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GNOSTIC-MASONIC INFLUENCES ON THE EDUCATIONAL CONCEPT IN GERMANY BETWEEN THE SECOND HALF OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY AND THE FIRST HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

1. Herder

Between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, the search for one's ancestral origins and the elaboration of one's own Germanic identity began to take shape in German culture, in contrast with both the classical heritage and Catholicism.

One of the most active proponents of Germanism was Herder, a Lutheran philosopher, pastor and theologian fascinated by the occult, an active member of Freemasonry and the Illuminati of Bavaria.

All of Herder's reflection, from the origin of language to the philosophy of history, around the claim of German national autonomy, of which he was tireless promoter. It was a very marked nationalism, which met the spirit of the nineteenth century, animated by the reaction to the universalism of the Enlightenment and by the desire to rediscover national history and traditions, exalted against the imperial political ideal of the Habsburg Catholics. The national idea lent itself well to being exploited by Freemasonry in an anti-imperial and anti-Catholic function.

As Lessing had done before him, Herder also wrote works dedicated to Freemasonry, the *Dialogue on a visible-invisible society* of 1793, which takes up Lessing's *Dialogues*, and the *Fama fraternitatis or on the purpose of Freemasonry, as it appears from external. Solomon's Signet Ring*, a continuation of the previous dialogue from 1803. In the first book, the revival of Lessingian themes leads to the hope of a humanity reunited by the wisdom of universal minds, variously scattered throughout the world; in the second, however, in continuity with the first, the reflection on Freemasonry is accompanied by an esoteric reinterpretation of the events of King Solomon, the custodian and custodian of initiatory wisdom.

The friendship (not without disagreements) with Goethe, pushed Herder to join the Illuminati of Bavaria, a secret society with a much more elitist character than Freemasonry. The philosopher, attracted throughout his life by the occult, was distinguished by the tireless activism and reform commitment lavished in favor of the two main European esoteric associations.

In addition to Spinozian thought, deeply permeated by Jewish tradition, Herder extensively referred to the occultists of the past and in particular to Giordano Bruno.

The vastness of social relations (he met Lessing, was a friend of Goethe and an acquaintance of Diderot and d'Alembert), the deep ties with the influential German esoteric world and the success of Germanist ideas ensured Herder a wide and lasting fame, which reverberated on the nascent German idealism.

Herder is also the author of a work in which he deals with the theme of education by intertwining it with that of cultural tradition, *This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity* (1774) less known than those of an exquisitely philosophical nature, but which in any case exerted a certain influence in the German context.

2. Goethe

Johan Wolfgang von Goethe is unanimously considered one of the greatest poets of German expression. Born in Frankfurt in the mid-eighteenth century into a Protestant family, he was directed by his father, a high-ranking bureaucrat, to study law at the University of Leipzig. The dissolute university life didn't bear any fruit, so much so that the young Goethe was forced to return to his despised hometown in poor health. The danger of his life led him to approach piety, from which he promptly departed after healing, assuming a contemptuous attitude towards Christianity. In fact, Goethe liked to define himself, not without a smug 'cursed' pose, a burning heretic.

The resumption of his studies in the city of Strasbourg wasn't crowned by the achievement of a degree in law, but by the more modest baccalaureate, which in any case allowed him a short career as a lawyer.

In the meantime, Goethe had made the acquaintance of Herder, a well-known philosopher at the time, with whom he had a fluctuating relationship, but nevertheless destined to exert a profound and lasting influence on him. The unsatisfied search for the meaning of life, combined with intolerance for discipline and religious dogmas, determined that predisposition to esotericism that would later be directed towards Freemasonry and the Illuminati of Bavaria.

The alternating biographical events, from the crisis of inspiration to the poetic rebirth following the trip to Italy, did not affect Goethe's interest in the spiritual dimension, understood in magical and occult terms. Membership in Freemasonry, to which he was initiated in 1780, rapidly rising to the rank of master, permeated his literary production and in particular two of his best known works: *Faust* (1808–1832) and *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795–96).

