CHAPTER 5

The Mystical International

WHAT little notoriety the Avignon Society achieved during the French Revolution it achieved by accident. In the spring of 1794, in the course of searching out anyone suspected of harboring aristocratic sympathies, the revolutionary security network turned its attention to the personnel of the old Parlement of Paris, which had been abolished in 1790. Some of the members, among them one Bourrée de Corberon, a member of a distinguished Burgundian noble family, had signed a protest at the dissolution of their institution. When agents of the Committee of General Security learned that Corberon had two sons living in France, one of them at Avignon, they traveled to the old papal city, arrested the son, Marie-Daniel Bourrée de Corberon, and seized some suspicious-looking letters from his home.¹

Some of these letters had been written to Corberon by Louis-Michel Gombault. Since the abolition of the royal treasury, Gombault had been serving without salary as paymaster of a regiment of the Paris gendarmerie, while continuing in his spare time to pursue his mystical and occultist interests at Petit-Bourg. In the tense atmosphere of 1794, the letters were enough to make Gombault politically suspect. He was arrested early in May and questioned especially closely about a “Society” to which he had referred in his letters to Corberon.

Another suspicious thing about the letters, in the eyes of Gombault’s interrogators, was that individuals were often identified not by name but by numbers of three digits. Gombault identified the people mentioned and explained that assigning a number to each individual was in accordance with “the customs of the Masonic lodges.” As to the mysterious society, he explained that before the Revolution there had been at Avignon “a Society of men, devoted to religious speculations,” whose two articles of belief had been “the

existence of a supreme being and the immortality of the soul." 2 The society no longer existed; that nobody had ever heard of it was proof 
that it had done no harm.

One of the individuals referred to in the letters was identified by 
Gombault as a Polish count named Grabianka; in a letter written in 
August 1789, Gombault had mentioned the society's excitement at 
the impending arrival in Avignon of "the family of the Count." Gom­ 
bault explained that he had been talking with members of the society 
"about a Revolution which was to arrive first in France and then in 
all the globe." This Revolution would bring about "a universal Re­ 
generation which would lead to a purity of morals, a fraternity, and a 
happiness" such as the world had not seen since the Garden of 
Eden. The society believed that the glorious epoch would begin when 
Count Grabianka's family arrived in Avignon from Poland.

Gombault concluded his testimony with a statement that affirmed 
his absolute loyalty to the Revolution. His interrogators had probably 
heard such declarations many times before, but in Gombault's case 
there is no reason to doubt his absolute sincerity. "I have believed 
in the Revolution from the beginning," he said; "I have been con­ 
vinced of the happiness that it would procure for France and one day 
for the entire world."

A few months later, in London, the Avignon Society again received 
a kind of incidental prominence. Two artisans, a carpenter named 
John Wright and a former printer named William Bryan, published 
testimonies of their belief in the prophetic pretensions of a retired 
naval officer named Richard Brothers. They both declared them­ 
selves to be members of the Avignon Society, having in 1789 made a 
pilgrimage "to Avignon in France" at the prompting of the Holy 
Spirit. They had spent seven months there, studying the "revealed 
knowledge" that the members received from a divine spirit. John 
Wright now published some of these prophecies, many of which did 
indeed predict a time of troubles and revolution in which thrones 
would topple and blood flow before there came "the time of the new 
heavens and the new earth." 3 Robert Southey, when he learned of the 
Avignon Society through reading Wright and Bryan, commented 
ironically that even if the abbé Barruel's version of a Masonic and 
Jacobin conspiracy to overturn governments was nothing but fiction,

2. Archives Nationales, F74728, doss. Gombault. Quotations in the next two para­ 
graphs are from this letter.

(London, 1795); John Wright, A Revealed Knowledge of Some Things That Will Be 
Speedily Fulfilled in the World . . . for the Good of All Men (London, 1794).
here was a society "whose object was to change or to influence the governments of Europe; it was well organized, and widely extended, but enthusiasm, not infidelity, was the means which it employed."  

The Avignon Society was only one of many shoots in the lush undergrowth of mystical Masonry in the eighteenth century. While it was an independent association, with rituals and doctrines quite distinct from those of the lodges affiliated with the Grand Orient in Paris, the society enjoyed full social and intellectual respectability. When international conferences of mystics, occultists, and alchemists met at Wilhelmsbad in 1782 and at Paris in 1784, the Avignon Society sent delegates. The conferences were one result of the remarkable surge of interest in mysticism in the later eighteenth century. The tidy generalities of deism and of conventional Freemasonry were beginning to seem inadequate to many in the educated classes from which these ideologies had always drawn their support.

These eighteenth-century mystics, who often called themselves "men of desire," did not repudiate the notions of social and moral improvement which Freemasonry and the other reforming movements espoused. Nor did they reject the belief that "science" and "reason" were capable of transforming the world. The difference lay in their increasing tendency to seek true science and true reason in such unlikely places as alchemical lore, cabalistic numerology, mesmerist séances, Swedenborgian spiritualism, and (perhaps most surprising of all) the Scriptures. Many of these mystical Masons expected the sort of spiritual regeneration of the world which the Avignon Society's delegates had announced to the Paris conference in 1784: the reunion of the churches and the promulgation of a new doctrine for the entire world. Only in the range of its interests and activities and in the grandiloquence of its prophecies of impending revolutionary regeneration was the Avignon Society unusual in the world of late eighteenth-century mystical masonry.

