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## [Knigge on the Illuminati \(According to Knigge\) and Other Reflections \(According to the Historical Record\)](#)

Friday, July 6th, 2012 | [Illuminati Members](#), [Primary Documents](#)



by Terry Melanson, July 6th 2012

The exposure and persecution of the Illuminati had barely commenced. Adam Weishaupt fled from the Bavarian authorities in February of 1785.

Two weeks after his hasty escape, Elector Karl Theodor issued his second edict against secret societies (and the Illuminati specifically). More than a year would pass before he reached safety at the court of fellow-Illuminatus, Duke Ernst II of Saxe-Gotha. Bobbing in alleyways, hiding in chimneys, and witnessing a [friend drop dead from lightning](#), Weishaupt somehow managed to pen and publish five apologetic pamphlets concerning his activities as “General” of the Order.

After the writings and correspondences of the Illuminati were published in 1787 - reputations and livelihoods at stake - his cohorts penned their own accounts, most notably Christoph Friedrich Nicolai (1733-1811), Franz Xaver von Zwack (1755-1843) and Baron Thomas Franz Maria de Bassus (1742-1815). However it wasn't until after these developments that Adolph Freiherr von Knigge (1752-1796) saw fit to issue his own account in 1788.

The latter work (*Philos endliche Erklärung und Antwort ...*) has been translated by Jeva Singh-Anand: [Philo's Reply To Questions Concerning His Association With the Illuminati](#) (lulu.com, April 5, 2012). It's the first full English translation of a primary Illuminati source, and, for that reason alone, is highly recommended. You can read Jeva's forward [here](#) and purchase it at [Lulu](#) or [Amazon](#).

There are only two minor issues that I have. For one, the original pagination hasn't been preserved. This presents difficulties for those who've encountered citations of it in other works. For example, scholars such as Reinhart Koselleck and René Le Forestier, and scores of others, referred their readers to page so and so of the German edition; I was thus looking forward to

quickly finding these precise references. A lesser gripe - if you can call it that - is the lack of criticism and/or detailed explanatory notes.<sup>1</sup> Coupled with the fact that it's a relatively short work and that it took 200+ years before being translated, a more thorough accompanying commentary would have been welcomed. Nevertheless, one can still benefit from it on its own terms. After all, as Jeva mentions in his forward, there are indeed "important and unexpected insights into the history and structure of the Bavarian Illuminati." Knigge's character sketch of Weishaupt, and the latter's despotic proclivities, are quite interesting to read as well.

I received my own copy a little more than a week ago. Read it, re-read it again, and made a few notes. Critical remarks follow.

First, Knigge fibs about the extent of his familiarity with the Rosicrucians. Given the utter hatred between them and the Illuminati, however, his downplaying of the situation is understandable.

On page 17, Knigge states: "I never joined the Rosicrucian Order (I believed the German Rosicrucians were inauthentic and ignorant), but greatly valued this ancient brotherhood after Schroeder's confidential revelation"; and again, on page 35, while admitting that he wrote a pamphlet [against the Jesuits and Rosicrucians](#) at the behest of the Illuminati: "I have never had anything to do with the Rosicrucians for good or ill."

In fact, in August of 1778 Knigge actually tried, but failed to gain admission into the [Golden and Rosy Cross](#). The published letters from Knigge to Johann Georg Wendelstadt (1744-1819), Friedrich Joseph Greven (1751-1828) and Joachim Nikolaus Richers (d. 1811) bear witness. Citing this correspondence, René Le Forestier wrote:

This mystical crisis reached its apogee during the years 1778 and 1779. Knigge's correspondence with doctor Wendelstadt of Weimar (Eques a Serpente), and the Hanoverian officer Grewe [sic], show that he was fully engaged with alchemical research: he's in pursuit of manuscripts containing recipes for the transmutation of metals and performs all the experiments recommended to apprentices of the Great Work. Unsatisfied with the enlightenment found in the Strict Observance, he had sought affiliation with the Golden and Rosy Cross: "the only Order which, through its doctrine," he said, "will one day rule the world." In August 1778, together with Wendelstadt, he had taken steps to be received into this society and counted on the support of Schroeder, who had provided a list of preliminary questions for candidates and promised to provide, in his own house, a live-in tutor to assist in passing the entry exam. But the Rosicrucians had not granted Knigge's request and he had to be content to remain a member of the Strict Observance. The disappointment he had experienced did not quell his ambition, and, to prove his worth to his brothers, he conceived the plan of a radical reform of Freemasonry. His roving spirit had renounced alchemical fantasies, but the new purpose he assigned to Freemasonry was no less utopian.

**- René Le Forestier, [Les Illuminés de Bavière et la Franc-Maçonnerie Allemande](#) [Paris: 1915], Archè reprint, 2001, pp. 210-211.**

His friends Wendelstadt, Greven and Richers would in turn join the Illuminati along with Knigge. Apparently they had all become disillusioned with Rosicrucianism and [Templar Strict Observance](#). Also not mentioned in Philo's Reply, was the fact that Knigge had founded his own secret society in September of 1775, "Freundschaftsordens" or "Orden der Freundschaft,"<sup>2</sup> which was still in operation during the time of Knigge's involvement with the Illuminati. This is significant if only for the fact that Illuminati initiates were admonished to renounce membership in other societies (excluding, of course, Freemasonry).

In general, Knigge comes across as a good-natured idealist with utopian aspirations. This was in fact what drew him to the Illuminati in the first place: the chance to reform Masonry, and guide it toward a higher purpose.

He quickly discovers, however, that his new brotherhood is unstructured, unorganized, and not yet fully conceived.

Weishaupt considered himself lucky to have found a hard-working and dedicated collaborator and

Knigge's knowledge of the arcane higher degree systems of the day was soon put to use. Basically, the only thing operational when Knigge joined in the summer of 1780 were the Minerval schools in Catholic Bavarian territories; and by the time of his formal resignation in the summer 1784 the Order had, due to Knigge and those whom he recruited, become quite formidable. René Le Forestier perhaps gave the best summary of the situation:

Solidly established in Bavaria, it extends all through Central Europe, from the Rhine to the Vistula and the Alps to the North Sea and the Baltic. It includes among its members young men who'll later apply the principles with which they've been inculcated, civil servants of every kind who use their influence in the service of the Order, members of the clergy whom they teach tolerance, and Princes, whom they hope to lead and call upon for protection. It seems as if the Great Architect of the Universe himself watches over them: year after year, since its founding, its conquests continually multiply; its leader, just when he was beginning to think the Order would sink under its own weight, found a clever and active collaborator [Knigge, who was] just as good with pen in hand composing the higher grades of the Order, as he was a skillful and persuasive propagandist; Strict Observance, the main obstacle to its ambitious plans, has crumbled, leaving the road free; and the two greatest leaders<sup>3</sup> of that particular System of Freemasonry were able to be taken up [by the Order]. A far cry from the days when Weishaupt had gathered together in his house a few obscure students!

**- In [Perfectibilists: The 18th-Century Bavarian Order of the Illuminati](#), p. 28, translated from Le Forestier, *op. cit.*, p. 401**

A few of the things highlighted by Le Forestier are confirmed in Knigge's account, such as members "who use their influence in the service of the Order."

For example, on page 41 Knigge admits one of their goals is to "guide all Freemasonry toward our exalted purpose and bring it under guidance"; and that he did not like the way in which the Illuminati had "meddled in political matters and procured civil advantages" (p. 53).

The latter maneuvers had already been exposed in the Original Writings themselves. Zwack, at [the very beginning](#) of [Einige Originalschriften des Illuminatenordens](#), is seen bragging about obstructing "monkish forces," the Rosicrucians and the Jesuits, and completely cleansing the latter from the University of Ingolstadt; surveilling, then infiltrating the Cadet institute of the Duchess Dowager, initiating its professors and having their thumb on all the pupils; how they had succeeded in installing one of their own as treasurer of the Ecclesiastical Council, thus having "church revenue" at "its disposal"; and all manner of cronyism and favouritism.