Faust takes up the German medieval legend that narrates the pact made by the protagonist (alchemist, magician and doctor) with the devil, to whom he sells his soul in exchange for pleasure and success. The composition of the work, which lasted about sixty years, didn't achieve the desired unity or harmony, but was an effective expression of the versatility of the era between the end of the Enlightenment and the beginning of Romanticism.

The plot is discontinuous, made up of heterogeneous blocks at times almost juxtaposed, each witnessing the period in which it was composed and the degree of aesthetic maturity of the author. Beyond the inhomogeneity, what holds the story together is the high style and the tension of the protagonist towards absolute pleasure and happiness. The intricate events revolve around the initial pact between Doctor Faust, disappointed and bored by a monotonous existence, and Mephistopheles. In exchange for the soul, the devil promises to give a moment of enjoyment so intense as to induce Faust to hope that time will stop.

A singular aspect of the story, revealing its initiatory meaning, is the scene in which God, confident in Faust's goodness of soul, allows him to be tempted by Mephistopheles. In reality, the great architect of the universe of Freemasonry hides under the guise of the Christian God, with whom Faust dialogues through magical-alchemical practices. The goodness of the protagonist is therefore to be understood in esoteric terms, not in a Christian moral sense.

Correctly framed, the adventures of Faust take on the meaning of an initiatory path, complete with final redemption brought about by the magical-sexual power of the eternal feminine. With the help of Mephistopheles, in fact, Faust seduces and leads to complete perdition Margaret, the innocent girl transformed into her son's executioner and into a gallows pendant, redeemed only by repentance on the verge of death.

The repulsive figure of Faust, whose incessant search for fulfillment sows death and destruction, isn't in contrast with Mephistopheles, but in harmony with it, of which Goethe affirms, beyond the malicious intentions, the incessant beneficial work. The German poet realizes a real transfiguration of the idea of evil, which no longer has its own dimension, but ends up fading into the profane folly of the uninitiated. Goethe-Faust invites us to exploit the demonic force by submitting it through the initial pact, an allegory of the theurgic power of magic. It isn't Faust who is subjected to the devil, but vice versa.

The obscene underworld that unfolds before the (anti) hero is described in terms exalted by Goethe, who raises his own hymn to the deified nature, within which the saving figure of the woman stands out, dispenser of the eroticism that dissolves the spiritual tension of the protagonist.

In Faust there are all the typical elements of Masonic Gnosticism: magical and mysterious neo-paganism, which subjects natural forces and gives female eroticism an esoteric value; the revelation of universal knowledge through the initiatic path of the adept; the theurgic power over nature and man, strengthened by the sacrifice of innocence (especially sexual).

To crown his misdeeds, Faust avoids submitting to the devil because he is unable to reach absolute ecstasy in life, but projects his search beyond his earthly existence. The negativity of Mephistopheles doesn't lie in the fact that he embodies evil, but only in the attempt to impose limits on his victim, by which he ends up being harnessed.

The underworld forces of nature are exalted by Goethe, who makes them the center of radiation of sexual vitality, enjoyment, power over other men.

It has been rightly said that the success of *Faust* didn't depend on particular aesthetic or narrative merits, but on the ability to give voice to the rebellious spirit of modernity, to its eagerness to go beyond the limits of human existence to reach perfection, to control over nature, to unlimited power. Behind the mask of *Faust* is contemporary man, seduced by sinister promises of future joys, destined to remain unattainable.

