Grand Lodge in 1717 and Anderson's Constitutions of 1723 give Freemasonry convenient and incontrovertible historical monuments, and although historians have many facts at their disposal as they seek to explain the social and political causes and effects of the eighteenth-century institution, much of the century's Masonic activity is inextricably entwined with various legends, stories, novels, and even frauds. Specific stories served specific needs.

Anderson's fanciful history stretching from Adam to his own time (he claims, for example, that "Grand Master Moses often marshaled the Israelites into a regular and general lodge whilst in the wilderness") is an attempt to lend the weight and glory of all known history to the new institution; and as Koselleck suggests, the resulting philosophy of history may have been a factor in challenging absolutist rule. Such a history, however, ultimately satisfies only the credulous. As Fichte pointed out in an exchange of letters with Ignatius Aurelius Fessler, perhaps the leading Freemason in Berlin as the nineteenth century began, Masonic "history" must be transformed into legend if it is to continue to be taken seriously by intelligent men. Fessler was writing a conjectural history of Freemasonry that linked the order with the Knights Templar and other earlier secret societies; and Fichte suggested that Fessler would do better to write his "history" in such a way that intelligent readers could recognize it as allegory. Fessler admitted that such a fiction, as fiction, would then be historically unassailable; but he insisted on history: "No Fiction!"

Unlike Fessler, Lennhoff and Fossner's Internationales Freimaurer-Lexikon ends its discussion of Anderson's fanciful chronicle by pointing out its fictionality—and also its worth: "It is a chronicle, not history, which Anderson has passed on to us. Whoever discards the good Reverend entirely, wrongs him. And whoever takes him perfectly seriously goes astray" (35). Such an admission of nonhistoricity turns attention away from a potentially ridiculous chronicle and focuses it on a symbolically significant story.

But the desire for supporting, indeed legitimizing, historical roots was strong in the eighteenth century, as it always has been. This is evident in the eight competing, variously influential theories concerning the origin of eighteenth-century Masonry listed in the Internationales Freimaurer-Lexikon. The first, and clearly most authentic, is the theory that Freemasonry arose from guilds of operative masons. The second theory, and already the waters grow murky, states that Freemasonry is a continuation of Renaissance scientific academies, German Baroque language societies, the union of academies proposed by Comenius, and so on. According to the third theory, Deists created Freemasonry as an organ to promote their ideas. The fourth theory claims that Freemasonry is a descendant of Rosicrucianism; Elias Ashmole, a leading Rosicrucian and also a Freemason, is the most direct connection between the two. Freemasonry is linked by the fifth theory with the Kabbala, by the sixth with Knights Templar, and by the seventh with ancient secret societies of the Egyptians, Hebrews, and Greeks. The racist eighth theory finds Freemasonic origins exclusively in Germany. Each theory, including the largely historical first, is more or less a fictional construction, and each has its own power over certain types of people. In some ways, the more fictional the story and the more fantastic the claims, the more effect the story has. Of all these theories, for instance, the spurious Rosicrucian and Knights Tem-
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FREEMASONRY

plar connections evoked the most excitement in the eighteenth century (along with rumors of a Jesuit takeover of the lodges). So in one sense Fessler was justified in rejecting Fichte’s recommendation that his “history” be labeled story, although in the process Freemasonry lost support from Lessing and Fichte and others desiring a more strict separation of fiction and history. Like many religious innovators, the founders of the most successful Freemasonic branches used Fessler’s kind of (hi)story to establish legitimacy and to express their principles. In search of power, they began with Anderson’s fanciful chronicles and built ever more elaborate narratives. The history of the Strict Observance, the Freemasonic order established by Karl Gottelvon Hund, is a good case in point.

Hund claimed, while at the court of the pretender Charles Edward Stuart in 1742, to have been initiated by a mysterious Knight of the Red Feather into an ancient order of Knights Templar. Hund said he had been named the grand master of the province of Germany, and he produced a coded charter to prove his claim. As the system of Strict Observance developed under his leadership, Hund elaborated his fiction, claiming that the order was led by unknown heads who demanded unconditional obedience; and he developed a colorful ritual that emphasized Templar origins and extended hierarchical grades of initiation.