This state-wide infiltration, especially within the Bavarian domains, is the main reason why they were suppressed in the first place. Even Steven Luckert, in his PhD thesis which focused on the Crypto-Catholic and Illuminati "conspiracy theories" during the period, had no choice but to write the following:

As more evidence rolled in, it was clear that the Illuminati Order had infiltrated the state bureaucracy and the educational institutions. And this must have frightened Karl Theodor all the more. After all, as Ludwig Manner correctly surmised, the Illuminati seemed to be thwarting or were in a position to thwart the Elector's absolutist ambitions. The bureaucracy, especially the censor commission, had been infiltrated and became a suspect institution. After all, given the blind obedience demanded of Illuminati, whose orders would these officials follow? It was a question of dual loyalties, and the more the Elector discovered about this secret society, the more suspicious he became. One state official, Karl von Eckartshausen, an Illuminat-turned Rosicrucian, claimed that the Order stole documents from the archives.

[...]

The Illuminati's infiltration of the country's educational institutions also worried the Elector and others; for schools, like Ingolstadt, trained the regime's future officials, teachers, and clergy, and if the students' heads had been filled with pernicious notions,

then presumably this would bring dire consequences later. The documents, interrogations, and denunciations all brought up the Order's interest in youths. As former members testified, the Illuminati did recruit university students and Weishaupt clearly intended to use these young men as emissaries of the order. Moreover, those Illuminati involved in education used their positions to reward their students with stipends.

**- Jesuits, Freemasons, Illuminati, and Jacobins: Conspiracy theories, secret societies, and politics in late eighteenth-century Germany, Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York at Binghamton, 1993, pp. 269-270**

In tandem with a strategy of infiltration was a sort of 'Seelenspionage'<sup>4</sup> ("spying on the soul") at the heart of the entire enterprise, which doubly worried the authorities.

On page 68 in Knigge's "confession," in a discussion of the degree of Illuminatus major, he writes:

By occupying oneself with the study and education of others, one naturally gains knowledge about human beings and especially knowledge of oneself. However, it seemed important that this field of study be the work of its own degree, and this is what occurred in the greater Illuminatus degree, or Scottish Novitiate. Here, **several thousand questions were raised** by which the inner and outer character of man was to be researched. By comparing all these character traits, even the smallest and seemingly insignificant ones, the most wonderful general anthropological results could be obtained, and gradually **a certain semiotics of the soul could be developed** ... No one was to be promoted to this degree until his supervisor had answered all these questions about the candidate. [emphasis mine]

The original German used by Knigge was "Semiotik der Seele." Since Knigge was writing in 1788, he probably got this exact saying from the influential Weimar theologian/philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), a high-ranking member of the Illuminati himself.<sup>5</sup> Herder is said to have coined it, [in 1784](#), for a new discipline of psychology. Whatever the case, it is obvious that they both had been exposed to this concept from their active association with the Illuminati.

The *diarium* the Illuminati initiates were required to keep became increasingly [panoptic](#) in scope. Knigge wasn't joking when he wrote that several thousands of questions were asked of them - from the mundane to the most intimate and private. Here's a taste, from my book *Perfectibilists*, pp. 236-237:

Upon admission to the Major Illuminatus degree the candidate is told of the code "Nosce te ipsum" (*know thyself*), and when another Brother pronounces it, he is supposed to reply "Nosce alios" (*know others*).<sup>7</sup> In this degree, the spying is taken to a whole other level. The initiate will scrutinize his inferiors in the form of questions about his physiognomy; his countenance; his gait; his language; his education—and each topic has multiple questions to elicit precise descriptions:

On the Physiognomy of the Candidate:—Is he of a florid complexion, or pale? Is he white, black, fair, or brown? Is his eye quick, piercing, dull, languishing, amorous, haughty, ardent, or dejected? In speaking, does he look fully in the face and boldly, or does he look sideways? Can he endure being stared full in the face? Is his look crafty, or is it open and free; is it gloomy and pensive, or is it absent, light, insignificant, friendly, or serious? Is his eye hollow, or level with the head, or does it stare? His forehead, is it wrinkled, and how; perpendicularly, or horizontally? &c.