The other work in which Goethe tackles the initiatory theme, developing them in a different way from *Faust*, is *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. The story, so tortuous and tangled as to resist attempts to syllogize it, centers on the protagonist, the son of a wealthy hard-hearted industrialist. From the very beginning, Wilhelm shows an intense passion for theater, and in particular for Shakespearean drama, but encounters various obstacles on the artistic path, intertwined with multiple sentimental experiences. Between ups and downs, always on the verge of disappointment, the protagonist manages to stage his Shakespeare, but has no way of making the success achieved lasting. A series of daring adventures puts him in contact with all social classes, from the humblest acrobats to the aristocracy, without excluding a close encounter with a band of brigands, who rob him. Like *Faust*, Wilhelm Meister also attaches great importance to the feminine ideal, capable of redeeming the protagonist's failures to lead him to the port of coveted fulfillment, with which the novel ends.

The work, which has the same narrative limits as *Faust*, isn't very homogeneous in texture, from which the individual stories emerge, connected in a way that isn't always flawless. Wilhelm Meister's reason for interest is represented by the opening to the new world of industrial production, which the author doesn't like, but who nevertheless proves to be ready to grasp its revolutionary significance already at its first manifestation. Goethe thus confirms his talent in immortalizing the spirit of a restless age, in many ways still suspended between declining feudalism and incessant capitalism.

Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship is also an interesting novel for reasons other than those of a social nature. Through it, in fact, Goethe exposes his initiatory idea of formation, understood as a progressive knowledge of the world and of the forces that govern it. Less imaginative than *Faust* and more realistic in describing the experiences of life, the novel didn't meet the same favor with the public, divided between the appreciation of the original motifs and the rejection of the crudeness with which the events are told.

3. Fichte

Johan Gottlieb Fichte was the leader of German idealism, to which Schelling and Hegel also belonged. Born in Saxony from a very poor Protestant family, he was able to access studies thanks to an aristocrat who appreciated his precocious intelligence. He attended the faculty of theology at the universities of Jena and Leipzig, sustaining his studies thanks to the humble job of a tutor.

The approach to philosophy came through the teaching of Kant, who favored his career by interceding for the publication of Fichte's first work, dedicated to the Critique of Practical Reason. The success was such as to induce the University of Jena to hire him, but, despite his promising beginnings, Fichte's career was troubled by controversies concerning his religious and political ideas, which reached full maturity in the Berlin period.

The highly articulated Fichtian speculation has the idea of the ego at its center, animated by a dialectical and progressive dynamism. The ego begins by placing itself as a primeval and self-conscious reality, which soon encounters the opposition of objects of knowledge, external, but still dependent on it. Without realities external to the ego, in fact, knowledge would not be possible, activated by an object extrinsic to the subject. Since the ego isn't only self-awareness, but also an ontological principle, it follows that it's the foundation of every known object, whose existence and knowability depend on the ego itself. The problem of the essence of objects of knowledge, which had animated Kant's reflection by channeling it towards the idea of "noumenon", suddenly ceases with Fichtian idealism. In order for the *I* to relate to the multiplicity of objects, however, it must come out of its original absoluteness and place a series of divisible *I*'s, each in opposition/dialectical relationship with the object of its knowledge.

With this further passage, the opposition/dialectical relationship between divisible *I* subjects of knowledge and divisible objects of knowledge takes the form of cognitive activity, reabsorbed within the original *I*, which has become, through the unfolding of its dialectical forms, absolute. The opposition between the multiplicity of *I* and divisible objects finds its fulfillment in the relocation within the sphere of the absolute *I*.

The similarity between Fichtian and Hegelian idealism, united both by the triple dialectical stage of thesis, antithesis and synthesis (to put it in Hegel's way), and by the gnoseological and ontological dimension of the philosophical principle, which Fichte calls "*I*" and Hegel calls, according to the level of dialectical development reached, "*Idea*", "*Nature*" and "*Spirit*", it's evident.

Another relevant aspect of Fichtian speculation is the influence exerted on it by Gnosticism and in particular by Kabbalism. The concept of limit as a form of knowledge and of the correspondence between the subjective human reality (divisible *I*) and the subjective reality of the totality of being (absolute *I*) brings to mind the kabbalistic tree of life, which is at the same time a figure of the derivation of being from the divine principle and the way (initiatory and rational) of man's knowledge of being. The substantial coincidence between gnoseological and ontological aspects is typical of the Jewish Gnostic tradition, which promised, through the initiation into esoteric studies, a perfect knowledge, with magical-theurgical implications capable of ensuring unlimited power and of bringing back the multiplicity of entities to unit.

