

HOW TO SABOTAGE A SECRET SOCIETY. THE DEMISE OF CARL FRIEDRICH
BAHRDT'S *GERMAN UNION* IN 1789.*

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ABSTRACT. In 1789 in Leipzig a slim pamphlet of 128 pages appeared that sent shock waves through the German republic of letters. The pamphlet, bearing the title *Mehr Noten als Text* (*More Notes than Text*), was an 'exposure' whose most sensational element was a list naming numerous members of the North German intelligentsia as initiates of a secret society. This secret society, known as the *German Union*, aimed to push back against anti-Enlightenment tendencies most obviously manifest in the policies promulgated under the new Prussian king Frederick William II. The *German Union* was the brainchild of the notorious theologian Carl Friedrich Bahrdt (1741-1792). But who was responsible for the 'exposure'? Using material culled from several archives, this article pieces together for the first time the back story to *Mehr Noten als Text* and in doing so uncovers a surprisingly heterogeneous network of Freemasons, publishers and state officials. The findings prompt us to reconsider general questions about the relationship of state and society in the late Enlightenment, the interplay of the public and the arcane spheres and the status of religious heterodoxy at this time.

[fig.1: The title page of *Mehr Noten als Text*]

I.

In early modern Europe a fugitive existence was the price tag often attached to heterodoxy or dissidence. Those whose beliefs challenged the status quo had to stay one step ahead of the religious and political authorities that guarded it. They were thus forced to spend much of their lives either in hiding or on the run. In fact, the latter state was a response to an escalation in the danger already associated with the former. By publishing anonymously or ensuring that meetings with like-minded contemporaries took place in secret, heterodox and dissident thinkers could ward off the greater danger that would arise if their cover was blown. Should this, however, happen, then a discreet tip-off or an astute inference could provide a window of opportunity in which to take to the road and seek out a safer haven or more tolerant abode.

Of course, in many cases the precautions were either insufficient or the tip-off came too late. Early in the morning on 7 April 1789 the German theologian Carl Friedrich Bahrdt (1741-1792) was woken by his secretary and called downstairs to the wine garden that he had managed on the outskirts of Halle. Ten years earlier Bahrdt had found refuge in the Prussian university town after fleeing punishment by the authorities of the old Reich on account of his profanizing translations of the Bible. In the interim the situation had, however, changed. In August 1786, Frederick the Great, the enlightened Prussian monarch, under whose rule Bahrdt had found protection, had died. He had been succeeded by his not-so-enlightened nephew Frederick William II. On that early spring morning in 1789, Bahrdt realized that he was about to pay a price for the resistance he had mounted against the policies of the new regime. From his vantage point overlooking the river Saale, he could see three bailiffs of the court approaching the wine garden. As they drew nearer, Bahrdt thought of mounting his horse and fleeing the scene. In contrast to the situation ten years earlier there was, however, neither the

time to escape nor the safe haven awaiting him, were his escape to be initially successful. This time flight was not an option.¹

The lengthy interrogations and fifteenth months of imprisonment that awaited Bahrtdt might seem to earn him a place among the numerous other heretics and dissidents who on account of their beliefs suffered similar hardship at the hands of the authorities. If Marx, however, taught us that the tragedies in history often repeat themselves in the guise of farce, then his claim – beyond its original application to the Second French Empire – finds further vindication by considering the case of Bahrtdt. Admittedly such a remark at first appears uncharitable; after all, imprisonment and interrogation are unpleasant experiences and as such more the stuff of tragedy than farce. Yet an element of farce was already present in the earlier episode, when in 1779 Bahrtdt had felt compelled to **flee** eastwards across the territory of the Reich and seek Prussian protection. Well-informed observers of this episode already knew that Bahrtdt's was not just **fleeing** the imperial authorities. His sudden departure from Heidesheim on the Rhine, where he was attempting to administer a school in accordance with the program of pedagogical reform known as Philanthropinism, saved him from creditors demanding repayment of their investment in this project.² Even more egregiously, Bahrtdt, a Protestant preacher and family man with wife and children, had fathered twin girls with one of the maids who worked at the school. Thus in his final months in Heidesheim Bahrtdt was facing the prospect of financial ruin and social disgrace.

And yet all this impending ignominy was obscured by another crisis. Two years earlier Bahrtdt had published a second edition of his modernizing reinterpretation of the Holy Word, *The Most Recent Revelations of God, Told in Letters and Stories*.³ The imperial authorities, who had taken no measures against the first edition, responded this time by declaring the translation to be an exercise in profanation and issuing a *Conclusum* enforcing Bahrtdt's suspension from all official positions. Conceivably Bahrtdt could have defused the situation by

publicly declaring his belief in the core articles of Christianity and then continuing to do what he had done in the past, namely: ‘preach orthodoxy while cunningly hiding his heterodoxy’.⁴ Instead he did the opposite. His escape to Prussia was accompanied by the publication of a *Glaubensbekenntnis (Profession of Faith)*, in which Bahrtdt disavowed any belief in original sin, in the divinity of Jesus Christ, in the doctrine of his crucifixion for the atonement of mankind’s sins, in the eternal torments of hell and other such doctrines.⁵ Upon arriving in Halle, pious townsfolk made the sign of the cross when Bahrtdt passed on the street. They did so because of his reputation as a ‘heretic’: an imputation that conveniently overshadowed the other scandalous details about Bahrtdt’s life.⁶

If the status of persecuted heretic was preferable to that of amoral reprobate, this was in large part because under an enlightened regime such as that of Frederician Prussia ‘heretics’ could expect a higher degree of toleration than had been the case in past centuries. The sense that this liberal attitude was in danger upon the accession of Frederick’s successor was seemingly vindicated when Johann Christian Woellner, the new cultural minister, promulgated the Edict on Religion in July 1788. Although this Edict was not as draconian and regressive as the voices of protest claimed at the time, it clearly announced the end to any toleration of public expressions of heterodoxy. A remarkable debate ensued, made up of over a hundred pamphlets. The most scurrilous of them was an anonymous play, which did not shy away from directly criticizing the monarch. Bahrtdt insisted that he had only arranged its publication, yet the suspicion that he was the author was in fact the reason for the visit the three bailiffs paid Bahrtdt at his wine garden in April 1789.⁷

This article will, however, focus on the other reason for Bahrtdt’s subsequent detainment. Sometime in the mid-1780s Bahrtdt organized a secret society that began convening at his wine garden as an irregular (i.e. not formally recognized) lodge. A core group of twenty-two members seems to have been the reason why the organization referred to

itself as the Society of the XXII.⁸ The adoption of the second name *German Union* indicates a further stage in the organization's history, in which it reconstituted itself as a corresponding society with branches extending throughout Germany and beyond.⁹ It presented itself to prospective members as a necessary – and necessarily clandestine – ‘counter-balance’ to offset the ascendancy of those ‘proponents of enthusiasm and superstition,’ who particularly in Prussia had assumed positions of power.¹⁰ Apart from its free cities, the German lands remained a patchwork of absolutist monarchies and principalities, none of which foresaw a legally sanctioned place for organized opposition. If opposition was therefore to organize itself, it would have to do so covertly.

At first sight the *German Union* seems to affirm the old thesis put forward in Reinhart Koselleck's classic work *Critique and Crisis* (German original: 1959), particularly with regard to his account of the antagonism between the early modern state and the secret societies of the Enlightenment.¹¹ However, a more probing examination calls into question this initial impression. Just as there were multiple reasons compelling Bahrdt to seek refuge in Halle in 1779, the following analysis will reveal multiple motives for the secrecy in which Bahrdt's organization veiled itself. The first section of this article will demonstrate that the secrecy of the *German Union* was not just occasioned by its unsanctioned opposition to the traditional authorities.