His Countenance:—Is it noble or common, open, easy, or constrained? How does he carry his head; erect or inclined, before, behind, or on one side, firm or shaking, sunk between his shoulders, or turning from one side to the other? &c.

His Gait:—Is it slow, quick, or firm? Are his steps long, short, dragging, lazy,

or skipping? &c.

His Language:—Is it regular, disorderly, or interrupted? In speaking, does he agitate his hands, his head, or his body, with vivacity? Does he close upon the person he is speaking to? Does he hold them by the arm, clothes, or button-hole? Is he a great talker, or is he taciturn? If so, why? Is it through prudence, ignorance, respect, or sloth? &c.

His Education:—To whom does he owe it? Has he always been under the eyes of his parents? How has he been brought up, and by whom? Has he any esteem for his masters? To whom does he think himself indebted for his education? Has he traveled, and in what countries?<sup>8</sup>

As a means of providing an answer, the “Scrutators” embarked on elaborated fact-finding missions. Amazingly, they actually went so far as to follow their prey into his bedroom, “where they will learn whether he is a hard sleeper, whether he dreams, and whether he talks when dreaming; whether he is easily or with difficulty awakened; and should he be suddenly, forcibly, or unexpectedly awakened from his sleep, what impression would it make on him?”<sup>9</sup>

It is also in the Major Illuminatus degree that the candidate delivers up a sealed history of his life. This is compared with the tables already in the possession of his superiors—the complete picture drawn up of his person—and if it coincides with the surveillance conducted thus far, he is then admitted into the deeper mysteries. By this time the adept was well accustomed to the intrusion; the all-seeing eye of the Order had become habitual.

It’s really quite startling that anyone would put up with it. I’d venture to say that a modern psychologist would salivate at the power of such a comprehensive diagnostic tool.

By the time the initiate had reached that level, anything and everything of any significance was not only known about them (as well as their friends and family) but confirmed many times over. In real terms—in the setting of a strict hierarchical secret society—manipulation, even blackmail would have been effortless. These were the types of people that had insinuated their way into very heart of the state, with motives only known to themselves and their masters. No wonder Karl Theodor was alarmed!

The full implications of the Order are actually hinted at by Knigge. On page 34, he admits the possibility that without, as he says, the “purest intentions” of a Philo or a Spartacus, “this machine, in the hands of scheming, ambitious, and power hungry persons (and these could have sooner or later pushed their way up in the Order and placed themselves at the system’s head) could become a great danger to humankind.” Judging by the totalitarian bent of the “General” already, complained about (for years) by Knigge and cohorts, this statement is a bit ironic.

I won’t give away too much of Knigge’s own account of his time with the Illuminati, which I recommend you read for yourself and help out its translator by [purchasing](#) a copy.

Suffice it to say, Knigge was ousted. And in retrospect it was inevitable. Weishaupt and Knigge were incompatible: the latter a social animal, a doer, a lifelong seeker of mystery, arcane knowledge, and a genuine esotericist; the former naïve, unworldly, entirely self-preoccupied, and aspiring in his heart-of-hearts to be a great philosopher. I think Weishaupt was quite relieved that his Order was reduced to shambles only a few short years after Knigge had left. He gladly gave the reigns over to the Weimar and Gotha faction controlled by J. J. C. Bode – a Knigge recruit no less – and spent the next 45 years, a recluse, writing obscure philosophical tomes mostly against Kantian idealism.