The society came into being in 1779, not at Avignon but at Berlin. Its founder was Dom Antoine Pernety, a Benedictine who had re-

nounced his clerical vows and fled to the hospitable court of Frederick the Great. During his monastic career, Pernety had acquired a reputation more for erudition than for piety. In the 1760s, he accompanied the explorer Bougainville as chaplain on an expedition to the Falkland Islands. Upon his return, he abruptly left his monastery, abandoned clerical dress, and set out for Avignon.  

Avignon in the eighteenth century was a major center of Freemasonry, including its occultist and esoteric offshoots. Although the territory belonged to the Pope, Avignon's liberal and cosmopolitan society was generally allowed to believe and to practice what it pleased. One of the first Masonic lodges in France had been founded there by Scottish Jacobite exiles. This was more than the papacy was prepared to tolerate, and in conformity with papal bulls against Freemasonry, the archbishop of Avignon in 1738 and 1751 had prohibited Masonic meetings. Nonetheless, the movement persisted.

It is not known when Dom Pernety became a Mason, but within months of his arrival in Avignon in 1765, he had inaugurated a new Masonic rite that was adopted by one of the disbanded lodges. Composed entirely of nobles, it had seceded from the parent lodge and the French Masonic network some years earlier. It now reorganized on the basis of Pernety's rite, which he said was derived from hermetic lore hidden within the myths of the Greeks and the Egyptians.

Finding Avignon too risky for a monk of his clouded status, Pernety soon accepted an invitation from Frederick to come to Berlin and serve as his librarian. At Frederick's court, he continued his researches in a variety of fields, publishing books on his trip to the Falkland Islands; on the character of America; on physiognomy, or the tracing of character through the analysis of men's faces; and on his pet theory that the bulk of ancient literature was in fact disguised hermetic lore. He also practiced alchemy.

Pernety gradually assembled a circle of followers in Berlin. At his instigation, they launched what one historian has called "a sort of religion of the occult, a mixture of casuistry, ecstasy, astrology, cabalism, and alchemy." Pernety's circle acquired two protectors: an angel named Assadai, who Pernety said aided him in his work; and Prince Henry, brother of the king. Henry lived in retirement near

8. Briculaud, Les Illuminés d'Avignon, p. 36. See also Le Forestier, Franc-maçonnerie, p. 554.
Berlin, studying religion and metaphysics with his wife and friends. Among the followers whom Pernety now brought into the prince’s circle were a financier, an actor at the prince’s private theater, two English merchants named Bousie, and a French priest named Guyton de Morveau, who called himself Brumore.

It was from the actor that Pernety acquired a book that he hoped would at last make it possible to accomplish the “Great Work” of alchemy, the creation of the philosopher’s stone. The book was said to be the work of “Elie Artiste,” an alchemist who lived quietly near Hamburg, doing his experiments and curing the sick. The title the author gave himself was one which alchemists since the time of Paracelsus had used in reference to a supreme alchemist who would one day come and lay bare the secrets of the universe. Just as the pious awaited the coming of the prophet Elias, who would herald the regeneration of the world, so they awaited the Elias Artista, who would make possible its alchemical transformation.

As Brumore explained in a letter in the *Journal encyclopédique* in 1785, Elias Artista taught that the ancient Chaldeans had possessed a science of numbers that enabled men to communicate with the heavenly powers. Men had lost this knowledge through pride; they no longer believed that something as simple as arranging numbers in a cabalistic order and then making calculations could reveal supernatural truths, “because such incomprehensible mysteries are repugnant to that pride of reasoning which wants to comprehend everything.”

Count Tadeusz Grabianka joined Pernety and Prince Henry’s circle in 1778. He was not really a count, but he was an extremely wealthy nobleman, with extensive estates in the province of Podolia in southeastern Poland. Although he had been born at Rajkowce in Podolia in 1740, Grabianka spent most of his youth in France at the court of Stanislas Leszczynski, the deposed king of Poland and father-in-law of Louis XV. At his father’s death in 1759, Grabianka inherited a fortune that included three castles, fourteen estates, and a fabulous

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collection of jewels. (Two of his pseudonyms, Count Ostap and Count Sutkowski, were derived from the names of estates he owned). In 1771, he married one of the greatest heiresses in Poland.

At some time in his youth, Grabianka developed the desire to succeed to the elective Polish throne. Poland in the eighteenth century was in a condition bordering on political anarchy, as factions rose and fell, pulled this way and that by the machinations of Poland’s neighbors, above all Russia. When Grabianka was a child, according to one of his biographers, a fortune teller predicted that he would become king of Poland, defeat Russia, and conquer the Turkish Empire, Asia, and part of Africa. Then “he would transfer his capital to Jerusalem, where the monarchs of the earth would come to prostrate themselves before him and learn supreme wisdom from him as from a second Solomon.”

Another factor may have contributed to the extravagant visions that absorbed Grabianka throughout his life. In the eighteenth century, both Poland and the Ukraine were centers of Jewish mysticism and the millenarian movement that had survived the apostasy of its prophet Sabbatai Zevi. Sabbatean prophets wandered about the region, calling upon the faithful to go to Israel to await the appearance there of their king and Messiah. In Grabianka’s native province of Podolia, there existed not only congregations of Sabbatean Jews but also heretical Orthodox Christian sects and some scattered Moslem antinomians. All three groups awaited a millenarian regeneration of the world, a new earth where men would live in peace under the rule of God’s anointed. It is surely more than coincidental that this is the province where Tadeusz Grabianka was born and to which returned to live at intervals throughout his lifetime.

