Fictions of Freemasonry: Preface

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The syllables of the word *Araby* were called to me through the silence in which my soul luxuriated and cast an eastern enchantment over me. I asked for leave to go to the bazaar on Saturday night. My aunt was surprised and hoped it was not some Freemason affair.

—James Joyce, "Araby"
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Illustrations

Following page 114:
Title page and frontispiece of Sethos
Masons “working” around a trestleboard
The Raising of a Master Mason
A representation of the symbolic route followed by an initiate
Allegorical depiction of the journey of a Freemason in the world
Various Masonic symbols, from Kestner’s Die Agape oder der
geheime Weltbund der Christen
Masonic figures from Krause’s Die drei ältesten Kunsturkunden der
Freimaurerbruderschaft
“For Freedom, Equality, Fraternity, but against Violence.
Freemasons on the Barricades.”
Plan of the Building and the Garden of the Lodge Royale York de
l’Amitié in Berlin

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Freemasonry. Yet another cause of the revolution. The
initiation is a fearful ordeal. Cause of dissension among
married pairs. Distrusted by the clergy. What can its great
secret be?
—Gustav Flaubert, Dictionary of Accepted Ideas

In Günter Grass’s Dog Years (Hundejahre, 1963), when officials ac-
cuse Oswald Brunies of un-German conduct, interviews with his
students reveal that he may be a Freemason: “The students had
written down things their teacher had said, maxims which seemed
demoralizing and negative. Suddenly everyone was saying: He was
a Freemason. But then no one knew what that was: a Freemason.”
Concerning Freemasonry, Brunies’ students are strongly influenced
by rumor and remain unencumbered by facts; and as modern
fictional characters, they are not alone in their ignorance. In Thomas
Mann’s Magic Mountain (Der Zauberberg, 1924), Hans Castorp is
likewise shocked to learn that his mentor Settembrini is a Freema-
son: “Once again he had been extraordinarily surprised to hear that
there was, in all seriousness, still such a thing.”

These twentieth-century responses would have been anom-
ali es in literature of the late eighteenth century, a time when Free-
masonry was a powerful institution and Freemasons were a staple
of German fiction. Freemasons (or members of similar secret soci-
eties) appear, for instance, in novels by Schiller, Goethe, Wieland,
Jean Paul, Tieck, and Hölderlin. But literary conventions shift with
historical circumstances, and as early as the mid-nineteenth cen-
tury, when one character in Karl Gutzkow’s The Knights of Spirit
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( Die Ritter vom Geiste, 1850–1851) admits that he has always skipped over Masonic passages in the German classics, a friend assures him that it is only natural: “You have probably always felt that these Masonic speeches do not, in fact, reflect what we admire of Herder and Goethe... The great, omnipotent Olympian... has nothing in common with the lodge. Once in Weimar someone showed me Goethe’s Masonic apron; it did not edify me.”

Goethe’s actual Masonic apron may remain unedifying to the modern reader as well; and certainly Hans Castorp and Brunies’ students find it odd to visualize their mentors in such aprons. But Goethe’s (and Herder’s and Frederick the Great’s) symbolic aprons represent a complex Masonic culture that Goethe and his contemporaries knew intimately, a culture reflected repeatedly in their novels and in those of their nineteenth- and twentieth-century successors as well.

The first chapter of this book sketches the history of Freemasonry through the eighteenth century, focusing on issues and figures most intimately related to the novels I discuss. The list of eighteenth-century Masonic topics, spheres of influence (imagined and real), and their manifestations is impressive: non-politics and revolutionary conspiracies, Jesuits and anti-Jesuits, the private opening of a public sphere, political landscape gardening, ritual education, debates on natural vs. arbitrary language, radical biblical criticism, alchemy, confidence men, learned academies, occult societies, and novels of every description. Running through both history and fiction is a basic Masonic story, a ritual tale told in many ways but with recurring motifs. It is in part the myth of the magus E. M. Butler describes so well. It is a story of esoteric education in the East. It involves a symbolic ritual route that challenges with trials of courage and teaches through pedagogical architecture. It features a secret society with the power and will to direct the affairs of an individual or a state. Historically, the story serves to found new secret societies, attract new members, or fuel theories of conspiracy. Fictionally, various motifs and themes may coalesce as a subgenre, the Geheimbundroman or league novel, or, more commonly, they form a subplot of a Bildungsroman or perhaps a social novel.

In this welter of historical and fictional Freemasonry, two issues recur regularly: politics and ritual symbolism. As told by some, the Masonic story reflects on its own ritual sign system. Both Schiller’s Ghost-Seer (Der Geisterseher, 1787–1789) and Goethe’s

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Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship and Travels (Lehrjahre, 1795–1796; Wanderjahre, 1821, 1829), for example, examine esoteric and exoteric signs and the Masonic semiotic transformation from reality to symbol and back to reality. The story can be represented as historically true to gain wealth from and political power over the credulous. Hund and Cagliostro told this version, as do Schiller’s narrators in The Ghost-Seer. It can be a story of frustrated democracy, as told in Gutzkow’s Knights of Spirit and Heinrich Mann’s The Subject (Der Untertan, 1918). Hofmannsthal’s characters in Andreas (1932) succor one another in their belief and disbelief in a transcendent Masonic sign system. The story can be presented as myth: a dangerous ritual descent into a romantic fascination with death as in Thomas Mann’s Magic Mountain or a mythicization of history, a semiologically effected will-to-power like that decreed in Grass’s Dog Years. In any case, this intriguing story about politics and semiotics is just as attractive to readers of the late twentieth century as it was to the seventeenth-century readers of Andreae’s Rosicrucian fictions.

In my book I aim to provide historical contexts in which to read selected German novels written over the course of three centuries. This has been done before, of course, in excellent books by Ferdinand Josef Schneider, Marianne Thalmann, Heinrich Schneider, Reinhart Koselleck, and most recently Michael Voges, just to name the most prominent. I am much indebted to these sources and frequently refer to them.

Historical context is indispensable; and a strictly historical survey of literary Freemasonry would provide its own satisfaction; that is clear. Such studies, however, invariably leave one wishing for closer analysis of individual works. To meet my own preference in that matter, this book features focused, interpretive studies of Schiller’s Ghost-Seer, Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister novels, Gutzkow’s The Knights of Spirit, Hofmannsthal’s Andreas, Thomas Mann’s Magic Mountain, and Grass’s Dog Years. I substantially reevaluate and reinterpret these major novels in Freemasonic contexts. Because of the emphasis on individual novels, this book is not a comprehensive history of Freemasons in literature. It lacks, for instance, a thorough description of the popular late eighteenth-century league novel; little is said about important novels by Wieland, Jean Paul, Moritz, Tieck, and many others well worth discussing in this context; and Russian, French, English, American, Spanish, and Italian “Masonic novels” are virtually ignored. Recent publications, how-
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However, fill in many of those gaps, and supplementary studies will surely result.

I would like to thank Heinrich Schneider, librarian of the Bayreuth Masonic Library, and Inge Baum, librarian of the House of the Temple in Washington, D.C., for their extraordinary helpfulness. Contrary to my expectations, Freemasons share their documents freely and welcome scholars working in their field. Thanks are also due to Hans Wysling of the Thomas Mann Archive in Zürich, to Alfred Bush of Princeton’s Firestone Library, and to the Interlibrary Loan Services of Vanderbilt Library.

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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.