

GOETHE, FREEMASON

Germany celebrates this year the Centennial of the death of her greatest man of letters, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, as the United States celebrates the bicentennial of the birth of George Washington, her greatest General, Statesman and President.

Both were Freemasons!

It is a continual puzzle to Masons, why Washington's biographers so seldom - almost never - mention either his Masonic correspondence, membership and Mastership; or the tremendous, if quiet, influence which Freemasonry had upon his life, character and activities.

The same puzzle exists about the biographers of the great Germany Poet. To an interested and understanding Freemason, his works are replete with Masonic allusions; some of them obviously inspired by Masonic teachings. To the Profane, this influence may be non-existent; perhaps it is because so few of the passionate admirers of the great German - who have sung the ever-increasing chorus of praise for his life and labors - have been Masons, and therefore the majority have no background of Craft understanding.

Many of his biographers put great stress upon his stay in Strassburg and his studies of Gothic Architecture, particularly under the tutelage of the great thinker, Herder, who is credited with inspiring Goethe with his love - even his veneration - for Gothic buildings. Freemasons will see in his stay in Strassburg, where the great Gothic minister dominated his thought with its beauty, the progenitor of that desire to know more of the Craft which had built it - a desire to be gratified when he was thirty-one years of age.

He was initiated in Lodge Amalia, at Weimar (where he lived most of his life and where he died) on the eve of the Feast of St. John the Baptist, in 1780.

Just how or why he became a Mason we do not know; neither can we know much of what impression his initiation made upon him. For it must not be supposed that the Masonry practiced then by the Lodge Amalia was the Masonry we know; although doubtless it held some of our essentials.

The Lodge at Weimar was then under the "Rite of Strict Observance," that curious compound of politics, religion and Knights Templarism. Of this Rite, Mackey says:

"The Rite of Strict Observance" was a modification of Freemasonry, based on the Order of Knights Templar, and introduced into Germany in 1754 by its founder, the Baron von Hund. It was divided into the following seven degrees: 1. Apprentice; 2. Fellow Craft; 3. Master; 4. Scottish Master; 5. Novice; 6. Templar, and 7. Professed Knight. According to the system of the founder of this Rite, upon the death of Jacques de Molay, the Grand Master of the Templars, Pierre d' Aumont, the Provincial Grand Master of Auvergne, with two Commanders and five

Knights retired for purposes of safety into Scotland, which place they reached disguised as Operative Masons, and there finding the Grand Commander, George Harris, and several Knights, they determined to continue the Order. Aumont was nominated Grand Master at a Chapter held on St. John's Day 1313. To avoid persecution the Knights became Freemasons. In 1361, the Grand Master of the Temple removed his seat to Old Aberdeen, and from that time the Order under the veil of Freemasonry, spread rapidly through France, Germany, Spain, Portugal and elsewhere. These events constituted the principal subject of many of the Degrees of the Rite of Strict Observance. The others were connected with alchemy, magic, and other superstitious practices. The great doctrine contended for by the followers of this Rite was, that every true Mason is a Knight Templar."

The seeds of death were sown in the Strict Observance by its very fundamental - that the "Unknown Superiors" supposed to be at its head, would communicate valued esoteric, not to say occult, secrets to its initiates. Obviously, no such secrets were ever communicated, and on the truth of history vanquishing the fiction that Strict Observance was really connected with the Order of Chivalry, the Rite died.

Luckily for Goethe's feeling for the Ancient Craft (?) had the advantage of a great admiration for Lessing - indeed, for all we know to the contrary, it may have been Lessing's love for Freemasonry which first led Goethe to seek the light. Goethe was far too broad-minded a man, and much too deep a thinker, to condemn all that he found good in the Lodge at Weimar, merely because it dropped from under his feet almost as he secured a foothold!

Two years after Goethe's initiation, the Rite of Observance received its death blow, and Frederick Ludwig Schroeder, one of Germany's greatest actors and an ardent Freemason, brought his influence to bear upon German Freemasonry. Dissatisfied then (as thousands of devoted Freemasons are dissatisfied today when any one attempts to "improve" upon ritual or doctrine) Schroeder, as Master of Lodge Emanuel at Hamburg, resolved to attempt to complete reformation of Masonry in Germany; to rid it of all its corruptions, "advanced" degrees, spurious Rites and fantastic "side orders," founded on alchemy, Rosicrucianism, Hermetic philosophy; even upon magic and mysticism.