Grabianka spent most of the 1760s and 1770s on his estates in Podolia or in Warsaw. It was during a sojourn in the capital that he became involved in occultism and alchemy, through the circles of noble amateurs that flourished there. In all the Baltic capitals—Berlin, Warsaw, Copenhagen, Stockholm, and St. Petersburg—these circles flourished, and seekers after mystical enlightenment moved freely between them. It was also in Warsaw that Grabianka joined the “reformed” Masonic system called the Strict Observance. Of all

the mystical Masonic associations, the Strict Observance, commonly known as the Templars, was perhaps the most widespread. Much more structured and hierarchical than the other systems, it claimed that its organization and doctrines were based on the medieval order of the Knights Templar, suppressed early in the fourteenth century by Philip the Fair.15

Founded circa 1760 by the German Baron Charles Hund, the Masonic Templars spread rapidly to both the east and the west. In 1778, not long after having joined the Warsaw lodge, Grabianka came to Berlin, where the Templars were particularly numerous. He rapidly gained access to Prince Henry’s court and met Pernety and Brumore. His entry into the group was of considerable significance for it; not only did he rapidly become one of its leaders but he also spent his wealth lavishly in support of its projects. As Pernety in his old age withdrew more and more into his studies and experiments, the swashbuckling count became the most influential figure in the group. It was Grabianka who was primarily responsible for shifting the society’s principal concern from occultism and alchemy to a millenarian anticipation of great events in the near future that would find the enemies of the Lord destroyed and Pernety’s little band established as the “new people” of the New Israel, with Grabianka as their king.

The transformation began soon after Grabianka had entered Dom Pernety’s occult circle. On 21 February 1779, the “Holy Word” that was revealed by means of Elie Artiste’s cabalistic number lore told Pernety that a society was to be formed that would be the nucleus of “the new people of God.” Those admitted to it would undergo a ceremony called the “consecration.”16 For each of nine successive days, on a hilltop outside Berlin, the candidate was to burn incense and consecrate himself to the service of God. Having thus made “an alliance with the Eternal,” he would be visited by an angel.17 The Holy Word announced that Grabianka should be the first to be consecrated, because his heart was pure. He carried out the nine days’ rite, but he saw no angel. The Holy Word assured Grabianka that everything was all right and that he should go ahead and consecrate Pernety, Brumore, and a fourth member of the circle, a financier

17. Ibid., pp. 45-48; “Breve dettaglio della Società, o Setta scoperta nell’arresto di Ottavio Cappelli, tratto dalle carte allo stesso perquisite,” printed in Felice, Note e ricerche, p. 221. The manuscript is in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale in Rome, mss Vittorio Emanuele.
named Anne de Morinval. With these consecrations accomplished, Grabianka began his reign as king of the new people. Pernety was to be their pope.

During the next several years, new members were brought into the society, including most of the members of Grabianka's family, whom he had gone to Poland to fetch at the Holy Word's command. Even Pernety, who until then had been absorbed primarily in alchemy, was caught up in the new developments. In 1781, he wrote the Swedish baron Nordenskjold concerning a "Polish gentleman" (Grabianka, surely) who told all he met of "the new reign of Jesus Christ on the earth, which he describes as very near." Pernety said that the Pole had been so informed by God himself. He added, "I have certain and very clear proofs of the truth of what is said concerning the new reign of God."

In 1782, the Holy Word commanded Pernety to leave Berlin and find a new city in which to establish the "new people." His angel Assadai would guide him there; it would be a forty days' journey from Berlin, on the banks of a great river. One wonders how necessary the angel's guidance was, since Pernety had after all lived for some years at Avignon, with its famous bridge spanning the great Rhone River. By 1785, Pernety and a number of other members of the society had made their way there. After quarrelling with Grabianka over the failure of some alchemical experiments during a sojourn in Poland, Brumore visited various occult centers in Switzerland and Germany before arriving at Avignon in June. In 1785, Grabianka too received a divine command to leave his estates and join the rest. It took him over a year to get there. He traveled through western Europe seeking like-minded societies that might join with his in preparing the world for the reign of God.

Avignon, when Pernety and the others arrived there in 1785, was still a haven for individuals interested in mysticism and the occult. One of them, an Avignonesi nobleman named the marquis de Vaucrose de Vernetti, offered the new arrivals the use of a country chateau, near the city but outside the jurisdiction of the archbishop. Pernety called the chateau Tabor. He scattered dust from Palestine on the top of a nearby hill; this he named Mount Tabor, the site of all future consecrations. Garbianka meanwhile established himself in some splendor in a house in the city. During the succeeding years, a steady stream of visitors arrived from all over Europe, some

18. Quoted in Viatte, Sources occultes du romantisme, 2: 270.
of whom undertook the rite of consecration and became people of the New Israel.