The new order grew steadily until 1763, when a man calling himself Georg Friedrich von Johnson-Fünen appeared in Jena, claiming to be a Scottish noble and head of the true order of Knights Templar. He had been sent to Germany, he said, to purify and renew various systems, including Hund’s, which had strayed from the true order. Johnson’s legitimating story appealed strongly to the same people who had believed Hund’s account, and Johnson expanded his claims: the order supposedly controlled vast sums of money; it had a large, secret army preparing for a conquest of Cyprus; and it possessed the alchemical formula for making gold from base metals. Hund consequently found it necessary to place his own order under Johnson’s leadership.

But the fictions Johnson had used to displace Hund’s own fictions could not long pass muster. Hund eventually learned details of Johnson’s past life which disproved his claims, and he challenged him to a duel. Johnson fled, and Hund once again controlled the Strict Observance. For a time the order flourished. Many prominent Masonic lodges affiliated with the Strict Observance, and by 1775 twenty-six German princes belonged to the order. Questions about

Hund’s original story began to cause unrest, however, and after he died in 1776 the Strict Observance rapidly lost influence. Finally the assembled Masonic lodges at the Wilhelmsbad Congress (1782) adopted a rectified system dispensing with Hund’s higher grades and Templar legends. The story of the Knight of the Red Feather had born tremendous fruit; but as the stakes rose and competing stories grew even more outrageous, mainstream Freemasonry retreated to stories that seemed historically possible or that could be raised to the figurative level of admitted fiction—a step neither Hund nor his imitators were willing to take.

Hund and his narratively talented allies and rivals dominated organized German Freemasonry during the third quarter of the eighteenth century. But the two true masters of this confidence game were Saint-Germain and Cagliostro. Saint-Germain, who died in 1784, could tell his story in several languages and buttress it with a seemingly comprehensive knowledge of history. He awakened the desires of his audiences with pretentions of vast alchemical knowledge, including the ability to prolong life indefinitely with a secret liquid he possessed. Freemasonic ties validated these credentials by linking him to legitimate moral and intellectual leaders of the age and simultaneously to the arcane knowledge and practices of the exotic Orient. For several decades he titillated the courts of Europe with the occult possibilities he represented. His successor, “Count” Alessandro Cagliostro (1743–1795), became even more notorious. The story Cagliostro told about himself describes “a mysterious Eastern origin, a tutelary sage, a far-flung journey, initiation into the ancient wisdom of Egypt by the anachronistic priests of the temples, association with the Knights of Malta,” and a life spent in study and dissemination of the mysteries.23 With his alchemy, healings, demonstrations of clairvoyance, and a new system of Egyptian Freemasonry, Cagliostro toured the capitals of Europe and found people everywhere anxious for initiation into his system. In England, France, Holland, Germany, Poland, Russia, and Italy he invariably gathered wealthy disciples and stirred up controversy, most infamously in the affair of the diamond necklace.24

While Hund, Saint-Germain, Cagliostro, and others like them were telling their exquisitely crafted stories to build their systems and to gain access to the richest courts of Europe, they were also providing novelists with priceless material. The story they lived and propagated, however, was anything but new. It had been told,
for instance, in a seventeenth-century Rosicrucian version by Johann Valentin Andreae.²⁵

THE ROSICRUCIAN FICTIONS

Universal and General Reformation of the whole wide world; together with the Fama Fraternitatis of the Laudable Fraternity of the Rosy Cross, written to all the Learned and Rulers of Europe; also a short reply sent by Herr Haselmayer, for which he was seized by the Jesuits and put in irons on a Gailey. Now put forth in print and communicated to all true hearts.
—Printed at Cassel by Wilhelm Wessel, 1614.