Before I wrote my book on the Illuminati, [Kris Millegan](#) asked me why there wasn’t a biography of Adam Weishaupt in English, let alone any other language. I know the answer to that question now: after the Illuminati there’s really not much left to say.

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<sup>1</sup> There are, in fact, fourteen endnotes, however for the most part they concern only listing a German book that had been cited by Knigge (which was translated in the text into its English title by Jeva). Something as simple as identifying the real names of some initiates mentioned by Knigge would have been more useful; a short bio on who they were, perhaps, and what rank they had attained in the Illuminati and Freemasonry, following the examples of Hermann Schüttler, Markner et al. or Radrizzani et al. in *Journal von einer Reise von Weimar nach Frankreich im Jahr 1787* (1994), *Die Korrespondenz des Illuminatenordens* (2005) and *J.G. Fichte: Philosophie de la maçonnerie et autres textes* (1995), respectively. At any rate, while writing about the Bavarian Illuminati one should always have on hand, first and foremost, a copy of Schüttler's *Die Mitglieder des Illuminatenordens 1776-1787/93* (Munich: Ars Una 1991).

<sup>2</sup> See Paul Raabe, "*-in mein Vaterland zurückgekehrt*": *Adolph Freiherr Knigge in Hannover 1787-1790* (Wallstein Verlag, 2002) p. 104; Ingo Hermann, *Knigge: die Biografie* (Propyläen, 2007), p. 116. In Le Forestier. *op. cit.*, p. 209 n.1, citing [Karl Goedeke's 1844 biography](#) of Knigge, the society is called "les 'Inconnus'", i.e. 'Unbekanntes' (Unknown ones) or 'Gesellschaft der Unbekannten,' who are said to have erected a monument in Knigge's honor upon his death. Wendelstadt, Greven and Richers became members of Knigge's 'Orden der Freundschaft' in 1778: see Reinhard Markner et al., *Die Korrespondenz des Illuminatenordens* (Band 1: 1776-1781; Tübingen, 2005), pp. 189 notes 2 and 6, 227 note 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ferdinand, Duke of Brunswick and [Karl, Landgrave of Hesse-Kassel](#), the two supreme heads of German Strict Observance newly recruited into the Illuminati after the [Congress of Wilhelmsbad](#).

<sup>4</sup> Hans Grassl, *Aufbruch zur Romantik: Bayerns Beitrag zur deutschen Geistesgeschichte 1765-1785* (Beck, 1968), p. 202.

<sup>5</sup> Herder, a Mason since 1766, was insinuated into the Illuminati in July 1783, subsequently becoming Dean of the Weimar Illuminati and elevated to the degree of Epopot (*Perfectibilists*, *op. cit.*, p. 318).

<sup>6</sup> Herder, Adler and Menze (eds), *On World History: An Anthology* (1997), pp. 154, 321

<sup>7</sup> This aphorism has been articulated in multiple variations for thousands of years: the Oracle at Delphi; Pythagoras; Socrates; Plutarch; and even the Tao Te Ching in the Far East, to name a few. In every instance, however, the sole concern is with the singular maxim, "know thyself." For this reason, I believe, it is Alexander Pope's precept that the Illuminati used as a guide: "Know then thyself, presume not God to scan; The proper study of mankind is Man." This is from Pope's work *An Essay on Man*, which was recommended reading for Illuminati initiates.

<sup>8</sup> Augustin Barruel, *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism* [1798], Real-View-Books Classics Reprint, 2002, p. 455. This is but a tiny selection translated by Barruel. In the original degree work published by Faber, [page after page after page](#) are filled with questions.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 455-56.

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## 15 Comments to *Knigge on the Illuminati (According to Knigge) and Other Reflections (According to the Historical Record)*



[Jeva Singh-Anand](#)

July 6, 2012

Thank you for writing this review. It provides a rich, historical background for Knigge's book.



