This volume provides a valuable contribution to our knowledge of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century intellectual life inside and outside Germany.

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This elegant collection of essays ranges across eighteenth and nineteenth-century thought, covering philosophy, science, literature and religion in the 'Age of Goethe.' A recognised authority in the field, Nisbet grapples with the major voices of the Enlightenment and gives pride of place to the figures of Lessing, Herder, Goethe and Schiller.

The book ranges widely in its compass of thought and intellectual discourse, dealing incisively with themes including the philosophical implications of literature and the relationship between religion, science and politics. The result is an accomplished reflection on German thought, but also on its rebirth, as Nisbet argues for the relevance of these Enlightenment thinkers for the readers of today.

The first half of this collection focuses predominantly on eighteenth-century thought, where names like Lessing, Goethe and Herder, but also Locke and Voltaire, feature. The second has a wider chronological scope, discussing authors such as Winckelmann and Schiller, while branching out from discussions of religion, philosophy and literature to explore the sciences. Issues of biology, early environmentalism, and natural history also form part of this volume. The collection concludes with an examination of changing attitudes towards art in the aftermath of the 'Age of Goethe.'

The essays in this volume are brought together in this collection to present Nisbet's widely-acclaimed perspectives on this fascinating period of German thought. It will be of interest to scholars and students of the intellectual life of Europe during the Enlightenment, while its engaging and lucid style will also appeal to the general reader.

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In his late work *The Education of the Human Race*, Lessing suggests that the time may now have come in which the New Testament has outlived its usefulness as a guidebook—at least for the more farsighted among his contemporaries. But anyone who has attained this insight would do well, he adds, to keep it to themselves: ‘Take care, you more able individual who stamp and fret on the last page of this primer, take care not to let your weaker classmates perceive what you suspect, or already begin to see! Until they have caught up with you, those weaker classmates!’

This partiality for concealment, and indeed for mystification, is repeatedly evident in Lessing’s late writings and conversations, but it is nowhere more conspicuous than in his Masonic dialogues *Ernst and Falk*. There have, of course, been various attempts by Lessing critics to explain the function of secrecy in this work. But the relevant interpretations are often mutually incompatible, and all are in some measure incomplete. A comprehensive explanation of this phenomenon should not, in my

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1 An earlier version of this chapter was originally published as ‘Zur Funktion des Geheimnisses in Lessings “Ernst und Falk”’, in Peter Freimark, Franklin Kopitzsch and Helga Slessarev (eds.), *Lessing und die Toleranz* (Detroit, MI and Munich: Wayne State University Press and edition text + kritik, 1986), pp. 291–309.

opinion, confine itself to the Masonic dialogues, but should view their mystifications in the context of related stylistic elements in other works of Lessing’s later years, because they are all, as I shall try to show, part of a wider rhetorical strategy. The aim of this essay is accordingly to examine all past interpretations of the mystifications in *Ernst and Falk*, and to define their function (or functions) within his late works as a whole.

It is not the purpose of this essay to examine the role of the secret societies in eighteenth-century Europe—not least because this topic has been extensively discussed from the later twentieth century onwards. But I may perhaps be allowed some introductory remarks on the relationship of Lessing’s dialogues to the secret societies of his time. For it was precisely the intense interest of the contemporary public in these institutions that provided the context which Lessing was able to exploit for his own rhetorical ends.

It would seem at first sight anomalous that these societies enjoyed their greatest popularity in Germany and other European countries at almost the same time as the Enlightenment attained its fullest development. Attempts have been made to explain their remarkable success by contending that, in the age of reason, mysteries acquired a rarity value, and that the secret societies helped, in view of the growing secularism of the times, to fill the vacuum left by the decline in significance of religion and its associated rituals. These circumstances may certainly

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4 See, for example, Roberts, *Mythology*, p. 57 and Ludz (ed.), pp. 170f.
have contributed to the success of the secret societies, especially in Protestant countries. But it is equally certain that the attraction of the societies, at least for progressively minded thinkers, lay largely in their close affinity to the aims and ideals of the Enlightenment itself. And the societies were not slow to exploit this affinity: they made calculated use of the age’s enormous thirst for knowledge by creating the impression that initiation into their secrets promised new insights from which the uninitiated were excluded. Lessing himself cherished hopes of this kind when he sought admission to the Freemasons in 1771 in Hamburg. He became a Freemason because he hoped to further his research into the origins of Freemasonry, and he felt drawn to a movement which seemed dedicated to the most progressive social and political values then current. But his disillusionment with the movement followed quickly and comprehensively, and he shared this experience with many other progressive-minded thinkers of the time. Nevertheless, the societies had means of dealing with such negative reactions. The disappointed initiates were promised subsequent admission to higher grades within the order, and when their expectations were again disappointed, other societies such as the Illuminati and the Rosicrucians were available which, in the later 1770s and early 1780s, recruited most of their members from among disillusioned Freemasons. Such organisations fed on each other, taking over and modifying their rivals’ rituals, and thereby lured their proselytes with the prospect of ever higher truths and ever more profound secrets. Lessing did not adopt this course. Instead, he found his own highly original course of action by writing *Ernst and Falk*.

Lessing was by no means the first to make literary capital out of the secret societies. The authors of the numerous novels on this theme in the late eighteenth century, among them Schiller and Goethe, followed a similar strategy. But there is an important difference—not only in the literary genre adopted—between Lessing’s dialogues and the contemporary prose narratives on related topics, a difference rooted in Lessing’s own disillusionment with such organisations. His aim is

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fundamentally distinct, in that he writes not so much about as against the secret societies. He is concerned, in *Ernst and Falk*, to undermine official Freemasonry as he knew it, to reduce its mysteries and obsession with secrecy and redefine it as an open brotherhood of all unprejudiced men (there were, of course, no female Freemasons). His own disillusion is reflected in the disappointment of Ernst, who, soon after his admission to the order, loses patience with the Freemasons and their constant prevarications and promises of higher insights (p. 204). But we are here confronted with a further paradox: if the two speakers, and the author himself, feel so disenchanted with the secret societies, why do secrets and further mystifications play so essential and conspicuous a part in the dialogues?