The Rosicrucian manifesto printed under this baroque title—along with its two companion works, Confessio Fraternitatis (1615) and Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosencreutz (1616)—was interpreted by many of its seventeenth-century readers as an irresistible invitation to join a select, secret society of infinitely wise and benevolent men. Others read it as a utopian fiction, with timely barbs aimed at contemporary science and scheming Jesuits. But received as fiction or fact, Fama Fraternitatis caused an uproar in the seventeenth century; and over the next three centuries it served as a model for several real secret societies and for reams of fiction.

Fama Fraternitatis proclaims a general reformation of thought, a marvelous illumination about to transform "the whole wide world." Christian Rosencreutz, the instigator of these changes, traveled as a young man to the East, where he learned the secrets of the universe. When the scientific community remained closed to his remarkable ideas, Rosencreutz gathered seven men around him, "all bachelors and of vowed virginity," and together they made a compendium of all "that man can desire, wish, or hope for." They agreed that they would profess no "other thing than to heal the sick, and that gratis." They would wear no distinguishing clothing. They would each find a worthy person to succeed them after death. And they would keep the fraternity secret for one hundred years.

Christian Rosencreutz finally died, not of infirmity, for he had overcome sickness, but "according to the plan of God." Two generations later the narrators of the Fama accidentally found Rosencreutz's grave in a curiously shaped vault behind a hidden door. The room, built to represent the universe, was divided into three symbolically adorned parts. Among the books lining the walls the narrators discovered Christian Rosenkreutz's life story, from which most of the Fama narrative is said to be taken. Now in possession of a true compendium of the universe, the newly instructed Rosicrucians have written the Fama, they say, to enlighten the world.

Andreae repeatedly referred to the fraternity as fictitious.²⁶ But despite such direct disavowals, the story was seen as literal truth by many who read it. Learned men began to publish responses as the Fama directed, and a flood of Rosicrucian literature appeared.²⁷ As the Thirty-Years War began to lay waste to German-speaking countries, the number of Rosicrucian publications declined precipitously. But the fiction of a secret brotherhood dedicated to transforming the world was to find new life in the eighteenth century, for motifs introduced in Fama Fraternitatis would serve well the needs of later organizers and writers. The secret society founded by a man who gained wisdom in the East, the room whose proportions and contents act as a memory system of all knowledge, the archive with the life history of the order's founder, the simultaneous invisibility and power of the society's emissaries, the desire for public disclosure versus the secrecy dictated by social and political conditions—each of these motifs figure prominently in scores of novels and actual secret societies over the next three centuries. The motifs appeal politically to those limited by various governmental systems; and they appeal semiotically to those who want to teach moral lessons through ritual, to the mystically inclined who find in the symbols keys to supernatural wisdom, and, most important for us, to novelists who wish self-reflexively to examine their own production of signs.

THE FIRST "MASONIC NOVELS"

Fénelon's Aventures de Télémaque (1699), describing the educational adventures of Télémaque under the guidance of Minerva (disguised as Mentor), is generally considered the first novel with Masonic ties. Freemasonic allegory often has Minerva leading the Mason along an educational path; and Masons found in Fénelon's description of moral education close parallels to their own practices and aspirations. Soon after Anderson published his Constitutions, a more explicitly Freemasonic novel appeared in France: Andrew Michael Ramsay's Les Voyages de Cyrus (1727), an admitted imitation of Télémaque.²⁸ Ramsay, a friend of Fénelon and a leading
Freemason, likewise depicted the education of a young, traveling hero as he described Cyrus’s initiation into the mysteries of Persian, Egyptian, Pythagorean, and Hebrew secret societies.

In 1730 Terrasson’s Sethos appeared, openly proclaiming its relationship to both Télémague and Cyrus. All three have a moral focus, the preface says, but unlike the previous two, Sethos is more than a didactic fiction; it aims to depict the “entire life” of the hero. Whether or not the novel achieves that goal is debatable; but, reiterating and developing figures, themes, and motifs from Andrae’s Rosicrucian fictions, the novel had a tremendous impact on Masonic fictions that followed. Any post-1730 work of fiction that describes a ritual education owes at least an indirect debt to Terrasson’s novel; and in fact, several actual secret societies have drawn their rituals from this fictional account.