The approach of Fichte's entire philosophical thought is therefore deeply affected by his belonging to Freemasonry, which in turn is permeated with Gnosticism and Kabbalism. Begun in Gdansk in 1793, the German philosopher remained active in the lodge for only seven years, entering "sleep" at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The departure from Freemasonry didn't depend on the rejection of his principles, but on the disagreements with the direction conferred on her by the master Fessner. The years of activity within Freemasonry were very intense and allowed Fichte to become, in a short time, teacher and official speaker of his lodge. The three solemn speeches given by the philosopher would later merge into the work entitled *Philosophy of Freemasonry*, published in 1802. Through the prayers, Fichte expresses his own interpretation of the meaning and mission of Freemasonry, which has in antihistoricism and in universalism its cornerstones.

The philosopher explains that it's in vain effort to seek the historical foundation of the initiatory path, which goes beyond rational understanding and directly embraces the entire human spirit, raising it. In the Fichtian interpretation, Freemasonry departs from the atheistic rationalism of the French free-masonry tradition, to recover the primitive Gnostic spiritualism.

The influence of the nascent romanticism marked the breaking line with the eighteenth century and fueled the controversy of Fichte against Kant, whose rationalism was considered unsatisfying and unable to reach the truth.

Despite the strongly anti-rationalistic accent of maturity, with his subjective spiritualism, Fichte did not deviate much from the Cartesian imprint of modern philosophy and from the idea of absolute domination of man over reality.

The *Philosophy of Freemasonry*, the work in which Fichte reflects on his own esoteric experience, offers numerous other food for thought, in addition to those already mentioned.

First of all, the philosopher reiterates the impossibility of explaining to the layman the meaning of Freemasonry, which can only be grasped by attending the lodge and arriving at a clarifying intuition.

Although not definable, the philosopher appreciates the power of esotericism, capable of disclosing an overall vision of humanity, within which individuals and peoples take on a specific role. The heated Fichtian nationalism of the *Addresses to the German Nation* (1808), often bordering on racism, has transcended from the universalism of the *Philosophy of Freemasonry*, which envelops everything and brings to completion.

Fichtian Germanism (like Herderian one) therefore fulfills the function of a dialectical moment, destined to be absorbed by Masonic cosmopolitanism, inspired by Jewish gnosis.

The idea that the German people is invested with the mission of guiding humanity towards a rediscovered unity, and that to absolve it must remain pure in blood and spirit, also reflects the concept of Jewish election, of which it represents a reflection.

The influence of kabbalistic gnosis on the thought of one of the forerunners of Pan-Germanism and German racism, which reached its most radical expression during the twentieth century, appears to be of the utmost importance. It's no coincidence that the scholar of esotericism René Alleau has defined Nazism as a racist gnosis.

4. Hegel

With Hegel, German idealism, inaugurated by Fichte and developed by Schelling, reaches the highest degree of systematization. History, religion, philosophy and more generally all human knowledge find their place within the Hegelian system, in a titanic effort to provide a definitive answer to the questions that have always accompanied humanity.

This attempt was unsuccessful, as Nietzsche and Kierkegaard rightly observed, but carried out with a commitment and with an internal consistency that determined its success among posterity. The breadth of Hegelian reflection exerted a vast and profound influence on the history of ideas and, in particular, inspired Marx and his economic-political ideal.

Hegelian philosophy, with a clear immanentistic approach, re-proposes a theme developed in the past by Spinoza and, even earlier, by the Gnostic tradition. Elements that have led to the question of whether Hegel, like Fichte, was also a Mason. The conjectures advanced in this regard have not led to certain proofs, but have nevertheless established that the father of absolute idealism maintained cordial relations with the Freemasons, as evidenced by his youthful correspondence. In fact, Hegelism is presented as a form of pantheistic Gnosticism, in which the spiritual and vital principle is immanent in nature and unfolds in dialectical opposition to it to finally reach the fullness of self-awareness.