Subsequent sections of this article will engage in some detective work in outlining the forces that conspired to bring about the demise of the *German Union*. In early 1789 a pamphlet appeared in Leipzig under the title *Mehr Noten als Text* (*More Notes than Text*, subsequently: *MNaT*. See fig. 1 for the title page). Within its 128 pages it laid before the eyes of the public the manifestos and programmatic texts of the organization (*Text*) and supplemented this with extensive and often acerbic commentary (*Noten*). As will be shown, *MNaT* had been compiled by the translator, publisher and advisor at the ducal court in

Weimar, Johann Joachim Christoph Bode (1731-1793). Bode was, however, only one of a number of actors involved in this ‘exposure’. The insight this yields into the fractious and clandestine aspects of the eighteenth-century republic of letters once more unsettles an interpretation derived from Koselleck’s thesis. This is because the multiplicity of (non-state) actors complicates any attempt to account for the downfall of the *German Union* in terms of a simple clash between the forces of subversion, as represented by the secret society of the *German Union*, and the forces of order, as represented by the state authorities. In the conclusion, some insights derived from this inquiry will be mined for their potential to suggest an alternative approach to understanding the changing status of heterodoxy and dissidence in late eighteenth-century Germany.

II.

The two events that bookend the following story, namely: first Bahrtdt’s founding of the *German Union* and secondly his subsequent imprisonment, suggest a narrative arc conforming to a simple pattern: the Enlightenment, personified in one its most fearless champions, attempts to resist and even subvert the repressive policies of the late absolutist state; the state then apprehends, interrogates and finally incarcerates said champion. The fact that Bahrtdt’s challenge to the state lands him in prison only a few short months before the Parisian crowd storms the Bastille can then take on a symbolic value; east of the Rhine the old order manages to ward off the subversion that west of the Rhine proves to be its undoing. If it was, however, argued above that the reasons compelling Bahrtdt to flee across Germany in 1779 are not as simple as the first might seem, then it is wise to approach the secrecy concealing the *German Union* and the circumstances of Bahrtdt’s imprisonment with similar circumspection.

The confrontation between the hypostatized entities of the Enlightenment and Absolutism, or alternatively: (bourgeois) society and the (early modern) state, underpins

Reinhart Koselleck's *Critique and Crisis*. Koselleck's account was first formulated well over half a century ago and yet it frames the drama in accordance with a narrative of subversion whose logic remains beguiling.¹² Moreover, in characterizing 'Enlightenment and mystery' as 'historical twins' it suggests a relationship between the public sphere and the arcane sphere, i.e. the sphere constituted by the enthusiasm of the time for secret societies, in a manner that the subsequent literature has rarely articulated with such sharpness.¹³ For this reason it represents a germane point of reference in trying to contextualize Bahrdt's secret society within the longer narrative of Enlightenment history. Yet while the case of the *German Union* initially seems to affirm the enduring relevance of Koselleck's perspective, the more detail investigation to follow also reveals the limits of his interpretation.

Koselleck's commitment to the narrative of subversion derives from the ambiguity he imputes to the confrontation between the early modern state and an increasingly assertive bourgeois society. What were the terms of this confrontation? According to the absolutist model (which Koselleck derived almost completely from Hobbes), politics was the prerogative of the early modern state. Thus the relationship between state and society could not be political in any sense extending beyond the axiomatic exchange of obedience for security. In the other direction, the nascent bourgeois society could not define its relationship to the state in the moral terms by which it internally regulated and judged the actions of its own members; at least this dispensation of political action from moral critique was deemed valid by those who recognized a doctrine of reasons of state. As a result of this ambiguity, the antagonism between state and society unfolded in an oblique, pseudo-political, pseudo-moralistic register, culminating finally in the collapse of the early modern state and in the ascendancy of a form of ideologized moral politics, exemplified by the terror of the French Revolution. According to Koselleck the subversive dynamic had been channelled through two forums: on the one hand, the republic of letters, whose open discourse anticipated the public

sphere, and on the other hand the masonic lodges and secret societies, which constituted a parallel arcane sphere.

Although neither Bahrtdt nor his *German Union* feature in *Critique and Crisis*, it is hard to imagine an organization more congenial to Koselleck's account of how the secret societies developed over the course of the eighteenth century; a development culminating in the Illuminati order, the secret society established in 1776 by the professor of canonical law at the university of Ingolstadt, Adam Weishaupt (1748-1830). For Koselleck, this order represented the politicization of the latent antagonism implicit in the self-understanding of the Masonic lodges as extra-political niches, governed only by their own moral laws and thus lying beyond the jurisdiction of the state. It is not a stretch to see in the *German Union* a further radicalization of this antagonism. The progression was discernible in the attitude towards princes as bearers of state power. Whereas the masonic lodges had been keen to enlist princes as patrons and protectors, the admissibility of princes to the Illuminati formed the object of a protracted dispute within the ranks of the order; despite the benefits that flowed from their patronage, their membership within the order represented an incursion of the old corrupted order into the inner sanctum where the new order was being prepared.¹⁴ For Bahrtdt's *German Union* there was no debate: princes and ministers were expressly excluded from membership (*MNaT*, 31).

This exclusion suggests that Bahrtdt's secret society was edging towards a more overt avowal of its opposition towards state power. And yet in accordance with Koselleck's thesis, this opposition was still loath to admit its political character; the *German Union*, after all, aspired not to political power, but rather to a 'moral power over the nation' (*MNaT*, 33). This ambition testifies to the conflation of politics and morality diagnosed by Koselleck as symptomatic of those who in their moral critique of the absolutist state no longer honoured its fundamental political achievement of imposing order upon a Europe recently ravaged by

religious civil war. If *Critique and Crisis* reveals no awareness of Bahrdr's conceit of a 'moral power over the nation', the note that Bode attaches to this expression can stand in for the sentiment such an expression might have elicited from Koselleck: 'How modestly this man [i.e. Bahrdr] calls the power that the Union achieves in this form over the nation a moral power! This Union will presumably coerce the nation not through a standing army nor through a formal inquisition but only guide it through the unity of thought, or rather non-thought, in other words though an undisputed Enlightenment'. (*MNaT*, 55) While admittedly formulated in a more polemical diction, one feels that Koselleck could not have said it better himself, particularly because Bode seems to sense the 'totalitarian' character of an Enlightenment incapable of distinguishing between politics and morality.

The means by which Bahrdr planned to attain this moral power over the nation likewise speak to another feature of Koselleck's account. In a letter Bahrdr wrote in 1782 to Franz Dietrich Freiherrn von Ditfurth (1738-1813), an assessor at the Imperial Court in Wetzlar, he reported on how he had for many years been toying with an idea that he saw as simply a 'castle in the air' but which in an epiphany-like moment he had had connected with Freemasonry. A postscript to the letter elaborates upon his belief that there had to be a thread 'on which all people in all parts of the world can pull without any of them knowing that this is the thread of Freemasonry [...] In short there has to be something in the eyes of the public which is entirely different from what the public thinks it is'.¹⁵ Bahrdr then revealed that books and journals would be this 'something': although appearing to the public in the guise of reading material, they would actually function as secret conduits of influence for the society Bahrdr was envisioning. In formulating the plans five years later for the *German Union* (plans then *MNaT* subsequently revealed to the public), Bahrdr built upon these ideas. He foresaw a network of reading societies that served as a cover for the secret society and at the same time provided an audience and a market for the literature the society would distribute. In this manner, Bahrdr hoped to achieve a secret monopoly over the German book market, while at

the same time guiding the nation in a pro-Enlightenment direction. As hare-brained as this plan was, it can be seen as an ingenious attempt to interlock those two dimensions of bourgeois society identified by Koselleck as so corrosive to the old order, namely the public and the arcane sphere.