His theory was that, despite the traditions of the Steinmetzen, Freemasonry had begun in Gothic England and spread to the continent. According to his belief, the English Book of Constitutions and the English Ritual held the only pure Freemasonry. Securing a copy of "Jachin and Boaz," Schroeder translated it and made it the foundation of that which speedily became known as Schroeder's Rite or Schroeder's System. It was adopted by the Provincial Grand Lodge in 1801 and, later, by many other German Lodges. The Hamburg Grand Lodge, under which Lodge Amalia now holds, still works according to this system. (How the "Gentlemen belonging to the Jerusalem lodge" who wrote the pamphlet, would have turned in his grave had he known how his famous expose was to be used!)

Otto Caspari, historian, Goethe admirer and Masonic enthusiast, couples Goethe and Schroeder in the change of the working of Lodge Amalia. He says:

“Frederich Ludwig Schroeder was the man who, meantime, made his appearance as the reformer of Freemasonry. He also went to Weimar and succeeded in persuading Goethe and the Duke Carl Augustus to take an interest in his system. Amalia Lodge accepted Schroeder’s system and in 1808 opened its Temple again.”

“Jachin and Boaz” may be found in any good Masonic Library. The modern Freemason will miss much that he knows in its pages, and find much that he does not know as Masonry; but he will see that many essential Masonic principles are therein set forth.

Goethe remained a member of Amalia Lodge to the day of his death. What was to him the “new system” must have made a far greater appeal than the Rite of Strict Observance. Shortened, abbreviated, scanty as is the Masonry set forth in “Jachin and Boaz,” to us who are heir of the rich ritual and symbolism of Preston, Oliver, Desaugliers et al; it is yet Masonic, which the Strict Observance can hardly be considered to be in the light by which we moderns see. At any rate, Goethe embraced the Schroeder system as the real and Ancient Freemasonry, and it was this which influenced both his life and his writings.

Because Goethe was a follower of Spinoza, ignorant fanatics have falsely accused him of atheism; a charge as ridiculous as it is unfounded. No one today finds Spinoza atheistic; no one ever read Goethe to find anything but a humble man marveling at the greatness of a nature he could not comprehend. Goethe stands awestruck before creation; his characters are often blinded by the magnificence of the cosmos. Goethe revered the Bible; merely because he could not accept the narrow definition of God and heaven which were the professions of his time, he has been thought by the ignorant to have denied the God all his works praise by their spirit of reverence for nature and its miracles.

Throughout the works of this greatest of German poets - a genius so stupendous that he is not infrequently bracketed with Shakespeare - are countless Masonic thoughts, ideas, references and allusions. Some of these, like those found in Kipling, are evidently conscious and intentional. Others - and these the Masonic student of Goethe loves best - are as evidently without intent; they are but the breathing into poem or drama of those ideas of life, death, hereafter, moral principles and ethical doctrine, which, inculcated by Freemasonry, were a part of Goethe’s life.

To English speaking Masons Goethe’s best known Masonic work is the short poem “Masonic Lodge.” It can be found in any collection of Goethe’s works, and in Volume Twenty of the Little Masonic Library.

It is given in full here, not only for purposes of short discussion, but because, by some unaccountable and distressing error, the first five lines, which are the keynote of the whole poem, are omitted in the (1929) Clegg edition of Mackey’s Encyclopedia.

The Masons’s ways are A Type of Existence

And his persistence Is as the days are

Of men in this world. The future hides it

Gladness and Sorrow, We press still thorow,
Naught that abides in it Daunting us - onward.
And Solemn before us Veiled, the dark portal,
Goal of all mortal; Stars are silent o'er us
Graves under us silent. While earnest thou gazest
Comes boding of terror, Comes phantasm and error
Perplexes the bravest With doubt and misgiving.
But heard are the voices - Heard are the Sages,
The Worlds and the Ages; "Choose well; your choice is
"Brief and yet endless; "Here eyes do regard you
"In eternity's stillness; "Here is all fullness,
"Ye have to reward you, "Work, and despair not."

The word "thorow (first stanza) is an obsolete variant of thorough meaning "through", "forward," "ahead," or "onward."

No short poem could more beautifully express the Masonic legend and doctrine; of continuity from "time immemorial;" of hope so great that though we ascend the Winding Stair of life without knowing whether gladness or sorrow are hidden in the future, still we climb, pressing ever onward, undaunted; of the terror and fear of the "grim tyrant," the voiceless grave, the unrevealed mystery; of the comfort and hope of the immortal voices from sage, experience, history and nature; of those "eyes" which "regard you" from beyond - does not Freemasonry teach of an All Seeing Eye? - of that "all fullness" of the future which is ours if we "choose well" - choice brief as a moment, result endless as eternity! And finally, that courageous, inspiring closing admonition - "work" - and despair not!"