To answer this question, it is necessary to examine the stylistic devices and turns of phrase which Lessing employs for the purpose of mystification, and to analyse their function. A brief initial outline of the form and structure of the dialogues, and in particular their rhetoric of mystification, may facilitate this end.

The five dialogues fall into two sections, inasmuch as the first three are separated from the final two by a pause during which Ernst leaves his friend to join the Freemasons. The first three dialogues deal with the antithesis between, on the one hand, Freemasonry as it ought to be—that is, the ‘true’ Freemasonry whose task consists in counteracting the national, religious, and social differences between human beings, and on the other hand, Freemasonry as it is in the existing Masonic lodges, whereby its inadequacies become increasingly conspicuous. Ernst repeatedly confuses these two concepts, which leads him to join a lodge in the hope of obtaining further enlightenment. The final two dialogues examine the present, decadent state of the Masonic order, before concluding with an investigation of its origin and a return to the true historical task of Freemasonry. On a personal level, the first three dialogues depict Ernst’s growing curiosity and initiation into some of the Masonic secrets; this reaches its climax with his formal admission to a Masonic lodge. The last two dialogues depict his profound disappointment, which gradually gives way to a renewed conviction in the value of ‘true’ Freemasonry as Falk further enlightens him on its role in human history.  

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Lessing’s choice of the philosophical dialogue is well suited to the theme in question, for it functions like a process of initiation in which Ernst (and with him, the implied reader) is gradually introduced to further secrets of Freemasonry. For example, when Ernst begins to grasp the complexity of the questions under discussion, he is informed by Falk that he is already ‘half a Freemason’ (p. 191). This takes place before he becomes the member of a lodge, which indeed affords him far less insight than his conversations with Falk. The dialogue form—consisting of private conversations in which the confidentiality of the topic and the need to keep it secret are repeatedly emphasised—illustrates and exemplifies the process which is the subject of the conversations, namely the process of individual and collective enlightenment. The role of Freemasonry in history, as Falk describes it, constitutes a parallel to his own role in the personal enlightenment of his friend.

But it would be misleading to speak without qualification of enlightenment and growing insight. For the enlightenment which is imparted to Ernst (and the reader) is only relative enlightenment, not least because the unelucidated mysteries are much more strongly emphasised than those which are clarified. The very title of the work implies an esoteric material: the dialogues are ‘for Freemasons’. The dedication, with its metaphor of the unfathomable well of truth and its prophetic tone, is likewise profoundly mysterious (p. 184). The ‘Preface by a third party’, which is certainly by Lessing himself, already acquaints us with that indirect form of expression which Falk employs almost exclusively throughout the later dialogues. With reference to the subsequent conversations, the preface asks the question: ‘Why has no one spoken out so clearly long ago?’ (p. 185). The question must, of course, be taken as ironic, for much of what follows will be anything but clear. Besides, no answer is supplied at all, and the preface simply continues: ‘This question could be answered in many different ways’, before the further, apparently similar, question is raised as to ‘why the

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systematic textbooks of Christianity arose at so late a stage, [and] why there have been so many good Christians who neither could nor would define their faith in an intelligible manner’. These questions likewise remain unanswered, and the preface concludes with the invitation ‘Readers may make the application for themselves’.

Right at the beginning of the dialogues proper, Falk evades his friend’s questions. When Ernst asks him if he is a Freemason, he at first does not answer the question at all, and when it is repeated, he gives the disconcerting reply: ‘I think I am.’ It is therefore hardly surprising that, early in the second dialogue, Ernst loses patience with Falk and his refusal to give clearer answers, and is able to pass the judgement on him and all Freemasons that ‘they all play with words, and invite questions, and answer without answering’ (p. 190). In the third dialogue, Falk confirms that the ways of the Freemasons are anything but straight, because he rejects Ernst’s conclusion that they ‘counteract’ the evils of constitutional states as far too definite. Instead, he says that the Freemasons help other people in an indirect way to become aware of such deficiencies: ‘’“To counteract” can here mean at most to activate this awareness in them from afar, to encourage it to germinate, to transplant the seedlings and remove the weeds and superfluous leaves’ (p. 199). He is at the same time describing here his own tactics towards his friend, as also evinced when he speaks in riddles and paradoxes—for example, when he tells him that the good deeds of the Freemasons are ‘good deeds aimed at making good deeds superfluous’ (p. 190), or when, instead of providing unambiguous explanations, he asks rhetorical questions (e.g. on pp. 196f.). He repeatedly teases his friend with Socratic irony, pretending to know less than he really knows. When Ernst becomes irritable and declares that he wants to hear nothing more about Freemasonry, Falk tells him that he is indeed willing to tell him more about them (pp. 191f.); but as soon as Ernst again becomes curious, Falk resumes his evasive tactics: he even claims to have forgotten their earlier discussion (p. 197). Among other things, this leads to a position where, by the final dialogue, Ernst has come so fully to terms with Falk’s evasive behaviour that he hesitates to ask any further direct questions. He would like to ask how it came about that the Freemasons derived so much of their symbolism from architecture, but says instead: ‘Shall I guess, or may I ask?’ Falk reacts in characteristic style and declares that Ernst could
have guessed the answer if he had asked a different question, so that Ernst now has to guess what that other question might have been (pp. 212–13).