During the same period, Pernety and Grabianka drifted apart. There was never an outright schism in the Avignon Society, but Pernety seems to have had little to do with the millenarian doctrines and proselytizing activities that centered at Grabianka's house in the city. The former monk resided most of the time outside Avignon, working in his alchemical laboratory or instructing candidates for consecration in the doctrines of the Holy Word. Grabianka, meanwhile, was preparing for the millennium that he was increasingly convinced was at hand.

It is likely that Brumore had been Grabianka's ally in Berlin in the transformation of a circle of occultists into a religious society with millenarian tendencies. In letters seized some years later by the papal police, Grabianka called the French abbé his first guide and master, even though Brumore had died in 1786, in Rome. Renzo de Felice has argued that he may have gone there in order to establish contact with an Italian mystic named Ottavio Cappelli, who was also in communication with angels. Before his death, Brumore put Cappelli in touch with the Avignon Society. In 1787, Cappelli came to Avignon, where he remained for two years. After his return to Rome, he continued to provide spiritual guidance to the society through letters, but late in 1790 he was arrested on suspicion of heresy. He was freed after recanting in 1795, but in 1798 he was arrested again. This time he was put to death, possibly because his connections with Grabianka and the Russian members of the Avignon Society made the papal authorities suspect that he was a Russian spy.

After Cappelli's first arrest, the papacy had published a report claiming that he was a gardener, of the lowest social class and without education. In fact, he was of middle class origin and had studied for the priesthood. After having left holy orders, he was a merchant in the Papal States, where he came into contact with some South American Jesuits who lived in exile there after the suppression of their order. Many of them were millenarians, and it may well be that their ideas helped to shape Cappelli's conviction that he was divinely called to a religious mission.

Although Grabianka gave Cappelli the title "Man-King of the New People," and although he fully believed in Cappelli's spiritual gifts, the Polish count continued to be the dominant figure in the society.

There is no indication what Cappelli's role in the group would have become had he not been arrested. It is clear that he was regarded by the membership as a prophet, whose counsel was sought on everything from the weather to the end of the world, and that he was preparing to make the society's rituals more conventionally Roman Catholic. Gombault, in a letter written in 1792, referred to him as "our dear victim," who must obtain "his deliverance" from imprisonment before he could complete "his mission" so that "the promises may be accomplished"—but it is not clear what "promises" were meant.

The papal inquisitors questioned Cappelli closely about the Avignon Society and the letters he had received from its members. They learned that it consisted of "men and women, Laymen, Priests, Monks and Nuns, and also girls of tender age." There were "Poles, Germans, Swedes, Frenchmen, Russians, Genevans, Dutch, Irish, and Italians of both sexes." Their aim was "to form a new People of God, a new Reign of Christ, to reform Religion, to restore the law, and to expand the Faith." Despite the peculiarity of some of its doctrines and the extravagant prophecies of its leaders, the papal report shows clearly that the Avignon Society was definitely part of the strong current that was moving, on the eve of the French Revolution, toward the conviction that the renewal of the church and the spiritual and moral regeneration of the faithful was imminent.

Bourrée de Corberon may or may not have been typical of the individuals affiliated with the Avignon Society on the eve of the Revolution. He is of particular interest, however, because he left a detailed account of the spiritual odyssey that finally brought him to Avignon in 1790. He came, as he wrote to another member at the time, in order to be "without human distractions in the sublime and consoling study of the religion of nature." By that time he had sampled practically everything the eighteenth century had to offer, including mystical Masonry, mesmerism, alchemy, and the doctrines of Swedenborg, Cagliostro, and a Parisian who predicted the end of the world.

Born in 1748, Corberon first pursued a career in the army. At the age of twenty-five he entered the diplomatic service, serving first in the petty state of Cassel and then at St. Petersburg for six years, the

last three as chargé d'affaires. Then, finding that Foreign Minister
Vergennes was not favorable to him, he retired, at the age of thirty­
two. With the exception of a brief diplomatic stint at Zweibrücken,
he never worked again.

It was during his years in Russia that Corberon became interested
in occultism and mystical religion. In company with the marquis de
Thomé, the abbé Pasquini, and the comte de Brühl, he plunged
into the study and practice of alchemy. In 1775, he joined the mys­
tical order called the Elus Coens. Two years later, he joined Brühl
in the Masonic Templars.

Corberon had met Cagliostro in Russia and been impressed by his
abilities as a healer. They met again in 1781 in Paris, where the
Sicilian made an impressive entry into society under the patronage
of the Cardinal de Rohan, until the affair of the Diamond Necklace
destroyed the reputations of both men and forced Cagliostro to flee
to England. It was while dining with the Sicilian "Great Copt" that
Corberon met Bousie and resumed his friendship with the marquis de
Thomé. Bousie had already been consecrated into Pernety's Avignon
Society, but there is no evidence that Corberon learned of the group
at this time. Instead, he, Bousie, and the marquis de Thomé began
an intensive study of the writings of Emmanuel Swedenborg. Cor­
beron took up Swedenborg with the same intensity he had given in
St. Petersburg to the transmutation of metals. He continued this
study during his diplomatic service at Zweibrücken in 1782-83.
He also made inquiries at Hamburg concerning the alchemist and
healer Elie Artiste, who was reputed to have been a close friend of
Swedenborg's. 25