Sethos is a novel in three long volumes, supposedly written by a Greek who lived in Alexandria during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. As the novel commences, Amedes, a member of a powerful secret society of priests, begins to educate Sethos, a young prince whose mother has just died. Following several preliminary tests Amedes finally decides that Sethos is ready for the trials of the great pyramid.

After dark Amedes leads Sethos from the palace to the pyramid. Through a small passageway they reach a seemingly bottomless well, and, climbing a circular stairway, they find a frightening, yet promising inscription:

Whoever traverses this path alone and without looking back will be purified by fire, water, and air, and if he can overcome the terror of death he will pass from out of the womb of the earth, will see the light again, and will have the right to prepare his soul for revelation of the secrets of the great goddess Isis.

Sethos bravely presses on until he finds piles of wood burning fiercely in a high room. Racing through this dangerous room, he undergoes the promised trial by fire. Next comes the trial by water, a broad canal across which he swims. Then an attempt to open an ivory door sets machinery in motion which raises him into the air—his third trial. Finally the machinery allows him to pass through the door, and he enters a room into which early morning sunlight falls.

Having successfully concluded the trials of fire, water, and air, Sethos is now embraced by the head priest and congratulated. Priests who seem to know everything about him teach him lessons.

He learns, for example, that “there is hardly a stronger desire among men than to achieve the honor of being accepted into a select, small society on the basis of merit and virtue.” After taking a horrible oath of secrecy, he learns more about life in the pyramid. He sees priests’ children participating in an elaborate pedagogical system, a scene reflected in the pedagogical province of Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister. Those studying to be priests wear black, judges wear red, and physicians dark blue. Sethos is also shown the theatrical tricks used by priests to “oracularly” answer petitioners’ questions; and although it originally strikes him as a fraud, he concludes that as pedagogical art it is for the people’s ultimate good.

Finally Sethos is introduced to the outside world as an initiate. Wearing the order’s distinctive vest he undertakes a long series of adventures, including retaking his family’s throne, a political task for which his initiation has prepared him. The various battles and voyages along the African coast are of passing interest and great length; but the political aspect of the secret society through which Sethos regains his power and the exotic symbolic system that teaches moral lessons while uncovering pretended esoteric practices brought the novel a wide readership.

Especially in France, Sethos was taken as historically accurate, despite specific disclaimers in the preface which contrast history with fiction. Freemasons were pleased to find supposed origins in Egypt; and some branches of Freemasonry, notably the Misraim system, based their rituals in part on those described in Sethos. The imaginative French architect Lequeu found the progression through ritual space described in Sethos so intriguing that he made fanciful drawings of the pyramid and the various machines used in the initiation. And the most famous work of art based in part on Sethos, Mozart’s and Schikaneder’s opera The Magic Flute, reproduces the trials by fire, water, and air administered by a priestly secret society.

Hundreds of works of fiction followed Sethos, especially as the century drew to a close, reflecting the eighteenth-century obsession with Freemasonry. In the following chapters I will take up the most important of these, but first two nearly forgotten texts and a vigorous written debate in a leading journal present interesting case studies in the theological and political uses of Masonic fiction.

Carl Friedrich Bahrdt’s demythologizing Explanation of the Plan and Purpose of Jesus (Ausführung des Plans und Zweckes Jesu, 1784–1792) is a multivolume fictional history of Jesus Christ. After
reading his friend Starck's book On the Old and New Mysteries (Über die alten und neuen Mysterien, 1782), a discussion of contemporary Freemasonry in the context of ancient mysteries, Bahrdt wrote that he thought again of his initiation into Masonry in London, where he was sponsored by Georg Forster and father, and had “the idea that Christ must have had the plan to establish a secret society in order to preserve and transmit to mankind the truth which had been thrust aside by clerics and temple priests.”