Falk’s tactics of mystification, as his own comments confirm, are akin to the language of the Freemasons. This becomes especially clear if we consider the symbols and metaphors used in the dialogues, for they are for the most part borrowed from Masonic terminology. Among them are, for example, the image of flames and smoke which the two speakers first use with reference to the advantages and disadvantages of civil society, and later to those of the Masonic order itself (pp. 195 and 203), as well as the images of sunrise and sunset, which are used in their literal sense at the beginning of the dialogues but acquire a symbolic meaning at the end (pp. 452, 209, and 216). Falk twice uses alchemical images, thereby alluding to the occultism of some contemporary lodges, but since he employs them to denote the progressive role of ‘true’ Freemasonry in history, he invests them with a positive sense. Just as sodium nitrate must be present in the air before it can settle on walls as saltpetre, so must unprejudiced people be present in society before they can address the tasks of true Freemasonry; and just as the alchemist who is able to make silver deals in old scrap silver to conceal his secret, so may the Freemasons publicise some of their intentions in order to distract attention from their real activities (p. 201). And the word Arbeit (‘work’ in English) which official Freemasonry uses to designate the business of the order is used more than once by the two speakers to designate the business of ‘true’ Freemasonry (p. 198). Nearly all of these symbols and expressions, in keeping with the theme of the dialogues, are associated with the realm of mystery.

It can therefore hardly be denied that the dialogues consistently make use of rhetorical mystification. Although some of the secrets of ‘true’ Freemasonry are aired as Falk gradually enlightens his friend, it remains a peculiarity of this work that nearly every secret that is revealed is balanced by a new, unresolved secret. For example, as soon as Falk has reported that the work of the Freemasons includes the

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11 On Falk’s evasiveness, see Wolfgang Heise, ‘Lessings Ernst und Falk’, in Weimarer Beiträge, 11 (1979), pp. 5–20 (pp. 11f.).

task of combatting ethnic, religious, and social prejudices, he at the same time emphasises that this task is only ‘part of their business’. He repeats this comment: ‘I say part of their business’ (p. 197), and thereby indicates that they are also concerned with further, unknown business. And when Ernst is somewhat later convinced that Falk has named all the social evils that the Freemasons are concerned to remove, Falk at once qualifies his earlier statement: ‘I have named only a few of them as examples. Only a few of those which are evident to even the most short-sighted observer’ (p. 199); there are accordingly further, unnamed evils that must also be resisted. Even towards the end of the dialogues, after Falk has introduced his friend into some secrets regarding the origin of Freemasonry, he adds with reference to further information he has yet to communicate: ‘Hear me now simply as one hears the first rumour of some major event: it stimulates one’s curiosity more than it satisfies it’ (p. 214). The concluding ‘Note’ to the reader also mentions a sixth dialogue, which Lessing did not write (and probably had no intention of writing).\textsuperscript{13} His reference to a further conversation simply serves to emphasise the fragmentary nature of the work and the provisionality of the thoughts it contains: Lessing thereby hints at further unresolved secrets and insights into the nature of ‘true’ Freemasonry.

The dialogues accordingly leave a great deal open. The number of unanswered questions and resolved mysteries is roughly equal.\textsuperscript{14} Lessing has also made the mystification tactics of the secret societies not just the object, but also the formal principle of his dialogues and thereby produced the effect of raising the curiosity of his readers to the highest pitch. It remains to be asked what purpose this device is meant to serve.

In the wake of Reinhart Koselleck’s study \textit{Kritik und Krise. Ein Beitrag zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt} (Critique and Crisis. Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society (Freiburg: Karl Alber Verlag, 1959; English edition Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988)), it became widely accepted by Lessing scholars that Lessing’s mystifications and the role of the secret societies in his dialogues must have a political explanation. The political interpretation of the secrecy practised by the Freemasons


\textsuperscript{14} Peter Michelsen (see note 7 above), pp. 309 and 312, in my view exaggerates the extent to which the fifth dialogue resolves the enigmas which arose in the previous dialogues.
and similar societies in the eighteenth century is, of course, much older than Koselleck’s book. Well over a century ago, Hermann Hettner, for example, declared that the secret societies of the Enlightenment were ‘a product of the general immaturity and oppression which stifled any vigorous expression of public life. [...] What [...] in a despotic state is a secret society is under freer circumstances a free alliance and public association.’

The political theory of the secret societies did, of course, gain a great deal in the way of breadth and complexity from the work of Koselleck and his followers, and it is largely due to him that interest in Lessing’s Masonic dialogues has grown so strongly over the last half century. This has led to the recognition that Ernst and Falk is a significant political document and Lessing’s political testament. According to Koselleck, the secret societies of the Enlightenment functioned as proto-democratic organisations which prepared the way for the emancipation of the bourgeoisie. Secrecy was for them a political necessity, because, in the absolutist state, the new and potentially revolutionary ideals of individual freedom and equal rights could be rehearsed only in the private sphere. At the same time, the fact that most Masonic lodges—in contrast, for example, to the Illuminati—disclaimed any involvement in politics constituted an implicit criticism of the political world on which they turned their backs.

The application of this theory to Lessing’s Masonic dialogues has led to the often repeated claim that his tactics of mystification are a symptom of political caution, or even that they served as a cloak for revolutionary attitudes. But the claim that Lessing held revolutionary

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16 See Anderson, Constitutions, p. 316: ‘we are also of all Nations, Tongues, Kindreds, and Languages, and are resolved against all Politicks, as what never yet conduced to the Welfare of the Lodge, nor ever will.’

