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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Walter Müller-Seidel, Wolfgang Riedel. *Die Weimarer Klassik und ihre Geheimbünde.* Würzburg: Verlag Königshausen & Neumann, 2003. 206 S. EUR 25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-8260-2528-0.

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Published on H-German (April, 2006)

Secret Societies and Weimar Classicism

Conspiracy theories and secret societies remain a topic of perennial fascination. The international best-seller, *The Da Vinci Code*, offers one of the more recent examples of this phenomenon. The world of German classical letters and its relationship to secret societies offers another illustration and it serves as the general topic of this essay collection. Delivered as lectures to the Munich Goethe-Gesellschaft in 1998-99, the volume has a narrower focus than that suggested by its title. All the chapters treat the German Illuminati, a secret society founded in 1776, and its relationship to late-eighteenth-century Weimar. Founded by the 28-year-old professor of canon law Adam Friedrich Weishaupt at the Bavarian University of Ingolstadt, the Illuminati were banned within less than a decade by the Bavarian Elector Duke Karl Theodor. But by 1785, when Weishaupt was forced to flee to the Thuringian principality of Saxe-Gotha, he and his closest associates had recruited a small but powerful group of German ruling princes, state bureaucrats, academics and aristocrats–including the Weimar Duke Carl August and his officials Goethe, Wieland and Herder. After 1789, the Illuminati became fodder for a broad myth that purported to explain the American and French revolutions, as well as any number of modern political conspiracies.

The history of the Illuminati and the conspiracy myth they inspired requires a brief overview. In its early years, the group was structured by Weishaupt as a kind of student fraternity, for which he served as mentor. Meetings provided a forum for debating the materialist philosophy of the radical enlightenment, including the work of Helvetius and d'Holbach. The revolutionary reputation of the group developed from some of Weishaupt's more utopian and even anarchic claims: the group hoped to eliminate the rule of princes and nations and promote world peace. Weishaupt was clearly influenced by the popularity of Freemasonry, whose first German lodges were established in the late 1730s. But unlike many Masonic lodges, the group's structure was both highly secretive and rigidly hierarchical. Members of the lowest order were not always aware of their superiors–in effect (even within the organization), the profile and size of the group's membership remained a secret. Likewise, secret code names for both individuals and place names were used in internal correspondence to disguise identities (for example, Weishaupt was referred to as "Spartacus"). The

rapid growth of the Illuminati after 1780 reflected the work of Baron Adolph von Knigge, who recruited members in Protestant Germany. The Illuminati also benefited from the divisions within German Freemasonry, which became more pronounced following the Masonic Convention of Wilhelmsbad in 1782. This success was short-lived, however, and a power struggle between Weishaupt and Knigge in 1784–leading to Knigge's expulsion–was followed by a Bavarian crackdown. By 1785, Weishaupt was forced to seek a kind of political exile in Saxe-Gotha, and in 1787, Bavarian officials published several volumes of confiscated Illuminati papers. Although the group persisted at least into the 1790s, its organization slowly dissolved, ironically at the same time that its radical and conspiratorial reputation grew.

The myths surrounding the Illuminati are not the only conspiracy theories that animate this collection, however. A second and more pressing agenda concerns the relationship of the Illuminati to Weimar, and specifically the membership and involvement of Goethe himself. Thus the volume is largely a response to Daniel Wilson's *GeheimrÃ¤te gegen GeheimbÃ¼nde: Ein unbekanntes Kapitel der klassisch-romantischen Geschichte Weimars* (1991), which claimed that Goethe joined the Illuminati in 1783 to spy on the group and keep his ducal boss informed of their activities. Wilson's scholarship (including some later publications) is based on a fairly sensational trove of sources, most of which had been considered lost. A professor of German literature at Berkeley, Wilson has clearly challenged many of the pieties of *Germanistik* and provoked a powerful backlash. In short, his polemic depicts Germany's greatest literary figure as the toady of absolutist princes. Classical Weimar can no longer represent progressive, humanist values, according to Wilson, but serves merely as a convenient German historical myth. Despite the singular quality of Wilson's sources, the questions of Goethe's motivation and alleged spying activities remain unresolved. As several contributors to this volume contend, there is no hard evidence for Goethe's subterfuge or deceit, and these charges appear to rest instead on conjecture.