In his book, after an imaginative account of Jesus’ boyhood (lived according to the designs of a secret, enlightened group of men), Bahrdt describes the formation of a secret society around Jesus which aimed to destroy superstition and unite all mankind in a rational faith in God. He explains Jesus’ miracles as machinations of this secret society. The feeding of the five thousand, for example, is done by accomplices who supply ever-new baskets of bread from a cave behind Jesus; and after the staged crucifixion, members of the society nurse Jesus back to health so he can appear to have resurrected. Like the priestly oracles in Sethos, these “miracles” are wrought to gain power over the superstitious, power that can later be used to wean them from their superstitions. After his resurrection Jesus works quietly in the Grand Lodge, directing the fraternity “until it pleased God to call him.”

Paradoxically, Bahrdt’s attempt at de mythology of the biblical life of Jesus involves a new myth. Like the conspirators in the novel, he must play on the nonrational sensitivities of his readers to gain the power he needs to direct them to a more rational worldview. As a result, any power the book had toward effecting the more rational view of the Bible Bahrdt desired was at least balanced by its propagation of the new myth of a Freemasonic conspiracy manipulating world history. Two centuries later Günter Grass makes much of this sort of mythical de mythologizing.

A second example of the dynamic relationship between Masonic history and fiction can be found in Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling’s autobiography. Having published (with Goethe’s help) his sensitive, pietistic Heinrich Stilling’s Youth (Heinrich Stillings Jugend, 1777), Journies (Wanderschaft, 1778), and Domestic Life (Häusliches Leben, 1789), having healed hundreds of people of blindness with cataract operations, and having reached out to the pietistically religious in his novel Homesickness (Das Heinwweh, 1794, 1796), Jung-Stilling could open his Heinrich Stilling’s Apprenticeship (Heinrich Stillings Lehrjahre, 1804) in which the following story is told, with the confident phrase: “Dear readers and friends of Stilling.”

Early in 1796, Stilling writes, he was visited at home by a young, wealthy, well-educated man who claimed that he was there on behalf of a friend suffering from cataracts. Soon, however, the visitor began to cry and then kiss Stilling’s hand. “You wrote Homesickness?” the young man asked; and when Jung-Stilling said that he had, the still crying young man said: “You are, then, one of my secret leaders!” Although Homesickness, a defense of monarchies threatened by revolution, indeed portrays the activities of a secret society with secret heads and ties to the Orient, Stilling explained that he was no one’s secret leader and, in fact, belonged to no secret society. Thinking this was part of a test, the young man continued to insist, but finally Stilling convinced him. Then came the incredulous question:

“But tell me, how do you know about the great and honorable league in the Orient which you describe in such detail in Homesickness? You have even exactly determined their meeting places in Egypt, on Mount Sinai, in the Canopic monastery, and under the Jerusalem temple.”

Stilling: “I know absolutely nothing about any of that, for these ideas and mental images appeared vividly in my imagination. Thus it is merely fiction, pure fabrication.”

The young man continued, telling Stilling about the actual secret society, revealing things, Stilling assures his readers, that he cannot make public. None of it, however, he hastens to point out, had “a relation of the most distant kind to political conditions.” Neither Jung-Stilling nor his young visitor would have marveled so at the coincidence of fiction and reality if they had realized that much of what passed for ancient, ritual esoterica had in fact been drawn from the public pages of fictions like Fama Fraternitatis, Sethos, and Homesickness.

FREEMASONS AND JESUITS IN THE
BERLINISCHE MONATSSCHRIFT (1783–1796)

Another set of pages helped spread the last of the stories to be discussed in this first chapter. Like the Rosicrucian fictions and Sethos, the story had a strong effect on subsequent fiction (especially Schiller’s Ghost-Seer); like Bahrdt’s story, it involves a myth of religious conspiracy; and like Jung-Stilling’s, it represents an intriguing interweaving of fact and fiction.
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FREEMASONRY