17 See, for example, Ehrhard Bahr, ‘The Pursuit of Happiness in the Political Writings of Lessing and Kant’, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, 151 (1976), 167–74 (p. 174): ‘It now becomes clear that the anonymity of the dialogues’ publication was due as much to their political implications as to considerations of Masonic secrecy. In order to have any chance for discussion and eventual application, German political theory was forced to hide behind the acceptable secrecy of the Freemasons’. See also Klaus Bohnen, Geist und Buchstabe. Zum Prinzip des kritischen Verfahrens in Lessings literaturästhetischen und theologischen Schriften (Cologne: Böhlau, 1974), p. 184, and Manfred Durzak, ‘Gesellschaftsreflexion und Gesellschaftsdarstellung bei Lessing’, Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie, 93 (1974), 546–60 (p. 558).
political views is demonstrably untenable. As Gonthier-Louis Fink has shown in detail,\(^8\) his political ideals in *Ernst and Falk* are related to those of early German liberalism—as in the thought of the young Fichte, for example, or that of Wilhelm von Humboldt—with no hint of any threat to the existing state. Besides, these ideals are propounded quite openly in the first two dialogues. Anyone who maintains that the metaphor of the anthill, which Ernst and Falk praise as a model of peaceful anarchy, anticipates the Marxist-Leninist doctrine of the overthrow of class society overlooks important contrary evidence;\(^9\) for Lessing’s remark, as reported by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, that ‘in a conversation I had with him, he became so heated that he declared that *civil society* must be abolished completely’,\(^10\) remains an isolated outburst out of keeping with the views expounded in the Masonic dialogues. The two speakers conclude regretfully that the analogy of the anthill will never be applicable to human society, and they are in agreement that the social differences which the state entails are necessary evils. The Freemasons must, of course, resist the state-sanctioned disunity among the populace, but ‘without detriment to this state or these states’ (p. 200). The evils inherent in civil society must indeed be resisted, but no one should try to eliminate them completely;’ for one would simultaneously destroy the state itself along with them’ (p. 199). And civil society and the state, despite all the evils associated with them, are much to be preferred to the state of nature (p. 195). The highest aim of Lessing’s Freemasons is therefore not to abolish the state, the church, or class distinctions, even if they employ the concepts of harmonious anarchy and perfect human equality as regulative, utopian ideas. They are in no way revolutionaries, for they disapprove of the American Revolution and the alleged participation of the Freemasons in it (p. 209).\(^21\)

But this is not to deny that Lessing’s dialogues contain progressive and even radical sentiments. There are examples of these firstly, in Falk’s pronouncement in the second dialogue that any happiness of the state whereby even the smallest number of individual members


\(^{19}\) See, for example, Heise, ‘Lessings *Ernst und Falk*’, pp. 5f.


\(^{21}\) See on this Michelsen, ‘Die “wahren Taten”’, p. 307, who convincingly refutes the exaggerations of the Koselleck party.
suffers is simply a cloak for tyranny (p. 191), and secondly, in Ernst’s attacks on class prejudices, antisemitism, and elitist attitudes within the Masonic order (p. 207). Similarly, Lessing’s liberal individualism, as in Falk’s declaration that the state is not an end in itself but only a means to individual happiness, does not amount to an implicit attack on the absolutist state such as the Prussia of Frederick the Great, in which there could be no question of individual freedom as an end in itself.\textsuperscript{22} I merely wish to point out that firstly, the political radicalism of this work has all too often been exaggerated, whereas its tendency can be described as subversive only in the sense of a belief in gradual and peaceful progress; and secondly, that the political content of the dialogues is not alone enough to explain their consistent mystification and secretiveness. Only a few years later, Kant, as a Prussian citizen, had no hesitation in openly defending liberal individualism in his essay \textit{What is Enlightenment?} (1784) and supporting the thesis that the only just laws are those which a people could impose on itself. And Lessing himself was in no way irresolute when it came to broadcasting radical opinions, as he did in theological matters in 1777 when he published the truly explosive ‘Fragments’ of Reimarus, in which it was claimed, among other things, that the apostles secretly disinterred the body of Christ and invented the story of the resurrection.

Besides, Falk distinguishes two kinds of secret: ‘mystifications’, which could in principle be expressed directly if it were appropriate or desirable to disclose them, and ‘the secret’, which cannot be expressed at all (p. 205). Radical political ideas plainly belong to the former category; but Falk insists the ‘true’ Freemasonry has to do not with ‘mystifications’, but with ‘the secret’—and that, of course, is quite a different matter.\textsuperscript{23}

The claim that Lessing resorted to mystification for fear of censorship\textsuperscript{24} can be refuted on similar grounds, for although he was forbidden in July 1778 to publish further writings without the approval of the Brunswick censors, he had already completed \textit{Ernst and Falk} (apart

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\textsuperscript{22} This is not contradicted by Lessing’s reply of 1769 to a letter from Nicolai in which he vehemently rejects the latter’s praise for the supposed freedom of speech enjoyed in Prussia; this was a private response provoked by Nicolai’s manifestly excessive claims, and would never have been made in any public statement: see Lessing to Nicolai, 25 August 1769, in Lessing, \textit{Sämtliche Schriften}, XVII, 298.


\textsuperscript{24} See, for example, Müller, \textit{Untersuchungen}, p. 25.
from the dedication and prefaces) in the previous year. And even if
the prohibition had been imposed at an earlier date, there is no reason
to assume that he would have paid any more attention to it than he
did during his later theological polemics, when he without hesitation
published unapproved writings even after the prohibition.