Although an examination of the *German Union* as revealed by *MNaT* is highly germane to Koselleck's account, a shift in focus away from the contents of the exposure to the circumstances of its production reveals aspects which sit less easily with the narrative of subversion. An appreciation of these aspects can begin by noting Carlo Ginzburg's characterization of Koselleck's work as an interpretation that 'cleverly reworks the old conspiratorial thesis advocated by the Abbé Barruel'.¹⁶ The Abbé Barruel was the French (ex-)Jesuit publicist whose *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du Jacobinisme* (1797-1798) laid before the eyes of the reading public the panoramic vision of a grand conspiracy directed against the old order and culminating in the French Revolution. In this work, Barruel found space to mention and dismiss the allegation that Bode's hand was behind *MNaT*. The reason for this position lay in Barruel's conviction that the *German Union* was simply a front for the Illuminati order. Ditfurth had in fact been a member of the Illuminati and provides one reason why the link between the Illuminati and the *German Union* is not to be totally dismissed out of hand. But there was a problem: this was also true of Bode, the compiler of *MNaT*. After becoming a member in 1782, Bode swiftly rose to a prominent position in the order. If the *German Union* was then really a front for the Illuminati, how was it possible to explain the possibility that Bode as a leading member of the Illuminati was responsible for sabotaging it? Faced with this quandary, Barruel was adamant that there was not 'the least probability that Bode, who had taken so active a part in this conspiracy, would be very forward in laying it open to the public ...'¹⁷ His explanation was that Bode was not responsible for *MNaT*, but rather the named publisher Georg Joachim Göschen (1752-1828).

If the allegation of Bode's responsibility for *MNaT* created problems for Barruel, what does its verification imply for Koselleck's interpretation? Admittedly Koselleck integrated a considerable degree of abstraction into his account, prompting another reader to describe it as a 'highly sublime form of conspiracy theory'.¹⁸ From these heights of sublimity, Bode's responsibility for *MNaT* is reduced from the embarrassment it represented for the likes of Barruel to a mere historical curiosity. And yet an analysis that uncovers the antagonism between two ostensibly pro-Enlightenment figures such as Bahrdt and Bode also reveals countless other fault lines running through the intellectual landscape. As we will see, the 'Enlightenment' turns out to be socially fractured to a degree that can easily cast doubt upon its status as more than just a catchphrase of the period (at least in the German-speaking lands where the term *Aufklärung* found a prominent place in the public discourse of the time). Does this fractured Enlightenment still cohere enough to carry the weight of the role Koselleck assigns it as the protagonist of a grand drama, busily engaged in the work of undermining the old order? More generally, do all the small acts of subversion within the social sphere (such as Bahrdt's *German Union* and Bode's sabotage of it) still add up to some meta-subversion of state authority as envisaged by Koselleck? After all, if we have multiple subversions working at cross-purposes and even pitted against each other, it is not evident why the aggregate itself should also be modelled as subversion.¹⁹ As Geoffrey Cubitt has noted against a different thematic backdrop: 'If conspiracies are varied and numerous, what happens in politics and society is likely only rarely and irregularly to be what any particular set of conspirators has intended'.²⁰

The secrecy in which the *German Union* veiled itself was, in any case, not just the subversive form of secrecy that underpins Koselleck's interpretation and that allowed the secret societies to constitute themselves as a separate sphere. Particularly in the early phases of the organization, Bahrdt had appealed to other qualities of secrecy. After all, secrecy, in addition to providing the means to conceal and to protect those on the 'inside,' also has the

capacity to entice and tantalize those on the ‘outside.’ Numerous eighteenth-century imposters had exploited this natural curiosity and fleeced the naive of their money by charging high fees for initiation into the secret of the secret societies. In all the subsequent controversy about Bahrdr’s society, many who were mindful of such schemes simply dismissed the *German Union* as a cynical money-making exercise. A lengthy digression in *MNaT* suggested to readers that the *German Union* was essentially a throwback to the *Dukatensozietät*, a society founded in the late 1740s essentially as an eighteenth-century Ponzi-Scheme (*MNaT*, 25-28).

The fact that such insinuations were of a piece with widespread opinion of Bahrdr’s character serves as a reminder of another aspect of the secrecy observed, however imperfectly, within the *German Union*. Because Bahrdr had become such a divisive and controversial figure within the German public sphere, it was imperative to suppress the knowledge that he was the driving force behind the organization. ‘Conceal yourself completely!’ was the advice given to Bahrdr by one supporter, who acted as one of his frontmen.²¹ Observing this imperative should have been viable, at least in theory, because by late 1787 the *German Union* had transformed itself into a corresponding society. As a result it operated not so much on the basis of face-to-face interaction but primarily through missives and circulars sent out to members from its centre in Halle or one of its sub-centres. Thus the secrecy was not just a means to protect the organization not just from the authorities but also from the negative fall-out potentially caused by Bahrdr’s reputation. Interestingly enough, *MNaT* does not once mention Bahrdr by name, although it contains a knowing allusions to his hand in the affair.²² In the published reviews of *MNaT* and in the repudiations of alleged membership, the fact that he had founded the society and authored its manifestos soon attained the status of an open secret.

The realization that the secrecy of the secret societies had a polyvalent character can also lead to an appreciation of the fact that secrecy was not limited to the arcane sphere of the

secret societies but also played its part in the public sphere. This in turn prompts us to revisit another aspect of Koselleck's thesis. In describing the indirect countervailing powers gestated within bourgeois society, Koselleck constructs an intriguing dualism, manifest in the republic of letters and the masonic lodges as institutions beholden to the opposing principles of publicity and secrecy.²³ As James Van Horn Melton pointed out in a more recent work: 'The masonic preoccupation with secrecy appears strangely antithetical to the transparency demanded by enlightened journalists and publicists'.²⁴ And yet whatever claims for transparency journalists and publicists might have put forward, it was the opacity attending to the experience of dealing with printed material (who is the actual author? who is responsible for circulating it?) that allowed Bahrtdt to graft a secret society onto a network of reading societies. An examination of the circumstances behind the appearance of *MNaT* provides a further salutary reminder that enlightened journalists and publicists (such as Bode) were highly adept at cultivating their own forms of secrecy.

It seems appropriate to draw attention to these arcane aspects of the public sphere by pointing to an episode that predates the *German Union* and sheds some light on the background to the relationship between Bode and Bahrtdt and more generally on the clandestine aspects of publishing in the German-speaking territories of the eighteenth century.²⁵ Before resettling in Weimar in 1778, Bode had been a publisher in Hamburg. During this time he had come to Bahrtdt's aid by overseeing the publication of the first edition of *The Most Recent Revelation of God*, the work whose second edition landed Bahrtdt in trouble with the imperial authorities. Admittedly Bode's involvement in the production of the first edition is not apparent by simply perusing the title page, which names Johann Friedrich Hartknoch in Riga as the publisher. In fact, Hartknoch's name is a ruse; the title page is an example of the kind of trick a publisher might employ in the politically fragmented German-speaking lands if there was a fear of punitive measures imposed by the political and religious authorities. In a letter to Bahrtdt from July 1771 Bode reported his concerns about the reaction

to Bahrđt's translation from the stalwart defender of Lutheran orthodoxy in Hamburg, Johann Melchior Goeze (1717-1786): 'In doing the corrections I have found that the book would cause me to completely lose the little friendship that Herr Goeze has shown me until now. Admittedly this is my least worry, but to avoid an unpleasant exchange with him about the last hours of death and the final judgment, I want to come up with a clever strategy, such as a *Maskopey* with a distant bookseller'.²⁶

What is a *Maskopey*? Because the word has disappeared from modern German, the answer will occur more readily to those who recall the Dutch *Maatschappij*, which denotes an association or a society. If one consults the 85th volume of Krünitz's *Ökonomisch-technologische Encyklopädie* (1802), this meaning is connoted with nefariousness and surreptitiousness: the *Maskopey* is 'an association secretly created to do harm to others'.²⁷ The *Maskopey* Bode eventually devised soon played itself out to the disadvantage of Goeze and – if one were to take Goeze's hard-line, orthodox point of view – also to the disadvantage of all those souls exposed to the corrupting influence of Bahrđt's translation. Bode printed the books in Hamburg under Hartknoch's impressum and then smuggled them *out* before ordering them back *in*. In this manner he was able to give the finishing touches to the illusion that the books were foreign wares.