The volume chapters offer alternatives to Wilson's arguments, addressing a number of themes related to the Illuminati and their connections to classical Weimar. Martin Mulsow's essay on Weishaupt explores both his career trajectory and philosophy. Just as the Bavarian state banned the Illuminati, Weishaupt became a candidate for a philosophy chair at the University of Jena, located within Saxe-Weimar. Had he received the position, Weishaupt might have been able to sustain the Illuminati. Moreover, Goethe played a central role in determining Weishaupt's qualifications for Duke Carl August, who finally rejected the candidate. According to Mulsow, much of Weishaupt's scholarship was secret Illuminati material, to which Goethe never had access, despite his membership. And this paucity of published scholarship ultimately helped to undermine Weishaupt's qualifications. Theo Stammen's essay on Adolph von Knigge traces the Baron's involvement with both Freemasonry and the Illuminati. Knigge first joined a lodge in 1773, but soon lost interest. With his participation in the Illuminati in 1780, Knigge hoped the group would help him pursue his republican political goals. After Knigge's falling-out with Weishaupt in 1784, he became disillusioned with secret societies altogether, and although his political ideals never wavered, he later condemned secret societies in his popular *Umgang mit Menschen* (1788).

In his chapter on the later influences of the Illuminati, Eberhard Weis, one of the leading historians of early modern Bavaria, offers both a damning critique of Wilson's scholarship and a useful sketch of the Illuminati's membership profile. Weis also condemns the ethics of Weishaupt–who encouraged members to steal books for the Illuminati library–and he contrasts the group's despotic governance to that of most Masonic organizations. Although Illuminati had penetrated much of the Bavarian bureaucracy by 1785, according to Weis, their influence beyond this date was exceedingly modest. Claims about their complicity in the French Revolution or their cooperation with the German Jacobins are largely untrue. In his essay on Friedrich Schiller, Wolfgang Riedel argues that Schiller rejected Illuminati overtures to join–some made as late as the early 1790s–because of his antipathy to their hierarchical order and secrecy. As Riedel, claims Schiller was influenced in part by the character of his mentor-student relationship with his Stuttgart professor Jacob Friedrich Abel, who was also an Illuminati member.

The two closing chapters both return to the issue of Goethe's relationships to the Illuminati and to secret societies more generally. Hartmut Reinhardt explores the apparent inspiration Goethe took from Lessing's *Ernst und Falk* (1778-80)–an emphatic endorsement of Freemasonry–to join the lodge in Weimar in 1780. Reinhardt suggests that Goethe was likewise motivated by the fashion for secret societies, which partially inspired his 1783 membership in the Illuminati. Reinhardt examines Goethe's fragmentary poem "Geheimnissen," composed in 1784-85, and his satiric play *Gro?-Cophta*, first performed in 1791, which some (including Wilson)

have considered a repudiation of secret societies. In Reinhardt's literary analysis, however, both works reflect Goethe's broader interest in and fascination with the implications of secret societies. Hans-JÃ¼rgen Schings also relies on literary analysis (of Goethe's famous Bildungsroman, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* [1795/6]) to demonstrate Goethe's approving view of the Illuminati. According to Schings, Goethe ascribed to ritual secrecy important functions for education and pedagogy. Thus the secret *Turmgesellschaft* in the novel represents, for Schings, a sympathetic rendering of the Illuminati, and not a reactionary condemnation of the group.

Both Reinhardt's and Schings's essays offer compelling responses to Wilson's contentious set of claims about Goethe's motivations and attitudes, for which there is limited supporting evidence. And since the protagonists in this exchange, including Wilson himself, are primarily literary historians and critics, the debate here returns, appropriately, to the interpretation of literature. It seems unlikely that some future archival discovery will confirm definitively one position or the other. But since Wilson's scholarship provides the motivating subtext for this collection, the absence of a reaction from him, at least to the mind of this reviewer, feels ungenerous and perhaps even unfair.

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Citation: Robert Beachy. Review of Müller-Seidel, Walter; Riedel, Wolfgang, *Die Weimarer Klassik und ihre Geheimbünde*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. April, 2006.

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