The attempt has also been made to explain the secrecy observed by
Lessing’s Freemasons as a moral necessity. Thus Gonthier-Louis Fink,
for example, maintains that an action can only be described as virtuous
if it is not publicised, for publicity would allow pride and self-regard
to operate as motives, so that the moral autonomy of the action might
be jeopardised. But although Falk maintains that the ‘true deeds’ of
Freemasonry are a secret in the sense that they cannot be expressed in
words, he also indicates that they do become known to outside observers
inasmuch as they can be learnt and imitated by example (pp. 186–87).
This fact somewhat reduces the credibility of the moral explanation of
the secret, for it appears that such deeds are taken note of by at least
a select public. But a further objection can be formulated to the moral
interpretation: deeds that are kept secret for moral reasons must by
definition be capable of communication, but this is clearly not the case
with the ‘true deeds’ of the Freemasons; for according to Falk, they
cannot be made known by the ‘true’ Freemason, even if he wished to do
so. In other words, the ‘true deeds’ of the Freemasons are either known
to some other Freemasons, in which case they are at least in part lacking
in moral autonomy; or they are in principle incapable of disclosure, in
which case the secrecy which surrounds them cannot be imposed by
moral considerations. It therefore follows that the moral interpretation
provides at most only a partial explanation for the secrecy in which
Lessing’s Freemasons enshroud their activities.

The most obvious explanation for the mystifications in Ernst and Falk
is, of course, that the work deals with Freemasonry—and not just the
ideal, utopian kind of Freemasonry which Falk attempts to define, but
also with the real Masonic order. And Lessing, as an official member of
that order, was bound by oath not to divulge any Masonic secrets. I have
already mentioned that the form of the work is entirely appropriate to
its subject, and that some of its symbols and images are associated with
Masonic practice. There is also no doubt that Falk does allude to certain

Masonic secrets—especially in the last two dialogues, in which there are various references to the origin, rituals, and symbolism of Freemasonry. In addition, Ludwig Hammermeyer’s research on the Strict Observance branch of the movement has shown that Lessing’s dialogues contain, among other things, a commentary on the contemporary crisis within that system, and that Lessing was concerned to influence the present course of events: his attack on the Templar legend in the fourth dialogue equates precisely with the aim of the Grand Master of the Strict Observance, Duke Ferdinand of Brunswick-Lüneburg (to whom the first three dialogues are dedicated), namely to discredit the Templar legend, while his publication of the last two dialogues constitutes one of the first public refutations of the doctrine that the modern Freemasons are the direct successors of the Knights Templar. Before their publication, Duke Ferdinand circulated the manuscript of these two dialogues among the office-bearers of the Strict Observance to further his reforming plans.26

Nevertheless, the main tendency of the dialogues is to play down such secrets of contemporary Freemasonry as its alchemistic experiments, conjuration of spirits, and Templar legend, which are among those ‘mystifications’ which could easily be expressed in words. (Besides, all the main secrets of institutional Freemasonry have been exposed at various times, as had already happened in France in the first half of the eighteenth century.)27 Falk even says that such mysteries, once they have fulfilled their purpose in the history of Freemasonry, have no need of further secrecy. He says, for example, of the relationship between the historical Knights Templar and the Freemasons: ‘It should rather be stated openly, so long as one defines the specific point which made the Templars the Freemasons of their time’ (p. 205). But characteristically, he does not define this relationship specifically, and merely tells his friend that he would be able to guess the answer to this question himself if he were to read the history of the Templars more closely. Falk is speaking of something which may once have been a true ‘secret’, but which has meanwhile fulfilled its historical function, so that it can now be understood correctly and made public. But among those Freemasons who have not

26 See Hammermeyer, Der Wilhelmsbader Freimaurerkonvent, pp. 26f.
yet grasped the historical significance of the Templar order, its memory survives only in the ‘mystifications’ of the Templar legend.

It is nevertheless remarkable that Falk’s own mystifications concern not only the inexpressible ‘secret’ of ‘true’ Freemasonry, but also some of the ‘mystifications’ of the contemporary Masonic order. Is it meant to be merely ironic when he states that a person who discovers the philosophers’ stone will at that same instant become a Freemason? Or when he says that spirits will heed only the voice of a Freemason (p. 204)? It seems as if Lessing wishes to leave open the possibility that an as yet unrecognised rational sense might underlie even the most ridiculous ploys of contemporary Freemasons.\(^\text{28}\) For Falk expressly declares of such delusions: ‘It’s enough [...] that I can already discern in their toys the weapons which the men will one day wield with a steady hand’ (p. 206).\(^\text{29}\)

The above reflections show that the mystifications in Lessing’s dialogues are partly due to the fact that secrets are the subject of the dialogues, above all that ‘secret’ that underlies the workings of ‘true’ Freemasonry in history, but also those ‘mystifications’ of contemporary Masonic lodges which could in principle be expressed directly and publicised. But that by no means exhausts the problem. The mystifications in *Ernst and Falk* are part of a wider tendency, indeed a strategy, which can be detected throughout Lessing’s later works (although it finds its most prominent expression in *Ernst and Falk*).

Lessing was inclined throughout his life to maintain a certain reserve towards even his closest friends, and especially in his later years, it became his habit to keep his philosophical speculations to himself, to express them only indirectly, or to try them out in conversation with younger acquaintances such as Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem, Johann Anton Leisewitz and Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi. But the decisive factor which transformed this habit from a personal idiosyncrasy into a conscious principle of his thought was his growing conviction (probably

\(^{28}\) It is possible that he is here alluding to the case of a Jewish Freemason, alchemist, and spiritualist called Samuel Jacob Falk (from whom Lessing’s Falk no doubt takes his name), who was expelled from Brunswick territories in the 1730s and later lived on in London as an important but shadowy figure in international Freemasonry; for further details, see H. B. Nisbet, *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. His Life, Works, and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 597–98.