It is impossible to compress the mighty allegorical drama of Faust into a paragraph as to do the same for Hamlet. Goethe did not invent the character of Faust, nor did the legend of his "selling himself to the devil." Faust was an actual historical character, a "scoundrelly magician and astrologer" about whom many legends clustered. In 1587, Faust appears as the hero of a popular book in the pride of his strength and knowledge. He sells his soul to the devil in return for a life of pleasure, luxury and gratification of desire on earth. Goethe added to the old legend a tender and tragic love story and wove into it a philosophic content entirely foreign to the material which began as an old wives tale, expanded into a plot for puppet shows, and finally became a popular book. He makes of Faust a student and a thinker, but also a man, with all of man's desires.

Mephistopheles is the wile and specious tempter; Margaret is part of the bait. Throughout the tragedy the struggle for ascendancy between good and evil is made manifest, just as in the Masonic drama. It is here that the keen student of Freemasonry and the lover of Goethe finds so many contacts between mind of the poet and teachings of Freemasonry. As in the Legend of Hiram Abif, Faust at last finds that evil may not forever strive successfully with good; his final and greatest satisfaction is not in selfish pleasure, which means death for the soul, but in work for humanity.

Difference of language, of Rite, and of age; make Masonic parallels in Goethe's works and the story and ritual we know, anything but literal. Such a study of an author is not for the literal minded.

To read Goethe literally is on a par with scanning Hamlet's soliloquy for knowledge of the physical phenomena of sleep! To discuss the Legend of Hiram Abif from a literal standpoint is wholly to miss its significance and its beauty. Goethe makes of his great character an allegory; allegorically, Faust and Hiram are not unlike. Though one first resists while the other first yields to severe temptation, in the end the same lesson is taught by both - that truth overcomes error and evil, and that the divine is always within humanity do we but seek far enough.

However, it is not only in Faust, the greatest of his works, that the interested Freemason will find the influence of the gentle Craft upon the great German poet. Wilhelm Meister's progress is through what may be called a series of Apprenticeships (at least they are periods of learning) to a stage of "further light" in which he learns that only by reverence for God, man and self can a firm character foundation be builded. Werther, Edmont and Gotz von Berlichingen, are all exemplars of the poet's concern for inner spiritual freedom. Iphigenia denies the traditional barriers of race and religion, just as does Freemasonry today (and has ever since the Mother Grand Lodge of 1717). Both poet and Fraternity contend for the right of the individual to erect his own spiritual plumb line, as told by Amos of the Jehovah of old who said, "I will set a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel, I will not again pass by them any more." In Tasso, the hero is seriously threatened with political and social powers but overcomes them by faith in the God-given powers within him.

It may be argued that as these themes of poets and playwrights of all ages, there is no more reason for ascribing a Masonic origin for them in Goethe's works, than to reason that Shakespeare must have been a Mason because in many of his plays truth overcomes error, wrong is supine against right and virtue triumphant over evil.

The difference is that we know Goethe to have been an interested, thoughtful and zealous Freemason; Lodge Amalia celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of his initiation with the aged but still vigorous poet taking part in the celebration. Of this important event in Goethe's life, Brother Otto Caspari has beautifully written: "On to old age he remained the intellectual center of Amalia Lodge.

It was a sacred and hollowed day when Goethe celebrated his fiftieth anniversary in the Temple Weimar. There he stood, the great and venerable poet, who had lived to see so much - the symbol of true and pure human love, no hypocrite, openly confessing his human weaknesses, but

relying on his noble, good and imperishable heart, or which it has been said Goethe's heart, which but few people knew, was as great as his intellect, which everybody knows.

“It must have been an impressive moment, when the grand old Mason, after receiving numerous ovations, responded by citing that Masonic poem which shows us clearly how he, an aged man, had retained eternal youth and love in his heart. He praised Freemasonry as the sublime and everlasting union of humanity.”

The greatest of men have to die; Goethe was called to the Celestial Lodge above on March 22, 1832.

Pathetically, yet most beautifully, his last words were Masonic - Masonic in the language of the Craft of all Freemasons of all lands and all Rites know. Perhaps this cry was but a physical craving for increased illumination as his eyes failed him. But thinking of his life, and the stupendous gifts he made to mankind, the urge to learn, to know, to reach out into the unknown for the solution of all mystery, which breathes through many of his poems and dramas, it is difficult to think of them except as symbolic of the man, his works, his Freemasonry and his character.

With his last breath, Goethe cried the immortal phrase “More Light!”