Such strategies serve as a reminder that the public sphere constituted by print media was also infused with its own forms of secrecy. They furthermore prompt us to ask how necessary it is to posit the dialectical opposition of Enlightenment and secrecy as thesis and antithesis, which plays such an important role in structuring Koselleck's account. A more situative approach, no longer bewitched by abstract dichotomies, could then demonstrate its sensitivity towards the varying dosages of secrecy and openness at play in various institutional contexts. To some extent this has already happened in the research that views the

secret societies as part of the eighteenth-century public sphere, as counter-intuitive and paradoxical as this might initially seem.²⁸

We can keep this debate in the back of our minds in the next section, which seeks to map out the *Maskopey* behind the production of *MNaT*. Once more two publishers will join forces in an arrangement that occurs to the detriment of a third party. The arrangement will provide a further opportunity to observe how in late eighteenth-century Germany circumstances were more complicated than a cursory glance at a title page might initially suggest.

III.

A short satirical play published in 1789 imagined Bahrdr's rage in response to the appearance of *MNaT*: 'Since the accursed book: *Mehr Noten als Text* appeared, all of hell is in an uproar! If I had you, you traitor, in my hands, I would [...] kick you so hard that you would no longer be able to put pen to paper'; and then some pages later: 'I would like to know the devil who betrayed our secret, it has to have been one of our members'.²⁹ The implication was that a turncoat within the organization was responsible for the exposure. This was not true. As will be shown in due course, multiple documents corroborate an attribution of *MNaT* to Bode. Bode was not a member of the *German Union*. This therefore raises the question about the source of the material: who gave Bode the manifestos, plans, membership lists and other documents he presented to the public in his exposure?

MNaT begins with a preface entitled: 'The Publisher Addressing His Respected Audience'. Given that the Leipzig publisher Johann Georg Göschen is named on the book's cover, it would seem reasonable to assume that Göschen was responsible for these few pages, which justify the contents of the volume as a necessary counter-measure to the monopolistic ambitions of the *German Union*. And yet in what must count as one of the more bizarre manoeuvres in the smoke-and-mirrors world of late eighteenth-century publishing, Göschen's

name, placed at the end of the preface seemingly in order to underscore his authorship, is followed by an asterisk that references a postscript immediately following the preface. In this postscript Göschen declares that in fact he did not write the preface. The true state of affairs was clarified by a letter Göschen wrote a decade later detailing the specific authorship of the preface and the broader responsibility for the exposure: ‘Bode in Weimar is the author of the piece *Mehr Noten als Text*, in which the Union was exposed to the world. I made a contribution to the piece; only the few lines after the preface are my work’.³⁰

Bode as a former member of the defunct Illuminati knew full well how the publication of the secret texts could debilitate a secret society. On 1 May 1787 he had set out on a journey from Weimar to Paris. This journey would later take on an ominous significance in the eyes of later conspiracy theorists such as Barruel, who saw in it a vital piece of evidence for the claim that the Illuminati had planned and caused the French Revolution. Barruel had no doubts about the ominous chain of events forming the drum roll in the grand drama of subversion: ‘It had been first set on foot by the arrival of Bode [in Paris]; it was completed at the Club of the Jacobins’.³¹ In fact, the situation was quite the opposite. Only four days after embarking on his journey Bode reached Fulda where a friend and fellow member of the order gave him a book: *Einige Originalschriften des Illuminaten Ordens* (*Some Original Writings of the Illuminati Order*). The book was a compilation of these writings seized by the Bavarian government, which in 1784 had launched a campaign to repress the order. It took a few days before the significance of this exposure dawned on Bode. On May 7 he wrote in his diary: ‘I have every now and again dipped into the book: *Einige Originalschriften des Illuminatenordens*. The book is highly damaging [...] It will be difficult to continue regular work after this publication! What a shame!’³²

A little over a year later, it was Bode’s turn to play the saboteur by putting together an exposure, this time targeting the *German Union*. On 15 March 1789, he could indulge a rather

impish hint at his accomplishment in a letter to his friend, the writer and poet Elisa von der Recke (1754-1833): ‘The Union, or the 22, is as good as demolished. Simply get a hold of ‘Mehr Noten als Text, or the German Union of the 22’ from the bookshop, and if you can guess the annotator, so, I entreat you, keep your opinion to yourself’.³³ Bode’s letter obviously indicates that Recke had played no active role in the production of the piece. Such a role would have been conceivable in view of the fact that her name appeared on the membership list printed in *MNaT*. Furthermore she had indeed had the other material – the oath and the plans, which Bode had also reprinted – in her hands. As she later explained, at the encouragement of a friend, the naturalist Johann Melchior Beseke (1746-1802), she had initially displayed a conditional interest in membership of the *German Union*, which she had, however, retracted after examining the plans for the society.³⁴

If Recke was not the source of the documents, how did Bode come into their possession? In fact, the evidence suggests that Recke was close at hand but not present when the exchange of material occurred. An entry in Bode’s diary for 22 October 1788 reads: ‘Began to write the preface and the notes for the exposure of the Union.’³⁵ Obviously Bode had the material at hand by this date. Twelve days earlier he had met with Recke and the well-known Berlin publisher Friedrich Nicolai (1733-1811) in Naumburg. In fact in a letter sent to Nicolai on the 3 October 1788 Bode puts forward the tavern ‘Zum Scheffel’ as the precise location for their ‘rendez-vous.’³⁶ Bode had advised Nicolai, who had been attending the Leipzig book fair, not to set out too late on his journey ‘as the last half or so mile to Naumburg is very hard to follow in the dark’. Nicolai seems to have arrived without mishap and sometime in the course of their meeting, presumably at a moment when Recke was not present, Nicolai handed to Bode the material for *MNaT*.

How did Nicolai get his hands on this material? A letter dated 17 June 1788 and preserved in his papers provides the answer. The letter was from Matthias Wilhelm von

Madeweis (1745-1830), who at the time held the office of master of the masonic lodge in Halle. Madeweis was well informed about the first phase of Bahrtd's masonic activities and had already attempted in the previous year to devise a means of suppressing them. In an appeal to a friend and fellow mason who held a position on the supervisory boards for Prussian universities and schools he suggested an official statement warning students in Halle about Bahrtd's disreputable practices. In another letter he informed the Grand Lodge in Berlin about the measures already taken against Bahrtd, including the visit to Bahrtd's wine garden undertaken by a delegate from the lodge in Halle. A letter from the beginning of October reported with some indignation about the futility of these attempts to compel Bahrtd to desist from his activities: Bahrtd was still holding lodges a couple of times a month and charging the sum of ten Taler for promotion through all degrees. There was the fear that if Bahrtd was not stopped from engaging in this 'nonsense' (*Unfug*), the official lodge would suffer considerable damage.³⁷

It is not clear to what degree the Freemasons in Halle appreciated how Bahrtd had resolved at the end of 1787 to transform his pseudo-masonic, 'irregular' lodge into a corresponding society. Whatever actual changes Bahrtd had instituted, it presumably seemed to them that he was persisting in his mysterious mischief. It was time to try a new approach. Madeweis therefore wrote to Nicolai in June 1788, beginning his letter in the effusive tones of one masonic brother confiding in another: 'Mon frère d'Orient! Brand shiny new pieces of news (*Ganz funkel nagel neue Neuigkeiten*) from the Orient here, dear friend, which will interest you all the more because they relate to plans to ruin you and all your colleagues'.³⁸ Despite such flourishes, Madeweis was not appealing to Nicolai as a fellow mason. Rather in referring to him and his 'colleagues', Madeweis was actually alluding to the publishing profession. Presumably in his reasoning he had taken stock of the failure of the university officials and fellow freemasons in forcing Bahrtd to relent from his activities. He was therefore willing to try another tack by enlisting the help of a publisher such as Nicolai.