[Terry Melanson](#)

July 7, 2012

Thanks. It's good to have a skilled translator such as yourself taking on such a long neglected topic. Your work is appreciated.



[RedRiver](#)

July 9, 2012

@Jeva — I totally agree. Great writing & most informative. Thanks for the vital information that

all of us need. Good job.



**Franco**

July 9, 2012

@Terry — Thanks so much for the article. I've been patiently waiting for more translations on the O.W., but seems like Wages is no longer working on them... or is he?



**Terry Melanson**

July 9, 2012

My bad. I may have to change the subtitle of the site, and the about page.

The translations were the work of myself. Not sure when more will come. It's tedious work, and I can't ever seem to squeeze in the time nor the patience. Pulling teeth!

Jeva's the one cut out for that sort of work.

I'm more of straightforward researcher. I have no problem translating things that I think important, as I come across them - paragraph here, page there, etc.



**Jeva**

July 10, 2012

I've actually translated another, much shorter piece that will hopefully come out later this year. Since it's under contract, I can't go into details, though. I've started on a larger, more derivative translation project that I'll discuss in more detail when I'm a bit further along.



**Franco**

July 10, 2012

@Terry — Your bad? You've done more than enough. I thought you had at least some help from Joe.

@Jeva — Looking forward to your work and also contributions to this great site.



**Terry Melanson**

July 10, 2012

Looking forward to it as well!



**Ross**

July 26, 2012

Ordered it for my birthday. Can't wait to read it.



**Jeva**

July 27, 2012

Thanks. Much appreciated. I'm heavily plugging Terry's work and this site on my FB page, and I'm willing to do that with any other serious and scholarly treatment of this topic.

BTW, just listened to Terry's interview on "Paranormal Radio."



**Terry Melanson**

August 1, 2012

Happy birthday Ross!

And thanks Jeva!



**Joe Wäges**

November 18, 2012

Loved the book. Looking forward to others from him as well 😊



**Franco**

January 25, 2013

I really enjoyed the book, specially after reading Kingge's *Conversations with Men*, which is a great introduction to the author's character. But so many references to the *Original Writings*, my lack of German kept me from getting the complete picture.



**[Jeva Singh-Anand](#)**

May 25, 2013

Wages, Marker, and I are currently working on a massive translation project which we hope to finish by the end of the year.

The plan is to work on a second edition of "Philo" afterwards, which will not only preserve the original pagination, but also include numerous explanatory notes, and a translator's foreword that will probably take off some of that shine on "Mr. Manners'" halo.

Knigge's book is not only an apologia of the Illuminati (that part by and large accurate) but also of his own conduct within the order (and in this, he does bend the truth on more than one occasion). While Engel, in *"Geschichte des Illuminaten-Orden,"* acknowledges his skill and hard work, he also makes it very clear that Knigge and Weishaupt didn't have the same goals for the order, certainly not in the context of Freemasonry.

Knigge saw the chance to create a new Masonic Rite from the ashes of the Strict Observance, possibly with himself as chief. Creating a new Masonic Rite, by the way, is a very big deal in Freemasonry. It's not like, say, Wicca, where (worst case scenario) you can read a few books, add a few of your own thoughts and insights and call it a "tradition" after a few months. There's nothing wrong with that, I guess, and it's accepted practice in Wicca. But it's very different in the case of Freemasonry.

On the other hand, Weishaupt, though himself a Mason, but thoroughly disillusioned with esotericism, believed that Freemasonry needed to be purged of esoteric practices, especially in light of the fact that so many brethren of the Strict Observance had been swindled out of large sums of money, having been promised occult powers from "unknown Superiors." He was also convinced that Freemasonry as it was needed to be "corrected;" in his view, it had become corrupted.

Add their differences in personality to the mix, and an escalating schism ending in a major blowout was pretty much unavoidable.



**[Terry Melanson](#)**

May 26, 2013

The Gottingen faction had much to do with Knigge's ousting and Bode as well.

Looking forward to the book.

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