\(^{29}\) Cf. Falk’s earlier remark (p. 204) ‘that I see in all these fantasies a quest for reality, and that one can still deduce from all these false directions where the true path leads to’.
strenthened by his intensive studies of Leibniz in the years 1772 and 1773) that language—and particularly fixed traditional concepts—imposes limits on the emergence and recognition of new ideas, limits which creative thought must seek to overcome.\footnote{On Lessing’s doubts in his later years concerning the capacity of language to express ideas, see paragraph 73 of \textit{The Education of the Human Race}: ‘I am perhaps not so much in error as that language is inadequate for my concepts’: Lessing, \textit{Philosophical and Theological Writings}, ed. Nisbet, p. 235.}

Lessing’s changed attitude towards the possibilities of linguistic expression is particularly conspicuous if we compare his remark in the \textit{Letters on Literature} of 1759: ‘Language can express everything which we think clearly’\footnote{Lessing, \textit{Sämtliche Schriften}, VIII, 132.} with the following exchange between Ernst and Falk:

Ernst: If I have a concept of something, I can also express it in words.
Falk: Not always, and often not in such a way that others derive exactly the same conception from the words as what I have in mind. (p. 187)

Falk is here referring specifically to the concept of Freemasonry. Why, one might ask, should it be so difficult, or even impossible, to express its meaning in words? The problem becomes no easier to solve since Falk uses the word ‘Freemasonry’ in two distinct senses—firstly, to denote the real Masonic order, then also in the ideal, utopian sense of what he calls ‘true’ Freemasonry. But it can only be this second sense that is particularly difficult to define.

Peter Michelsen has tried to overcome this difficulty in the following manner: the true significance of Freemasonry as it appears in the final dialogue, he says, is simply friendship, which is able to transcend all the limitations of nations, religions, and classes. Friendship, however, cannot possibly be understood by means of its conceptual definition, but only through personal experience—through the experience of brotherly interaction between human beings.\footnote{Michelsen, ‘Die “wahren Taten”’, pp. 297 and 314.} There is indeed a close association in the records of the secret societies between friendship and secrecy. In the original constitution of English Freemasonry, for example, it is stated that there are areas of Masonic life which cannot be explained in words, and can only be understood by means of personal contact: ‘All Preferment among Masons is grounded upon personal Worth and
personal Merit only [...]. Therefore no Master or Warden is chosen by Seniority, but for his Merit. It is impossible to describe those Things in Writing, and every Brother must attend in his Place, and learn them in a Way peculiar to his Fraternity [...].

These words, however, tend to suggest that the experience of friendship—or fraternal collaboration—is rather a means of understanding Freemasonry than the aim of Freemasonry itself: a means of recognising and appreciating the personal worth of other Freemasons. The decisive insight indicated here is not so much the experience of fraternal interaction in itself (although this experience is entirely necessary), but the fact that recognition of individual merit can only be based on the attitudes and actions of the individual in question, which give him the right to be a Freemason. In Lessing’s case, it is in my view no different. His partners in the dialogues were already close friends before their conversations begin (they address each other by the familiar ‘Du’), so that it can scarcely be the experience of friendship into which Ernst needs to be initiated; he must rather be led to an understanding of those personal attitudes and actions which turn individuals into true Freemasons of the kind Falk has in mind, and whose collective expression is the world-historical achievement of Freemasonry.

It may be helpful to consider in this context Wieland’s ideas on friendship and secret societies. For there is a striking similarity between Lessing’s definition of Freemasons and Wieland’s definition of the ‘Cosmopolitan Order’ of his own invention, as described in his novel The History of the Abderites of 1781 and in more detail in his essay The Secret of the Cosmopolitan Order of 1788. Just like Lessing, Wieland distances himself from the actual secret societies of his time and contrasts them with the utopian model of a fraternity of enlightened men whom he describes as ‘Cosmopolitans’: ‘There is a kind of mortals who call themselves Cosmopolitans and who, without formal arrangement, without badges of membership, without lodge meetings, and without being bound by sworn oaths, constitute a fraternity which is more firmly united than any other order in the world, including Jesuits and Freemasons’. They, too, have a secret which cannot be expressed in words, for it is:

33 Anderson, Constitutions, p. 313.
34 Christoph Martin Wieland, Werke, ed. by Fritz Martini and Hans Werner Seiffert, 5 vols (Munich: Hanser, 1964–65), II, 230–32.
not a secret that depends on the silence of its members or on their care not to be overheard, but a secret over which nature itself has cast its veil. For the Cosmopolitans can without hesitation let it be trumpeted to the world at large; and they may be sure that, apart from themselves, no human being would understand it.

According to Wieland, the Cosmopolitans are friends from the moment they first meet, and their friendship is based ‘on the need to love ourselves in those who most resemble us’.

These extracts from Wieland are not, however, just an interesting parallel to Lessing’s dialogues. It is also quite conceivable that they influenced the latter, for the version from which I have quoted in translation appeared already in 1774 in a continuation of his novel The History of the Abderites in his journal Der Teutsche Merkur—that is, before Ernst and Falk, at least in its present form, was written. Lessing had closely followed Wieland’s career as a writer since the 1750s, and he regularly refers to his works (and in a very positive tone in the 1770s). In 1775, he declined an invitation from Wieland to contribute to the Der Teutsche Merkur, and his essay On a Timely Task of 1776 is conceived as an answer to a question which Wieland had posed in that journal.

It is therefore very likely that Lessing knew Wieland’s observations of 1774 on the ‘Cosmopolitans’, and it cannot be ruled out that he received the initial inspiration from Wieland’s novel for his plan to contrast the actual secret societies of his time with an ideal kind of fraternity.