Madeweis felt justified in doing this because he had obviously read the programmes and plans of the *German Union* and had recognized on this basis that Bahrdt's project was more than just a masonic matter; in addition to this, it pursued the goal of a monopoly over the book trade. Such a monopoly would force non-compliant publishers and book dealers out of business. His letter to Nicolai was accompanied by the following documents: the plan, the oath, the elaboration upon the plan, the list of members. After proudly presenting Nicolai with this material, he concluded his letter by asking for Nicolai's opinion: 'So what do you say? It is a financial undertaking, draped in a Weishauptian robe, don't you think?'³⁹ In Madeweis' estimation the plan was too poorly conceived to justify any real concern. By the same token, he thought that it would not hurt to draw people's attention to the venture. He therefore left it up to Nicolai to do what he thought was best with the material.

The question still remains about Madeweis' source for this material, given that he also was not a member of the *German Union*. In fact he had anticipated Nicolai's curiosity on this very point: 'How have I come into possession of these trinkets (*Sächelchen*) while still keeping my Taler in my pocket? Well, dear Nicolai, I am not allowed to tell you that, and you also may tell no one that you have found out about this through me'. Yet if Madeweis remained tight-lipped about his source, it is hard to resist the speculation that it had something to do with his civilian office as the postal director in Halle. After all, this position would have put him in a prime position to notice the explosion of postal activity emanating from Bahrdt's wine garden after Bahrdt had decided to transform his lodge into a corresponding society. Bahrdt had actually foreseen the importance of postmasters for this undertaking and the plans therefore contain explicit provisions for their targeted recruitment. It was important to bring them onside to protect the society against its enemies (*MNaT*, 31). In fact, the *German Union* was able to enlist seven such postmasters.⁴⁰ Madeweis was not among them. It does not seem out of the question that Madeweis could not resist the temptation of taking a peek inside the

mail issuing forth from Bahrdr's wine garden and that he then decided to direct some of it in a different direction, namely: to Nicolai in Berlin.

At this point it is worthwhile reviewing the links in the long chain extending from Bahrdr and his secret society to the exposure *MNaT* that revealed the *German Union* to the public and in doing so sealed its demise. If Bahrdr was an unwitting participant in the production of the exposure by originally producing the secret documents exposed to the public gaze, Madeweis as the postmaster in Halle provides the next link in the chain (although the possibility cannot be entirely discounted that he did not illicitly seize the documents himself but received them from an as-yet-unidentified intermediary). What is clear is that in mid-June 1788 he then sent the material off to Nicolai in Berlin. Four months later Nicolai passed this material on to Bode at their meeting in Naumburg. Bode returned home to Weimar where he spent the next months adding his notes to the text before sending it off to Göschen in Leipzig. Göschen printed the pamphlet in early 1789. All in all, an impressively convoluted *Maskopey!*

IV

MNaT did not fail to achieve its desired effect. While the exhortations from the Hallenser Freemasons had at most persuaded him to change the format of his secret society, Bahrdr claimed that upon the appearance of Bode's exposure he ceased all activity associated with the *German Union*.⁴¹ Undoubtedly the most pernicious item in the pamphlet was the list of members, which contained the names of numerous prominent publishers, writers, officials and other members of the North German Protestant elite. The Weimar publisher Friedrich Justin Bertuch (1747-1822) was the first to respond to the revelation of his alleged membership. He did so by inserting a notice in a February 1789 edition of the literary journal he had helped to find, the *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* (*ALZ*). In this notice he repudiated any formal membership, although he did admit to an exchange of letters with the organization.⁴²

Numerous others followed his example by making statements in subsequent editions of the same journal. In these statements they distanced or dissociated themselves from Bahrtdt's organization and protested the inclusion of their names on the list published in *MNaT*.

Although Bahrtdt's name was not to be found on the list nor anywhere else in *MNaT*, another short pamphlet *Nähere Beleuchtung der Deutschen Union (Closer Illumination of the German Union)*, which appeared shortly afterwards, filled in the blank.⁴³ The author of this pamphlet, the Leipzig writer Johann Gottlob Schulz, also quoted from some further plans that Bode had not had in his hands. Schulz's source was a secretary formerly employed by Bahrtdt, Samuel Christian Röper. Besides supplying Schulz with material, Röper had denounced Bahrtdt to the authorities as the author of the play satirizing Woellner's Edict on Religion. This set the wheels in motion leading to Bahrtdt's arrest and imprisonment. And yet the judiciary commission, when it passed its sentence in September 1789, also acknowledged the role *MNaT* had played in extending the investigation to the *German Union*: 'Some time ago a publication appeared in Leipzig with the title: *Mehr Noten als Text*. The publication gave notice about a secret society, the *German Union*, or the Association of the Twenty-Two, and the conjecture arose that Dr. Bahrtdt stood at the centre of this society. Partly for this reason and partly because unfavourable conversations have spread about the purpose of the society, the investigation has also directed its attention to this matter'.⁴⁴

In an argument that presumably dismayed the Freemasons, whose earlier direct intervention had been so unsuccessful, the court found that there were no reasons to deny Bahrtdt's society the toleration afforded by the Prussian monarchy to other such masonic systems.⁴⁵ The leniency shown in this charge might have been prompted by the consideration of all those other prominent figures throughout Prussia and Northern German who had had some affiliation with the *German Union*. The decision to not punish Bahrtdt for these activities spared them the embarrassment caused by their association with a condemned organization. It

was a different matter with regard to the authorship of the satirical play. Here culpability could be more specifically pinpointed (even if Bahrdrst stubbornly refused to admit authorship). Bahrdrst thus remained in prison as a result of the play and the Freemasons had, at least on one level, reason to be relieved: the *German Union* was dead.

Curiously the whole sequence of events leading to the demise of the *German Union* had been foreseen by the doctor and leading member of its highly active Marburg branch Ernst Gottfried Baldinger (1738-1804). At some time in 1788 he took stock of the society's plans and enumerated the enmities that it could expect to provoke. First on his list were (1) the princes and ministers; in other words the representatives and bearers of state power, who were excluded from membership. Baldinger was, however, aware that the *German Union* also exposed itself to the hostility of (2) 'all book dealers' and to (3) 'Freemasons of all constitutions'.⁴⁶ As prescient as Baldinger's words were, his list actually records in reverse order the series of blows delivered to the *German Union*. After all, the state authorities arrived late at the scene; their prosecution of Bahrdrst had been preceded by the sabotage orchestrated by Bode and Göschen as booksellers, and their intervention followed in turn upon the footsteps of the Freemasons who had tried to suppress Bahrdrst's activities.

Of course, it can be asked whether Bode's actions were motivated by his concern for the book trade or by his investment in the world of secret societies. It is in any case interesting that another prophetic remark had been made about how he represented a dire threat to the *German Union*. In July 1788 Adolph Freiherr Knigge (1752-1796), the writer and former member of the Illuminati now attending to his estates near Hannover, received a visit from a member of the *German Union*. It was Knigge who had originally recruited Bode as a member of the Illuminati in 1782. Knigge's subsequent expulsion from the order two years later as a result of a dispute about a planned reform had paved the way for Bode's elevation to a position of effective leadership. In 1788 the bitterness still lingered. Knigge, although

chastened by his past experiences with secret societies, lent his support to the *German Union*. In doing so, he gave unequivocal advice. ‘Beware of Bode in Weimar. He must have no access to us’.⁴⁷ Thanks to Madeweis and Nicolai, Bode, as of October 1788, had access in the form of the manifestos and programmatic texts. *MNaT* was the result.

Thus, it was not originally the political authorities but rather other social actors who conspired to scuttle Bahrdt’s project. Furthermore, Bode in hiding the role he played behind the veil of anonymity, was not trying to evade persecution from the authorities. Rather, he was undoubtedly concerned about the social backlash, provoked in large part by printing the membership list. In the statement he had sent to the *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* Beseke, who had earlier directed Recke’s interest to the *German Union*, complained how the unnamed compiler of *MNaT* (i.e. Bode) had published a membership list for whose reliability he was not willing to vouch. His annoyance at the cover of anonymity employed by the compiler then gave him the opportunity to lament the culture of the German public sphere in general, characterized as it was by ‘cloak-and-dagger operations’, by a lack of courage and by the manner in which either ‘the passions or that other scourge entity that had become so prevalent’, namely: ‘private interest’, were given free rein.⁴⁸ Beseke’s comment hardly qualifies as a highly coherent social critique, but it does register some aspects of this culture – such as the tension between the public sphere and private interests – worthy of consideration in the concluding remarks to this inquiry.