The triadic dialectic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis is taken from Fichte, but formulated with greater precision by Hegel, who introduces the concept of *Aufhebung*, that is, the inclusion/overcoming of the opposition between thesis and antithesis in the synthesis.

Although mature, Hegelian idealism, like the Fichtian one, uses unclear ideas to express its contents, veiling them with an ambiguous aura.

The Hegelian dialectic is represented by the absolute idea (thesis), which is alienated in nature (antithesis) and reaches fullness with the spirit (synthesis), which has become perfectly self-conscious precisely through absolute idealism, the fulfillment of the history of human thought.

The alienation of the idea in nature, its material antithesis, brings Hegelism back into the wake of an ancient tradition, which began with late Neoplatonism and reached its clearest formulation with Spinozian pantheism. In any case, in Hegel there is an innovative dynamic/dialectical element compared to the past.

The spirit, at first an abstract idea, incarnates itself in nature and opposes itself, and then becomes self-aware first with religious intuition and then with philosophy, accord-

ing to a dynamic and dialectical unfolding of its potential. Theology is thus subordinated to philosophy, in a substantial inversion of the medieval order, centered on the idea of God. With Hegel, not only Cartesian anthropocentrism finds further confirmation, but is incorporated into a holistic spiritualistic conception. Man, and in particular the philosopher, becomes the apical and self-conscious part of the absolute spirit, which engulfs everything within it. Any form of transcendence is firmly denied, because it would crack the pantheism or rather the pan-spiritualism of the Hegelian system, referring man and his investigation to an ontological principle that is irreducible to the knowledge of him.

The gnostic dimension of absolute idealism resides in the claim of all-understanding, where everything finds an explanation and every problem is solved. The absence of a gap between the knowing subject and the known object rests on their identity, which generates a hermetically closed gnoseological circuit.

The path begun three centuries earlier by Descartes reaches, thanks to Hegel, a significant stage, full of consequences for future history, in particular politics. The young Marx, in fact, would have grasped some aspects of the Hegelian political dialectic to push them to the point of absolutization, making them the cornerstone of his own philosophy. From the Master/slave dialectic, with which the German philosopher explained the ethical and political decadence of the ruling classes, Marx would have drawn his fundamental idea of class struggle. Thus the theoretical foundations were laid for the revolutionary uprisings of socialist inspiration, which would shock Europe from the mid-nineteenth century until the Bolshevik revolution of 1917.

Another Hegelian element destined to permeate European political history was the absolutization of the state, transformed into an institutionalized manifestation of the spirit itself. The Hegelian conception of an ethical state would have inspired both the fascist regimes and the communist and radical democratic regimes, sharing the same root. The absolutization of the state is implied by the very structure of Hegelian philosophy, which incorporates everything dialectically, reinterpreting history in terms of the progressive manifestation of the spirit.

It follows that moral judgment is devoid of any value and that the idea of freedom turns out to be illusory, since everything that happens takes on the chrism of necessity, within the framework of overall coincidence between spirit, nature and history. Justificationism was, more than any other aspect of absolute idealism, a harbinger of negative implications, which would not have been long in manifesting themselves.

Once again it's worth emphasizing the convergence between Hegelianism, Spinozism and Jewish Gnosticism, denying ethics and freedom, which no longer find a place in the unfolding of history, reduced to mere necessity. These are concepts that don't even contemplate the idea of evil, considered a mere external appearance.

To conclude the overview of Hegel, it's worth mentioning the enormous influence that his work exerted in the pedagogical field during the nineteenth century and, even

more, in the twentieth century. In this regard, remember the neo-realistic educational theories due to Sergej Hessen and Giovanni Gentile.

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