Friendship therefore constitutes an essential part of that secret which surrounds Wieland’s Cosmopolitan Order. This was implicit in his version of 1774, and in the essay of 1788 on the same subject he expressly writes: ‘The entire secret lies in a certain natural relationship and sympathy which manifests itself between similar beings in the universe’. No one outside the Cosmopolitan Order can partake in the secret, because they have no share in the friendship which exists between the Cosmopolitans. But significantly, it is not their friendship which makes them Cosmopolitans: it is rather their Cosmopolitanism which makes them friends. What is implicit in the 1774 version is formulated explicitly in the later essay, in which Wieland states: ‘One

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36 Der Teutsche Merkur, VII/2 (May, 1774), 125–65 (pp. 149–51).
37 Lessing to Wieland, 8 February 1775, in Lessing, Sämtliche Schriften, XVIII, 129.
38 See Nisbet, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. His Life, Work, and Thought, p. 525.
does not become a Cosmopolitan by acceptance and instruction: but one finds oneself in their society because one is a Cosmopolitan’.\textsuperscript{40} In other words, the essence of Wieland’s Cosmopolitanism—and of Lessing’s ideal Freemasonry—does not consist in friendship itself (although it does express itself in friendship), but in those personal qualities and attitudes which one must first possess before one can count as a Cosmopolitan—or a Freemason. Friendship is the means of preserving the secret of the Cosmopolitans or ideal Freemasons and simultaneously makes it possible to share their secret; but the secret they share is their Cosmopolitanism, or Freemasonry, itself.

To return to Lessing’s dialogues: Falk quickly passes on from the concept of Freemasonry to the ‘deeds’ of the Freemasons. Since the essence of Freemasonry cannot be communicated in words, it is communicated by means of deeds, which therefore function in this context as a substitute for words. But it soon emerges that the concept of ‘deeds’, like that of Freemasonry before it, has a double sense: it applies not only to the philanthropic actions of the actual Masonic order (the foundation of schools, orphanages, and the like), but also to the ‘true deeds’ of ideal Freemasonry. And just as in the earlier case, it is this second, utopian sense which, according to Falk, can be defined only with difficulty, or not at all:

\begin{quote}
Falk: [...] Their true deeds are their secret.
Ernst: Aha! so they can’t be explained in words either?
Falk: Probably not!—I can and may tell you only this much: the true deeds of the Freemasons are so great, and so far-reaching, that whole centuries may elapse before one can say ‘This was their doing!’ (p. 189)
\end{quote}

Thus the concept of Freemasonry can only be expressed through deeds; but the deeds themselves cannot be defined simply either. The reason for this seems to consist not in the fact that, as deeds, they can only be recognised by means of experience, but in the fact that the historical consequences which lend the deeds their full significance can only be understood later as parts of a meaningful process (perhaps within a providential framework). The secret therefore contains more than just the experience of friendship.

\textsuperscript{40} Wieland, \textit{Werke}, III, 554.
Nevertheless, a further ambiguity still remains. Falk says ‘I can and may tell you only this much’. The ‘may’ creates the impression that he could say more if he were permitted to do so. A similar ambiguity occurs on several occasions in the dialogues, for example in Falk’s comment that true Freemasonry is ‘something which even those who know cannot say’ (p. 186). It remains uncertain whether those who know about the secret cannot express it because of the inadequacy of language, or whether they have decided for particular reasons to remain silent about it. The line between ‘mystifications’ and the ‘secret’ seems to be anything but clear-cut.\textsuperscript{41}

All of this suggests that more than one reason is possible as to why the concepts of ‘Freemasonry’ and the ‘true deeds’ of the Freemasons must remain mysterious and indefinable. Perhaps it is in fact impossible to express them adequately in words, but even if it were possible, it might not be advisable; and the historical repercussions of the Masonic deeds may be so far-reaching that it becomes possible only long afterwards to understand their significance, and hence to define the deeds themselves accurately.

The dialogues do, however, contain some indications which allow us to conclude why Falk considers language inadequate to grasp the nature of Freemasonry fully. The task of the Freemasons does not consist in directly combatting those necessary evils which divide states, religions, and social classes. It is rather a matter of altering the attitudes of people by promoting in them an awareness of these evils—a process which can naturally succeed only very gradually: “To counteract” can here mean at most to activate this awareness in them from afar’ (p. 199.) It is therefore a feeling, an altered awareness, that must be propagated here—and not, for example, a new doctrine. This passage furnishes an indication of what Falk must have meant earlier when he rejected Ernst’s claim that it must surely be possible to convey at least an approximate conception of Freemasonry by means of words: ‘An approximate conception would in this case be useless or dangerous. Useless if it didn’t contain enough, and dangerous if it contained the slightest amount too much’ (p. 187). That is, if a particular definition of Freemasonry were to understate the

\textsuperscript{41} See also these words from the second dialogue: ‘Falk: […] you already recognise truths which are better left unsaid. / Ernst: Although they could be said. / Falk: The wise man cannot say what is better left unsaid.’ (p. 191)
historical task of the Freemasons in moderating the necessary evils of society (for example, by reducing the role of the Freemasons merely to charitable initiatives), it would be useless; but if it were to exaggerate that task (for example, by representing it as a revolutionary undertaking), it would be dangerous inasmuch as it might call into question the continued existence of the state itself. It follows from this that all linguistic definitions should be handled with the utmost caution. Even if it is in principle possible to formulate such definitions (and that will not always be the case, for example with the experience of friendship), such definitions will be at best deficient. This unceasing awareness of the inadequacy of language—not just, for example, in conveying the experience of friendship, but also in conveying human convictions and ideals in general—is characteristic of Lessing’s Masonic dialogues and of his later philosophical and theological writings in general. And in my opinion, it is above all this awareness which accounts for the consistent tactics of mystification that are so conspicuous in Ernst and Falk.