V.

As the case unfolded between Bahrdt’s arrest in April and the judgment passed in September, Madeweis, the postmaster in Halle, wrote to Bertuch in Weimar to keep him apprised of new developments. On the 30 June 1789 he informed Bertuch that Bahrdt was in good spirits; he ‘is writing a *Volks Moral* in prison and is in such good spirits that not even the smallest worry seems to trouble his soul’.⁴⁹ A subsequent letter has no date but

presumably was written on the 12 or 13 September as it reports on Bahrdr's sentence: two years imprisonment (*Festungshaft*), which the king had reduced to one year.⁵⁰ A further letter dated 4 November reports that Bahrdr was to be transported any day to Magdeburg where he would remain until his release in July 1790.⁵¹ Nowhere within these letters does Madeweis hint at the part he played in the sequence of events leading to Bahrdr's arrest. One wonders to what degree his interest in the case was sustained in part by a slightly guilty conscience.

Madeweis's letters also are oblivious to the psychological stress Bahrdr had actually experienced in prison. The assurance of his 'good spirits' seems to have been made in ignorance of the despair that befell Bahrdr upon learning from Woellner that his seditious and insolent actions had infuriated the king. Woellner informed Bahrdr that the king was considering a public execution as the condign punishment. This effectively meant that Bahrdr now had the opportunity to assume the central role in a tragic drama culminating in his martyrdom for the cause of heterodoxy. And yet at the critical moment, his resolve departed him. 'Yes, merciful Sir!', he wrote to Woellner on 7 June, 'I now see my errors in such a terrible light that I recognize my imprisonment [...] not as a punishment (since I have not sinned on purpose) but rather as a kindness rendered by God in leading me onto a better path ...'⁵² In beseeching letters to Woellner, Bahrdr detailed his intention to write a book denouncing the Enlightenment. Woellner reported this to the king: Bahrdr now recognized that the enemies of the Christian Religion were 'despicable men'. His book would expose 'the infamy of the Enlightenment thinkers and reveal to the whole world the evil tricks through which some of them had created a secret society which plotted against Christianity and into which Bahrdr had had the misfortune of being misled'.⁵³ It should be noted that Bahrdr never wrote this book; once he felt confident that his life was no longer in danger he went on producing works that continued to challenge the political status quo and the religious orthodoxy. Nevertheless his apostasy in mid-1789 makes for sobering reading; Bahrdr himself

would later excuse his letters to Woellner as ‘products of madness, caused by the prospect of death on the scaffold’.⁵⁴

Above the door of the reading room in the Prussian Privy State Archives in Berlin, where one can read Bahrdt’s letters to Wöllner, a motto taken from Spinoza’s *Tractatus Politicus* exhorts readers *non ridere, non lugere, neque detestari, sed intelligere*, i.e. to ‘not mock, lament or execrate human actions, but to understand them’. If we take these words to heart, then the inadequacy of the earlier appeal to Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire* becomes apparent; an awareness of the farcical element helps us overcome any naïve tendency to take Bahrdt’s story at face value, yet the resulting interpretation is tied more to an attitude of mockery than to one of understanding. Bahrdt’s own own defense of a passing lapse into madness is similarly problematic. A far more promising prospect of reaching a genuine understanding of these events lies rather in the consideration of a leitmotif running through Bahrdt’s life. This is the leitmotif of the ‘project’. On repeated occasions, Bahrdt invested his energies into ventures in education, (self-)publishing and into the reunion of the Catholic and Protestant confessions. All these undertakings bore the stamp of the project-mania which had gripped much of Europe since the late seventeenth-century. The *German Union* was no different. One of his collaborators later reported on Bahrdt’s excited state after the sleepless night in which the idea for the *German Union* had ‘sprung forth from his projecting head’.⁵⁵

It is worth reflecting on several aspects of this general enthusiasm for projects in the seventeenth and eighteenth century as the *German Union* demonstrates how it also left its imprint upon heterodoxy and dissidence. Although most often prey to delusions of grandeur, many early modern projectors strove to integrate a technical rationality into their plans by choosing those means best suited to achieving the ends aimed at by the project. What were the best means to promote Enlightenment? Bahrdt believed to identify them in a secret society grafted onto local reading societies. Of course, this would also double as an effective way to

increase the distribution of his own writings. Bahrdr's shrewdness in this regard was typical of the skill demonstrated by many projectors in matching not only ends with means, but also their own self-interest – indeed that 'private interest' whose baleful influence Beseke so lamented – with the interest of a patron or a broader collective. The dubiousness of this purported congruence rubbed off onto the perception of the projector. As a type, the projector became associated with duplicity. In selling their projects with assurances that their implementation would redound to the benefit of a more general or higher interest, the projectors stereotypically retained a keen eye for any prospect of an improvement in their own fortunes. A cursory remark from Bahrdr summing up his experiences in the early 1780s with the Learned Book Society in Dessau, a venture in self-publishing that later influenced the literary ambitions of the *German Union*, demonstrates this insouciant sense of enlightened self-interest: 'I invested money, ran up debts, and in the end, as the Learned Book Society was carried to its grave, I had nothing to show for my patriotism ...'⁵⁶ Flippant as the remark might be, it implies that 'patriotism', rather than entailing a willingness to make sacrifices, should yield pecuniary gains.⁵⁷ Bahrdr's commitment to the cause of heterodoxy – a cause that in eighteenth-century Germany had embraced an alliance with reason (as opposed to revelation) and in the process come to denote itself as 'Enlightenment' – was essentially the same: Bahrdr expected to profit from it. When this commitment instead threatened to cost him his life, he was willing to disavow it.

The incursion of the 'projecting spirit' onto the field of religion was registered by the defenders of orthodoxy in a revealing manner: whereas the enemy of orthodoxy had been previously denounced as a heretic, in the eighteenth century there was a tendency to replace the heretic with the conspirator. This sense that Christianity was threatened not by heresy but by conspiracy was articulated by Wöllner in his letter to the king and ultimately generated those grand conspiracy theories associated with names such as Barruel. Documenting further the highly mediated process of reception by which these conspiracy theories found a distant

echo in more modern narratives of subversion such as Koselleck's is a task for another day. For now, it suffices to acknowledge the scepticism that is warranted in the face of those views – or derivatives of those views – that equate history with the implementation of a singular conspiratorial plan. A more tenable alternative would instead track the growing confidence of multiple historical subjects, acting independently of each other (and often at cross-purposes), in applying a planning mentality, i.e. a profane calculus of ends and means, to manifold aspects of social life. In short, the 'projecting age' (Defoe) teaches us to not look for the plan in history, but rather the people in history learning to plan – most often in accordance with their individual self-interests. In as much as secrecy constitutes a frequently used means in these plans, there are, as Cubitt noted, 'varied and numerous' conspiracies in play: Bahrtdt's 'conspiracy' (i.e. the *German Union*) against the forces of 'enthusiasm and superstition' ends up being sabotaged by Bode's (and Nicolai's and Madeweis's) 'conspiracy' against Bahrtdt, just as Bode's earlier 'conspiracy' (i.e. the Illuminati) had been exposed to a similar act of sabotage.