In 1784 Corberon abandoned his earlier deism and became a
Christian. In his private journal, Corberon gave the credit for his con­
version to some of the pious noblemen he had met in the occult and
Masonic circles of St. Petersburg and to the reading of Swedenborg.
It was at this point in his spiritual pilgrimage that an old acquaint­
ance took him to see Jean-Baptiste Ruer, an impressive Parisian
gentleman of fifty who received heavenly communications each
night. 26 Ruer predicted great events—kingdoms would fall, revolutions
would break out, the Jews would be called back to the Holy Land,
Jerusalem would be rebuilt. Jesus would return to earth and launch
the Third Age. Ruer assured Corberon that he, his father, and pos­
sibly his wife were among the elect and would be spared in the ter­
rible times ahead. Ruer read aloud from the divine messages that he

received and transcribed nightly. Corberon exclaimed in his own journal: "Nothing is so simple and so beautiful as what I have heard. It is the style of Scripture, for it is Jesus Christ who speaks and dictates to Ruer." 27

In a striking anticipation of what Richard Brothers was to announce in England ten years later, Ruer declared that he was the descendant of David, destined to rule as king in Jerusalem. Also like Brothers, Ruer described his future kingdom in great detail, including the religious services that would be conducted in the rebuilt temple. He also asserted that St. John the Divine had lived near Paris when he wrote the book of Revelation.

Apparently Corberon was himself a little startled at how abruptly he dropped Swedenborg for the very different emphasis of Ruer. Thomé remonstrated with him at the time, but by 1787 both he and Bousie were also followers of the strange prophet. It is a pattern we shall see repeated in England in 1794 among similar "men of desire" during the brief vogue for Richard Brothers.

Ruer predicted that the end of the world would come in 1786, and the believers prepared themselves. A house was secured and stocked with food to sustain them when disaster struck. Corberon and the others contributed money to Ruer so that he might complete the preparations needed to preserve the elect. Madame Corberon, a Protestant, joined the Roman Catholic church in order to be included among them. As the year of doom progressed with none of the predicted events, Corberon began to grow restive. Ruer's constant demands for money made him suspect that the prophet was at least in part a charlatan. For one thing, it seemed to Corberon that Ruer had adopted some of Cagliostro's visions as his own.

It was during this period of progressive disenchantment that Corberon met Count Grabianka, early in 1787. For three hours, the count told him about the Avignon Society; but his involvement with Ruer had made Corberon wary. Grabianka wrote to him, but he waited for over a year before replying. He then asked Grabianka's advice concerning Ruer, and the count inexplicably told him to remain loyal to the prophet. Possibly, Grabianka saw Ruer's group as another member of his international millenarian "Union." Corberon nonetheless began to disengage himself from Ruer. He also began to move toward the Avignon Society. Two members of the society, Bousie and Gombault, frequented the same Paris circles that he did, and he now began also to correspond with some of the members who

27. Ibid., p. 274.
resided in Avignon. Finally, he wrote requesting admission. 28 After all of his spiritual adventures, the society (alchemy, angels, and all) must have indeed seemed to Corberon to represent a calm and reasonable "religion of nature."

Grabianka's refusal to urge Corberon to leave Ruer for the fellowship of Avignon may seem surprising, considering that the count was the society's most active propagandist. The explanation lies in the fact that Grabianka's evangelism was directed less at winning candidates for the particular fellowship of Avignon than at the creation of some sort of millenarian international. The clearest indication that this was what he had in mind is seen in his behavior during the year he spent in London among groups dedicated to the study of the teachings of Swedenborg. One man who knew Grabianka there recalled that he was a "frequent and welcome" visitor, whose "conversation was always interesting and animated: and when he communicated the religious sentiments of his Society, he seemed to speak the very language of the New Church." 29 After he had left for Avignon, he wrote his English friends, thanking them for their hospitality and for the gift of several works of Swedenborg "as a pledge of the union, which the Lord is about to form between us." There were several other societies, he told them, "who, like you, walk in the paths of Christ and we hasten to fulfill them also in obedience to the command." The divine command had not yet come, but it was expected soon; "for, very dear brethren, the angel that stands before the face of the Lamb, is already sent to sound his trumpet on the mountains of Babylon, and give notice to the nations that the God of heaven will soon come to the gates of the earth, to change the face of the world, and to manifest his power and glory." 30 The London Swedenborgians did not reply.

Several members of the Avignon Society had been deeply interested in Swedenborg, but the interest was not reciprocated by those whose primary allegiance was to the Swedish prophet. While still in Berlin, Pernety had published a very free French translation of one of Swedenborg's works which evoked the displeasure of both the marquis de Thomé and Benedict Chastanier, the French emigré surgeon who was one of the founding members of the Church of the

28. Ibid., pp. 279-81; Bricaud, Les Illuminés d'Avignon, p. 87.
30. Printed in ibid., pp. 46-47. Dated 12 February 1787, the letter was addressed "To the Children of the New Kingdom in London."
New Jerusalem in London. Thomé went so far as to try to prevent its publication.\textsuperscript{31}

Swedenborg’s theology seems to have had no lasting influence on the Avignon Society. Doctrinally, the society’s leaders saw themselves as orthodox Roman Catholics, with a special veneration for the Virgin Mary. One member said that the society believed that Swedenborg had been “divinely taught” at first but had introduced many of his own fantasies into his published work.\textsuperscript{32}

As far as the London Swedenborgians were concerned, no union with the Avignon Society was possible. In 1790, the New-Jerusalem Magazine denounced the society as “the Antipodes of the New Church, erected on the very borders of Babylon.”\textsuperscript{33}

Grabianka had met a likelier prospective recruit for the work of the Avignon Society in the person of Tiemann von Berend, a Saxon who said he was a major in the Russian army. In Masonic circles, he called himself Tieman.\textsuperscript{34} Like Corberon, Tieman had investigated practically all the mystical and occult doctrines current in the eighteenth century. He traveled all over Europe, acting as companion to a succession of Livonian and Russian noblemen. Tieman was a good friend of Jean-Baptiste Willermoz, the Lyons silk merchant who was perhaps the most influential and respected figure in French mystical Masonry.