The Berlinische Monatsschrift, one of the most widely read German periodicals of the late eighteenth century and a major organ of the Enlightenment, descending from the moral weeklies Habermas discusses as another step toward a public sphere, was edited by Friedrich Gedike and Johann Erich Biester, both members of the Masonic National-Mother-Lodge "Zu den drei Welkugeln" in Berlin. Prominent contributors to the journal included Moses Mendelssohn, Friedrich Schlegel, and Immanuel Kant, and Masons Friedrich Nicolai, Georg Forster, and Karl Philipp Moritz. Kant's essay "Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" ("Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?") appeared there in December 1784, after Mendelssohn had written "On the Question: What does it Mean to Enlighten" ("Über die Frage: Was heisst aufklären?") in September of that same year. Enlightenment is a broad program for a journal, but in a preface to the first number the editors proclaimed just that as their aim: "Enthusiasm for truth, passion for the dissemination of useful enlightenment and for the banishment of injurious and erroneous ideas" (Eifer für die Wahrheit, Liebe zur Verbreitung nützlicher Aufklärung und zur Verbannung verderblicher Irthümer).

From the beginning the journal was a lively public forum. Issues, persons, and subjects include a homage to Benjamin Franklin, a report on social security ("Proof, that the Royal Frussian General Widow's-Aid Foundation will not Become Bankrupt Before at Least 1803"), discussions of bees, deaf-mutes, the class system, universities, animal magnetism, and other topics fitting generally under the first two rubrics of the editors' programatic statement: "Enthusiasm for truth" and "passion for the dissemination of useful enlightenment." But the third rubric, "the banishment of injurious and erroneous ideas," proved, finally, the negative heart of the journal.

Several essays in the fourth number (April 1783) show the first tendencies in this direction, arising out of the impulse to expose and ban prejudice, superstition, delusions, and false traditions. "The Moon Doctor in Berlin," for example, is an investigative article aimed at uncovering the natural causes of the so-called miracles performed by an astral healer. Later articles expose treasure hunters, miracle healers, messiahs, and alchemists with single-minded zeal. And in this context, "deviant" offshoots of Freemasonry soon became the journal's driving concern. The Masonry to which Biester, Gedike, Nicolai, and friends subscribed was closely linked to the government of their fellow Mason Frederick the Great (or "Friedrich August" as a "Masonic Ode" published in the journal in 1784 calls him). As Freemasons, they had sworn to be peaceful subjects of civil authority and to take no part in any conspiracy against that authority; but they also belonged to an institution which, by its very nature, questioned the absolutist state. Made uneasy by that tension and alarmed by anti-Masonic reports like Göchhausen's Disclosure of the System of the Cosmopolitan Republic (1780), which called attention to the political potential and alleged aims of the secret society, Biester reacted by latching on to the aspect of Göchhausen's exposé least damaging to his own Freemasonry: Jesuit infiltration of Protestant lodges for religious and political purposes.

In the January 1785 issue, Biester published a "Contribution to the History of Contemporary Secret Proselytization" ("Beitrag zur Geschichte itziger geheimer Proselytenmacherei"), an article describing proselytizing Catholic monks who, incognito, are supposedly gaining control of various Masonic lodges to undermine English and German Protestantism. In July 1785 Christian Garve, a popular philosopher and an early favorite of Schiller's, wrote an almost fifty-page response, "On the Worries of Protestants Concerning the Spread of Catholicism" ("Über die Besorgnisse der Protestanten in Ansehung der Verbreitung des Katholicismus"), addressing his remarks to "Herr Doktor Biester." Garve argues that the Jesuits have been banned by the Pope since 1773. Why should one fear them now that their public power is gone? Their secret actions are no more frightening than the secrecy of the Freemasons. Secret societies, Garve states finally, be they Jesuit or Freemasonic, will have little actual effect on the affairs of the world. In a thirty-page response, Biester expressed a different opinion, for from his perspective the Jesuits and high-grade Freemasons directly threaten gains made by the Enlightenment.

In the next issue of the journal, Biester printed a fifty-page letter that expresses more worries about Catholic gains in Protestant countries. The letter describes an initiation ceremony, questions the secrets of higher levels of initiation, and discusses the unknown Jesuit heads of secret societies who exploit naive believers for political and religious purposes. The purpose of the letter, he assures his reader, is to return Freemasonry to its original purity. In his introduction to the letter, Biester claimed he was printing the document because he thought people should know about the phenomenon it describes. But then, miscalculating how important the theme was to.
himselves, 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 Geheime 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 Vorsehung 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).