Even if the story is less about conspirators in the sense of a grand, encompassing conspiracy and more about projectors pursuing private interests, the affinity shared by conspirators and projectors comes into view by considering a common difference to the heretic. Whereas the heretic lives and dies by an ethics of principle (*Gesinnungsethik*), conspirators and projectors by contrast operate strategically and in accordance with an ethics of consequence (*Verantwortungsethik*) – and more specifically an ethics of consequence privileging those strategies whose expected consequences align with their own particularized self-interest. As daring and dangerous as their actions might be, their goal is success and happiness not in the next world but rather in this one. The point was made by Bode in *MNaT* when commenting upon the claim that the *German Union* was devoted to fulfilling the mission of the founder of Christianity. If one really wants to take Jesus as the role model, then, as Bode noted, one 'does not desire a kingdom of this world' (*MNaT*, 35-6); and

Bahrtdt's vision of a network of reading societies as the basis for a monopoly of the German book market was very much a vision of a 'kingdom of this world'.

Bode's criticism was astute in its insinuation that the frame of reference for Bahrtdt's actions was the here and now. This in turn reflects a more general sea change in the fortunes of heterodoxy. The hour of the uncompromising heterodox thinkers, willing to sacrifice themselves for their beliefs, was over. Moreover, heterodoxy was not the unconditional disadvantage it had once been; under certain circumstances it had even become compatible with self-interest. Indeed, Bahrtdt's life demonstrates how in some situations courting controversy and cultivating notoriety by openly defying orthodoxy could even represent the strategically preferable option. The question then became how deep this commitment to heterodoxy actually was. How would it hold up under duress?

Bahrtdt's letters to Woellner provide one answer, at least for his specific case. Earlier heretics who lived either on the run or in hiding obviously valued life enough to motivate such attempts to elude their persecutors. Should their evasion, however, fail, then they were loath to do what Bahrtdt did, namely: disavow their beliefs. A consideration of Bahrtdt's reaction to the prospect of public execution suffices to dispel any claim of kinship with the heretic willing to embrace martyrdom – a claim underscored by numerous (admittedly often ironical) references in the contemporary literature – and reveals instead his kinship with the projectors guided by self-interest. *In extremis*, self-interest simply meant self-preservation. To the extent that the Enlightenment implied a rational calculation of worldly interests, repudiating it could in certain circumstances represent the enlightened thing to do.

The situation was perhaps most succinctly expressed by Bahrtdt himself. In 1782 he had created quite a stir in Halle by anonymously publishing a *Kirchen- und Ketzer Almanach*, a satirical almanac in which at one point he referred to himself in the third person as 'the heretic Bahrtdt' in describing an earlier feud with an orthodox theologian. Bahrtdt's ridicule

latched onto the failure of this particular theologian to appreciate the fact that ‘the actual heretics (*die eigentlichen Ketzer*) had in fact been dead for centuries’.⁵⁸ Once more a cursory remark, but Bahrdt’s own life demonstrates how true it was.

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¹ Carl Friedrich Bahrdt, *The Edict of Religion. A Comedy, and The Story and Diary of My Imprisonment*, trs. and ed. John Christian Laursen and Johan van der Zande (Lanham, Maryland, 2000), 98-99.

² For Bahrdt’s educational activities, see Hans-Helmut Lößl, *Karl Friedrich Bahrdt an den Philanthropinischen Anstalten zu Marschlins und Heidesheim (1775-1779)* (Berlin, 1998).

³ *Die neusten Offenbarungen Gottes in Briefen und Erzählungen verdeutscht durch D. Carl Friedrich Bahrdt* (1st ed. [Riga], 1773-74, 2nd. ed. Frankenthal, 1777).

⁴ Karl Gotthold Lenz, ‘Nachträge zum Leben des D. Carl Friedr. Bahrdt’, in Friedrich Schlichtegroll (ed.), *Supplementband des Nekrologs für die Jahre 1790, 91, 92 und 93*, (Gotha, 1798), 2. section, 31.

⁵ See Sten Gunnar Flygt’s *The Notorious Dr. Bahrdt* (Nashville, 1963), 197-200, for a translation of Bahrdt’s profession of faith.

⁶ Bahrdt, *Geschichte seines Lebens, seiner Meinungen und Schicksale* (Berlin, 1790), Vol. IV, 18. For my attempt at an interpretation of this episode, see Andrew McKenzie-McHarg, ‘Überlegungen zur Radikalaufklärung am Beispiel von Carl Friedrich Bahrdt’, *Aufklärung. Interdisziplinäres Jahrbuch zur Erforschung des 18. Jahrhunderts und seiner Wirkungsgeschichte* 24 (2012), 207-240. A remark in a polemical piece by the famous pedagogue Johann Bernhard Basedow, *Eine Urkunde des Jahrs 1780* (Dessau, 1780), further indicates Bahrdt’s success in generating the impression that his heterodoxy was the reason for this flight to Prussia. According to Basedow,

Bahrtdt and his family had become 'helpless refugees *because of the Profession of Faith* that had been demanded from him and that had revealed his previously hidden heterodoxy' (29, my italics).

⁷ A translation of the play forms the first part of the edition prepared by Laursen and Zande, *The Edict of Religion. A Comedy, and The Story and Diary of My Imprisonment*.

⁸ Bahrtdt, *The Edict of Religion. A Comedy, and The Story and Diary of My Imprisonment*, 83, mentions five or six old friends, along with sixteen students.

⁹ See for the international dimension Günter Mühlpfordt, 'Europarepublik im Duodezformat. Die internationale Geheimgesellschaft "Union" – ein radikalaufklärerischer Bund der Intelligenz (1786-1796)', in Helmut Reinalter (ed.), *Freimaurer und Geheimbünde im 18. Jahrhundert in Mitteleuropa* (Frankfurt Main, 1983), 319-364.

¹⁰ *Mehr Noten als Text*, 8-9. Stoking the fear of these 'proponents of superstition and power' was the fact that many leading figures in the Prussian administration under the new king were associated with the Late Rosicrucians, a secret society distinguished by its embrace of theosophical and esoteric doctrines and into which Frederick William II. had been inducted while still crown prince in 1781.

¹¹ Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis. Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988).

¹² An interesting point of comparison is provided by Jonathan Israel's recent *Democratic Enlightenment. Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790* (Oxford, 2012), 822-858, in which his treatment of the secret societies is beholden to a history of ideas that limits his attribution of a conspiratorial character to those societies explicitly espousing an egalitarian, republican ideology. His account thus lacks the appreciation of the subversive effect arising purely out of the socio-political profile of these societies as 'indirect countervailing powers' (as they are termed in the translation of Koselleck's *Critique and Crisis*). Koselleck's argument by contrast implies a subversive effect inherent even to those secret societies that avowed loyalty to the existing order, as such societies encountered genuine difficulties in reconciling their autonomous existence with the principles of this order. Reinhard Markner has shown how this was the case for the Late Rosicrucians in his '*Imakoromazypziloniakus. Mirabeau und der Niedergang der Berliner Rosenkreuzerei*', in *Sozietäten – Netzwerke – Kommunikation. Neue Forschungen zur Vergesellschaftung im Jahrhundert der Aufklärung*, ed. Markus Meumann and Holger Zaunstöck (Tübingen, 2003), 215–230.

¹³ Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, 62.

¹⁴ See W. Daniel Wilson, *Geheimräte gegen Geheimbünde. Ein unbekanntes Kapitel der klassisch-romantischen Geschichte Weimars* (Stuttgart, 1991), 95-105.

¹⁵ Staatsarchiv Hamburg 614–1/72 Gr. Loge Nr. 1303.

¹⁶ Carlo Ginzburg, *Wooden Eyes. Nine Reflections on Distance* (New York, 2001), 198.

¹⁷ Abbé Augustin de Barruel, *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, trs. Robbert Clifford (London, 1798), Vol. III: the Antisocial Conspiracy, 315. For the French original see *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du Jacobinisme* (London, 1798), Part IV, 311.

¹⁸ Dieter Groh, 'The Temptation of Conspiracy Theory', in Carl F. Graumann and Serge Moscovici (eds.), *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy* (New York, 1987), 9.

¹⁹ See for two contrary positions on the subversiveness of the Prussian public sphere Michael Sauter, *Visions of Enlightenment. The Edict of Religion of 1788 and the Politics of the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century Prussia* (Leiden, 2009), and Florian Schui, *Rebellious Prussians. Urban Political Culture under Frederick the Great and his Successors* (Oxford, 2013).