Grabianka’s revelations concerning the Avignon Society and the Holy Word were hardly news to Tieman. The same sorts of predictions of crisis and regeneration were in rather general currency in the 1780s. What particularly attracted Tieman to the Avignon group, however, was Grabianka’s statement that it formed the core of an international alliance of watchers for the Second Coming. He wrote Willermoz that while “the first place for the first assembly of this singular Society” was at Avignon, they would move farther south, to Florence, where “all the brothers dispersed in Europe were to go.”\textsuperscript{35} That the Florentine site derived from that city’s role as the focus of the millenarian hopes of the Fraticelli and of Savonarola is a tempting but unprovable hypothesis.

\textsuperscript{32} “Friday, December 9th 1791, at the Rev. Mr. Smiths Fitzroy Street Tottenham Court Road,” ms JT 35, Friends’ Reference Library, London. The member who spoke at the meeting was William Bryan.
\textsuperscript{33} New-Jerusalem Magazine, April 1790, p. 176.
\textsuperscript{34} Joly, “La ‘Sainte Parole’,” p. 110; Le Forestier, Franc-maçonnerie, p. 620 n 20.
\textsuperscript{35} Quoted in Le Forestier, Franc-maçonnerie, p. 1003.
Willermoz's refusal to go to Avignon, despite the urgings of his friends Tieman and Gombault, is explained by the complete absorption that mesmerist somnambulism had for Willermoz and his circle on the eve of the French Revolution. They had certainly examined doctrines that were at least as bizarre before. Initially, Willermoz and his group of mystical Masons in Lyons had concentrated, like Mesmer himself, on mesmerism as a healing technique. In the summer of 1784, they had even secured the cooperation of some teachers at the local veterinary school for experiments on animals. By the fall, however, this activity had been supplanted by an enthusiasm for the Puységur brothers' technique of inducing hypnotic trances. Willermoz and his associates took up what in the next century would be called séances, aided by a succession of ladies who prophesied and brought news from the spirit world. In addition, in 1785 Willermoz organized a group called the Workers of the Eleventh Hour, a select band of mystics who dedicated themselves to studying the messages that a noblewoman of Willermoz's acquaintance received from heaven and transmitted by automatic writing.36

For some, mesmerism became a new religion, a third revelation, with clearly millenarian implications.37 Like so many religious currents in the 1780s, it promised an imminent regeneration, a new golden age that was at once mystical and scientific. While Willermoz was both too cautious and too eclectic to go that far, it is clear that for him the Avignon Society's Holy Word, however interesting a phenomenon, offered nothing that Willermoz could not (or so he believed) attain elsewhere.

Of all the visitors to Avignon, the most untypical were surely the two English artisans, William Bryan and John Wright. All evidence indicates that the Avignon Society consisted entirely of members of the nobility, the clergy, and the wealthy bourgeoisie. Yet both Wright and Bryan testified to the kind and generous treatment they received from the society at Avignon when they turned up there in January 1789. It was William Bryan, a Quaker printer with a restless intellect and prophetic pretensions, who had learned of the society; he does not say where. He told his fellow seeker John Wright about it. Toward the end of 1788, both men felt themselves inwardly compelled to go to Avignon. They accordingly set out with just enough money to get them across the English Channel, leaving their wives and children

37. Darnton, Mesmerism, chaps. 1–3; Viatte, Sources occultes du romantisme, I: 230.
at home. Wright wrote that as he left London he “interceded with the
great and merciful GOD” to care for his family, since it was “for his
sake they were going to be left without any outward dependence. . . .
I did not know whether I ever should see them any more; for although
our first Journey was to Avignon, we did not know it would end
there.”38

They walked to Paris, where they went to the home of William
Bousie, whom Bryan had met in London. Bousie made them welcome,
and the next morning he gave them money for the rest of their trip.
Wright worried that no one at Avignon spoke English, but Bryan
assured him that Major Tieman, whom he had seen in England two
years before, would be there and would serve as their translator.
At Avignon, they found that Tieman was indeed there and that the
society had been expecting them; Chastanier had written from
London that they were coming. Bryan wrote: “Nothing could exceed
the brotherly kindness shown by these men, who told us we were
welcome to the house provided by the Lord for those of his children
whom he might be pleased to send to the reunion from all parts of
the earth.”39 A week later Bousie arrived and was commanded by the
Holy Word to remain. He served as their translator after Tieman’s
departure.