What Falk, and with him Lessing, sets his face against is the tendency, inherent in all established concepts, to reinforce those very socio-political divisions which he seeks to relativise and deactivate. In her book Die List der Kritik (The Cunning of Criticism) Marion Gräfin Hoensbroech provides perhaps the best analysis to date of that ‘communicational scepticism’ of Lessing whereby he seeks to subvert entrenched linguistic conventions with a view to neutralising the traditional patterns of thought which tend to promote social and political disunity.42 She illustrates how Lessing, on the one hand, expands the conventional definition of Freemasonry as an exclusive philanthropic organisation and liberalises it in the spirit of its original constitution, and on the other hand, calls into question those prejudices inherent in such concepts as ‘happiness’, ‘nature’, or ‘fatherland’ which contemporary political theory exploited. No one who has recognised the negative social consequences of such concepts can continue to use them in the same way as someone who uses them with all their conventional implications. But instead of seeking to replace them with new concepts or doctrines—for these new concepts and doctrines would entail exactly the same risk of exclusivity and intolerance as the older ones—the true Freemason continues (to

borrow Falk’s alchemistic metaphor) to deal publicly in the ‘scrap silver’ of the old concepts while secretly augmenting it with the new silver of that dynamic, and hence elusive, sense which he has discovered beneath the old ones.43

That is therefore the main reason why Lessing refuses to supply any unambiguous or conclusive definitions of the central concepts in his dialogues. He deals in the same way with the positive ‘spirit’ of religion in contrast to its ossified ‘letter’ in his theological writings, and with the mysteries of Christian revelation in *The Education of the Human Race*. This also gives us the answer to the question he posed in the preface to *Ernst and Falk*: ‘why have there been so many good Christians who neither could nor would define their faith in an intelligible manner?’ (p. 185). For even if the doctrines of Christianity can be (albeit inadequately) defined, it still remains advisable to regard such definitions as at best provisional and inconclusive. The mystifications and ambiguities in *Ernst and Falk*, as in other later writings of Lessing, are thus part of a well-considered strategy. They are in no way a symptom of unclear thinking, as one Marxist critic claims;44 this would imply that Lessing would have replaced his mystifications by unambiguous concepts if he had known the writings of Marx. But it should by now be clear that Lessing rejects all ideologically binding definitions—whether new or old—for the simple reason that, by virtue of their fixed form, they consolidate prejudices and one-sidedness. Instead, he rightly regards them all as provisional and incomplete. This is the main source of that liberating influence which emanates from his writings even today. Nothing repelled him so much as intolerance, including that associated with unquestioned traditional assumptions.45

The principal factor responsible for the mystifications and evasions in *Ernst and Falk* is therefore neither political caution, fear of censorship, respect for the moral autonomy of virtuous actions, the Masonic oath of secrecy, the inexpressibility of individual experience, the imponderability of history, nor imprecise thinking on Lessing’s part—although several of these elements, along with the pleasure he always took in keeping

43 Ibid., pp. 36–48.
44 Heise, ‘Lessings *Ernst und Falk*’, p. 18.
45 See, for example, Gerhart Schmidt, ‘Der Begriff der Toleranz im Hinblick auf Lessing’, *Wolfenbütteler Studien zur Aufklärung*, 2 (1975), 121–36 (p. 133).
his friends and readers guessing, doubtless played a minor part. The explanation lies to a far greater extent in his growing perception that all institutionalised concepts, especially those with a normative content, are at best provisionally valid and at worst liable to confirm existing prejudices and to prevent the development of new and more constructive ideas. To a certain extent, all linguistic formulas are for him at the same time falsifications. The cumulative effect of the mystifications in the Masonic dialogues therefore consists in casting doubt on all doctrinal systems, of which the system of institutional Freemasonry is only one example—but an example which, in view of the secrets associated with it, is extraordinarily suitable for Lessing’s purposes.

It has often been observed that the Masonic dialogues have a pedagogic element. That is certainly correct, and Falk’s mystifications are closely linked to the work’s didactic intention. Education consists, for Lessing, not in passing on existing knowledge, but in the endeavour to develop the pupil’s own capacities. Falk’s evasive manoeuvres, riddles and subtleties are designed to awaken Ernst’s curiosity and so to lead him towards independent thinking. This is also the explanation for the paradoxical juxtaposition of mystification and the ideals of the Enlightenment which we encounter so often in Lessing’s later writings: for the tactics of mystification in the dialogues are not primarily designed to mystify, but rather to stimulate the will to enquiry and discovery more effectively than could ever be achieved by direct and intensive preaching of the gospel of Enlightenment. As the preface of the work puts it, ‘Readers may make the application for themselves’ (p. 185). Right from the first page of the work, Lessing generates, by economical means, that aura of the mysterious, the adventurous, the forbidden, which in 1771 had made it so enticing for him to become a Freemason before disillusionment took over. But he separates these negative impressions from the Masonic order itself by redefining Freemasonry in a new, open sense, so that Ernst’s (and the reader’s) curiosity and intellectual excitement are transferred to Falk’s subversive and constructive ideas on human progress.

After the crisis of the Strict Observance movement around 1780, the prohibition of the Illuminati in 1785, and the rise of the Rosicrucians as a

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46 See, for example, Müller, Untersuchungen, p. 26 and Fink, ‘Lessings Ernst und Falk’, p. 26.
reactionary interest group in the later 1780s, the secret societies had lost their appeal in Germany—at least for progressive thinkers. Adolf von Knigge, who had formerly belonged to the inner circle of the Illuminati, declared in 1788 with some bitterness that the secret societies were ‘useless […], because there is no need in our times to conceal any kind of important instruction in secrecy […]. It is pointless for individual people to try to speed up the process of enlightenment; for they cannot do so, and if they can, it is their duty to do so in public’. Wieland, in his essay of 1789 on the concept of enlightenment, had likewise said that the way to enlightenment must be a public way, and that the old penal laws against ‘secret conventicles and covert fraternities’ ought to be renewed. And in his own Masonic dialogues of 1793, Herder advocated the abolition of all secret societies in favour of an international and public community of thinking people in the spirit of the old ‘republic of scholars’. Lessing did not live to experience these developments. But in his own way, he had already gone beyond them. For he did not confine himself to rejecting the negative aspects of the secret societies of his time. He went one step further in turning the model of the secret society and its rhetoric of mystification into an effective medium for his own emancipatory thinking.