²⁰ Geoffrey Cubitt, *The Jesuit Myth: Conspiracy Theory and Politics in Nineteenth-Century France* (Oxford, 1993), 1.

²¹ See *Briefe angesehener Gelehrter, Staatsmänner und anderer, an den berühmten Märtyrer D. Karl Friedrich Bahrdt*, ed. Degenhard Pott (Leipzig, 1798), Vol. V, 29.

²² An introductory passage to one of the documents claimed that the *German Union* continued the work of Jesus 'through a silent association of all who love God's work' (*MNaT*, 30). Throughout the 1780s Bahrdt had produced new renderings of the Bible, culminating in the representation of Jesus as the head of a secret society. (Jesus, even if no longer divine in Bahrdt's eyes, remained for him an exemplary human being.) The conspicuous parallel between the *German Union's* ambition to serve as a vehicle for pursuing these goals and Bahrdt's reinterpretation of the Bible was taken as a clue to his hand in these matters (see *MNaT*, 35-6).

²³ As Koselleck saw it: 'Enlightenment and mystery appeared as historical twins' (*Critique and Crisis*, 62). For the further elaboration on this relationship, see 70.

²⁴ James Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge, 2001), 253.

²⁵ See for some general comments on these topics, Pamela E. Selwyn, *Everyday Life in the German Book Trade. Friedrich Nicolai as Bookseller and Publisher in the Age of Enlightenment 1750-1810* (University Park, Pa., 200), esp. chapter 4: 'The Legal and Political Framework of the Eighteenth-Century Book Trade: Privilege, Piracy, and

Censorship,' 181-250. For a case directly related to one branch of the *German Union*, see Christine Haug, 'Geheimbündische Organisationsstrukturen und subversive Distributionssysteme zur Zeite der Französischen Revolution. Die Mitgliedschaft des hessischen Buchhändlers Johann Christian Konrad Krieger in der Deutschen Union', *Leipziger Jahrbuch zur Buchgeschichte* 7 (1997), 51-74.

²⁶ *Briefe angesehener Gelehrten...*, Vol. I, 135.

²⁷ *Ökonomisch-technologische Encyclopädie. Fünf und achtziger Theil* (Berlin, 1802), 261.

²⁸ Norbert Schindler drew attention to the crypto-public sphere (*Kryptoöffentlichkeit*) of the secret societies in his 'Freimaurerkultur im 18. Jahrhundert. Zur sozialen Funktion des Geheimnisses in der entstehenden bürgerlichen Gesellschaft' in Robert Berdahl et al. (eds.), *Klassen und Kultur: Sozialanthropologische Perspektiven in der Geschichtsschreibung* (Frankfurt Main, 1982), 205-262.

²⁹ *Die Deutsche Union in den letzten Zügen* (Barthruhe [sic], 1789), 7, 21.

³⁰ Quoted in: Stephan Füssel, *Verlagsbibliographie Georg Joachim Göschen 1785-1828* (Berlin, 1998), 34.

³¹ Barruel, *Memoirs*, Part IV, 384.

³² Bode, *Journal von einer Reise von Weimar nach Frankreich im Jahr 1787* (Neuwied, 1994), ed. with an introduction by Hermann Schüttler, 160, 165.

³³ Letter from Bode to Recke vom 15. März 1789. Sächsische Landesbibliothek – Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Dresden, Mscr. Dresd. h. 37, 4°, Bd. 16, 32^r.

³⁴ *Intelligenzblatt der Allgemeinen Literatur-Zeitung*, 74 (13 June 1789), 627.

³⁵ Bode, *Tagebuch*, Ms.: Archive of the Grand Orient, The Hague, 190. D. 14; Kloss MS 202.

³⁶ Nachlass Nicolai, Staatsbibliothek Berlin (SBB), Handschriftenabteilung Vol. 6, Mappe 2.

³⁷ For excerpts from these letters, see Karlheinz Gerlach, *Die Freimaurer im Alten Preußen 1738-1806* (Innsbruck, 2007), 361-3.

³⁸ Nachlass Nicolai, SBB, Handschriftenabteilung, Vol. 47.

³⁹ 'Weishauptian' refers, of course, to Adam Weishaupt, the founder of the Illuminati.

⁴⁰ This figure according to the 'Sozialstatistik der Bahrdtianer-Union' as provided by Günther Mühlpfordt in *Demokratische Aufklärer I: Bahrdt und die Deutsche Union*, (Halle, 2015), 447-451.

⁴¹ Bahrdt, *The Edict of Religion. A Comedy and The Story and Diary of My Imprisonment*, 98

⁴² *Intelligenzblatt der Allgemeinen Literatur-Zeitung*, 11 February 1789, 159-160.

⁴³ Johann Gottlob Schulz, *Nähere Beleuchtung der Deutschen Union* (Frankfurt and Leipzig, 1789).

⁴⁴ These documents were printed as accompanying material to the German original of *The Story and Diary of My Imprisonment (Geschichte und Tagebuch meines Gefängnisses)*, were not included in the translation, and run with a second pagination, 164.

⁴⁵ *Geschichte und Tagebuch meines Gefängnisses*, (second pagination) 167.

⁴⁶ *Briefe angesehener Gelehrten ...*, Vol. V, 185

⁴⁷ The publicist Karl Spazier relayed this advice to Bahrtdt after visiting Knigge in Hannover in July 1788. See *Briefe angesehener Gelehrten ...*, Vol. IV, 159.

⁴⁸ Beseke, 'Erklärung über die Deutsche Union', *Intelligenzblatt der Allgemeinen Literatur-Zeitung*, 67 (23 May 1789), 569-570.

⁴⁹ The letters from Madeweis to Bertuch are preserved in the Goethe-Schiller Archive (GSA) in Weimar, Call Number: 6 / 1201. For this quotation see 11^v. Madeweis is referring here to Bahrtdt's *Handbuch der Moral für den Bürgerstand* (Halle, 1789).

⁵⁰ Madeweis to Bertuch (n.d.), GSA, Call number: 6 / 1201, 9^v.

⁵¹ Madeweis to Bertuch (4 Nov 1789), GSA, Call number: 6 / 1201, 14^f.

⁵² Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Berlin), VI. HA., Nachlass Woellner I, Nr. 30, 17r.

⁵³ Quoted in Uta Wiggermann, *Woellner und das Religionsedikt. Kirchenpolitick und kirchliche Wirklichkeit im Preußen des späten 18. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen, 2010), 438.

⁵⁴ Letter to Degenhard Pott, 21 January 1791. *Briefe angesehener Gelehrten ...*, Vol. V, 329.

⁵⁵ Karl Spazier, *Carl Pilgers Roman seines Lebens* (1792-1796), Vol. III, 273. See for an important interpretation of the projector as a symptomatic type of the early modern period Georg Stanitzek's 'Der Projektmacher. Projektionen auf eine 'unmögliche' moderne Kategorie', *Ästhetik und Kommunikation* 17:65/66 (1987), 135-146.

⁵⁶ Bahrtdt, *Geschichte seines Lebens, seiner Meinungen und Schicksale*, Vol. IV, 105. For an account of this project, see Stephanie Rahmede, *Die Buchhandlung der Gelehrten zu Dessau. Ein Beitrag zur Schriftstelleremanzipation um 1800* (Wiesbaden, 2008).

⁵⁷ A remark made by the theologian Johann Salomo Semler, whose relationship with Bahrtdt could easily provide enough material for an essay in itself, can serve as a point of reference here: 'For me the definition of a patriot has long been someone who does not regard advantage or disadvantage when duty prescribes [...] a

regard for the common good. Only in this manner does the patriot show himself'. Semler, *Aufrichtige Antwort auf Herr Basedows Urkunde* (Halle, 1780), 44.

⁵⁸ Bahrdt, *Kirchen- und Ketzer-Almanach aufs Jahr 1781* (Häresiopel [Züllichau], 1789), 204 ('Ketzer Bahrdt') and 26.