Wright and Bryan stayed for seven months, reading, copying
extracts from the volumes of communications from the Holy Word,
and worshiping with the society. Wright wrote that “we met every
evening at seven o’clock to commemorate the death of our LORD
and SAVIOUR JESUS CHRIST, by eating bread and drinking wine.
Very often when we have been sitting together, the furniture in
the room has been shook, as though it was all coming to pieces . . . we
were told that it announced the presence of angels.”40

The prophecies that John Wright published in 1794 show that in
addition to providing spiritual guidance and advice on topics ranging
from health to the weather, the Holy Word described with some pre­
cision the political events that would precede the coming of the Lord.
Some of these prophecies had long been standard in the Christian
tradition—the Turkish empire would fall, Christianity would return to
the Middle East, and the Jews would be converted and restored to
their homeland. All people would acknowledge one God, be united
in one faith, and be governed by “one sole master.”41

38. Wright, Revealed Knowledge, pp. 8-10.
40. Wright, Revealed Knowledge, p. 19. 41. Ibid., p. 28.
"This is the time that we must believe all those who announce
the new reign of the LORD, for his spirit is with them," the Holy Word
declared. God would soon announce "the new reign" by "terror" and
by "prodigies," for "this is the time of the new heavens and the new
earth."42

Returning to London at the end of 1789, Wright and Bryan rejoined
their families and more or less resumed the lives they had led before
the Lord called them to Avignon. Wright returned to carpentry.
The more flamboyant Bryan, excluded from Quakers meetings and
from work as a printer, was unemployed much of the time before he
became a pharmacist and herbal doctor. Both men testified, when
they could find listeners, to the revelations they had received. Both
awaited the fulfillment of the promised time of new heavens and new
earth. And both men believed that the predictions of the Holy Word
at Avignon had come to pass in the French Revolution. Late in 1794,
they found the divinely appointed prophet of the New Age in the per­
son of a retired naval officer who called himself the Revealed Prince
of the Hebrews: Richard Brothers.

Wright and Bryan were the first of many visitors whom the Avi­
gnon Society received in 1789. For a brief time, the papal city rivaled
Paris and Lyons as a mecca for those seeking occult and mystical
enlightenment.43 In the climate of "revolutionary mysticism,"44 which
awakened a sense of impending religious and political regeneration in
the late 1780s and drew attention to such diverse prophets as Mes­
mer, Cagliostro, Swedenborg, and Ruer, the rites and revelations of
the Avignon Society had considerable appeal.

People came from all over Europe. The duchess of Württemburg
arrived with her two sons. Others came from Russia, Poland, and
Italy, and one lady was said to have traveled from the Turkish
Empire.45 At the end of 1789, two Swedish nobles arrived. Count
Gustaf Adolf Reuterholm was the friend and advisor of King Gus­
tavus III's brother, Duke Charles of Sudermania. His companion was
Karl Göran Silfverhjelm, nephew of Swedenborg himself and later
Swedish ambassador to London. Both men were Templars; their

42. Ibid., pp. 30-31.
43. Joly, Mystique lyonnais, p. 279; Le Forestier, Franc-maçonnerie, p. 878; and Felice, Note e ricerche, p. 51.
45. Viatte, Sources occultes du romantisme, 1: 99; "Breve dettaglio" in Felice, Note e ricerche, pp. 216-17; and ms JT 35, Friends' Reference Library.
friend Duke Charles was the head of the order. Their travels were at least in part a search for the sort of mystical enlightenment that was a particular preoccupation of the Swedish intelligentsia throughout the eighteenth century.  

Before setting out for Avignon, Reuterholm and Silfverhjelm stayed in Paris with the Swedish ambassador, Baron Eric de Stael, like them a mystical Mason. Among the people they met during their stay were two members of the Avignon Society, Gombault and Bousie, and also Willermoz’s friend and disciple Périsse-Duluc, one of Lyons’s deputies to the National Assembly. Périsse reported to Willermoz that the two Swedes “knew all about what is called secret science, spiritual communications, visions.” He added that, unlike Bousie, they were “more preoccupied with Truth than with marvels.”  

After having left Paris, the two Swedes stopped to visit Willermoz in Lyons and then proceeded to Avignon, where they remained for a month. If there were a division within the society between Pernety and Grabianka, it was a very informal one. Reuterholm recorded in his journal daily visits both to the brothers’ lodge outside the town where Pernety was staying and to Grabianka’s house in the city.  

On 1 December Reuterholm began the ceremony of consecration that the Holy Word had ordained a decade earlier in Berlin. Accompanied by the “pontiff,” Pernety, he walked for some distance along the Rhone, then ascended the hill the brothers called Mount Tabor. “There I made with the most high the most holy of all unions,” he wrote in his journal. “God give me his grace never to forget my promises!!!” He returned to town at sunset and called on Count Grabianka at his home before returning to his own lodgings. It was, he wrote, “one of the most remarkable days of my life. God has brought me all the way here from the North.” He ascended the hill for nine successive days, each day performing the same ceremonies. On the ninth day, Pernety again joined him. Returning to town, Reuterholm called at Grabianka’s home, where for the first time he was allowed to participate in the evening worship service.  

47. G. A. Reuterholm, “Resejournaler, 14, 16, 25, 26, and 30 November 1789, Riksarkivet, Stockholm; Périsse-Duluc letters, 16 November 1789, ms 5430, Bibliothèque de la ville de Lyon.  
48. Reuterholm, “Resejournaler,” 1-9 December 1789. I am grateful to Birgitta Angiolillo for her help in translating Reuterholm’s manuscript. There is also a description of the rite in “Breve dettaglio” in Felice, Note e ricerche, p. 223.
Reuterholm and Silfverhjelm remained in Avignon for the rest of December, visiting with members of the society and seeing the local sights. Reuterholm even climbed another mountain, Petrarch’s Mont Ventose. They left for Italy at the end of the month and traveled by easy stages to Rome. Reuterholm immediately sought out Ottavio Cappelli, bringing him letters from Paris and Avignon. Reuterholm wrote Duke Charles that Cappelli was “a man filled with the blessings of God, an initiate who has more enlightenment in himself alone than all the Brothers of Avignon together; who is, indeed, the source from which they draw their enlightenment.”

After spending three months in Rome and Naples, visiting the points of historic and artistic interest with a thoroughness that would have pleased Baedeker, the two Swedes left for home. They again stopped at Paris on their leisurely way back, but not at Avignon. Reuterholm was to have been the agent for bringing others of his countrymen into the Avignon Society, but he does not seem to have done so. He gradually abandoned mysticism as he became more deeply involved in Swedish politics.

Six months after Reuterholm and Silfverhjelm had left Rome, Ottavio Cappelli was arrested by the papal police. They seized fifty letters he had received from various members of the society at Avignon. On the basis of these letters, the police drew up a report which described the doctrines and structure of the society. In addition, the report shows that prophecies in circulation among the members had a decidedly political tone.

The year 1790 was to be an “auspicious, happy, and fortunate year,” in which great events would take place, notably in Rome. Several letters mentioned imminent “confusion” there, to be followed by the sounding of the bells on the Capitoline Hill and “the drum on Mount Marius.” John Wright and William Bryan had read and copied down similar prophecies the year before. Wright recorded the Holy Word as having declared that “ROME will be the theatre of great events, the sound of the drum will be heard on the Mount Marius, . . . and the Capital of the world will experience great calamities.” Bryan reported that there was an eleven-year-old boy in Rome who, under the tutelage of “Spiritual and Angelic Agents,” was being prepared for the great mission of destroying the Turkish Empire.

Perhaps the drums mentioned by Wright and the Avignon letters belonged to the armies of the Turkish Antichrist. The assumption that the last great battle before the millennium would be fought against the Turks was six centuries old by 1790, and there is at least one indication that the Avignon Society shared it. One member had written Cappelli in July that peace with the Turk could not last long; soon they would reenter the Campagna, as "Dear King 1.3.9."—Grabianka—had predicted in 1783. When that moment came, the members of the society too would "receive the order to get [their] boots ready." 51

Ready for what? Possibly to follow Grabianka to the Holy Land. In September, Tieman reported that the "Avignon oracle" predicted that "Pius VI will be the last Pope; soon the Turks will leave Europe, and the Jews will rebuild their capital." 52 Similarly, William Bryan described a prophecy that closely parallels those in the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century literature of the Fraticelli concerning an angelic Pope. Bryan had learned at Avignon that Pius VI did not have long to live. At his death, two would contend for his throne and fail. A third candidate would then be elected, "who will close the scene of Papal Tyranny and Authority." 53 One of the letters seized by the papal police in the fall of 1790 told Cappelli that the angel Raphael had described the duchess of Württemberg's son Ferdinand as "the Savior of the World," the man who would accomplish "the new reform of the corrupted Earth." 54 These terms, it might be noted, recall those applied in medieval prophecy to the secular ally of the angelic Pope, the great prince who would defeat the forces of Antichrist and inaugurate the millennium. Renzo de Felice has argued that in 1790 the Avignon Society actually contemplated some sort of military expedition, aided by Ferdinand of Württemberg and perhaps also by Prince Henry of Prussia, against the Turks. Any such plans must have involved Grabianka, who still dreamed of ascending the Polish throne and also, according to one Polish biographer, hoped to conquer Syria, Palestine, and North Africa. 55

Two letters Reuterholm received in 1791 indicate that the millenarian hopes of the Avignon Society did not fade after Cappelli's arrest. Gombault wrote him that "everything announces to us a universal regeneration which, in achieving the good of all, will neces-

52. Quoted in Viatte, Sources occultes du romantisme, I: 99.
54. "Breve dettaglio" in Felice, Note e ricerche, p. 226.
55. Felice, Note e ricerche, pp. 43-45.
sarily bring the happiness of each." In December, a former member of the society reported the death of one of the brothers. What was remarkable, he wrote, was that "they could never persuade him that he could die, because he was convinced that he was destined to see all the great things that were promised to him."

Cappelli's arrest and the resulting investigation of the Avignon Society led the papal authorities to decide that the society was a sect with heretical tendencies. It might have been formally condemned and suppressed, but the events of the French Revolution intervened; Avignon was annexed to France at the end of 1791. Ironically, it was that same Revolution, anticipated for so long in the prophecies of the society and so sincerely welcomed when it did arrive, that effectively brought its activities to a halt.

The Avignon Society gave up its own religious rites and participated instead in the municipal patriotic celebrations. The brothers accepted all the duties of citizens in the new French Republic, but a group that consisted to such a great extent of foreigners, ex-nobles, ex-priests, and former royal officials must have invited the suspicions of the authorities. In 1793 and 1794, Pernety, Corberon, Gombault, Bousie, and Grabianka were all arrested. Other members fled Avignon, and the society dissolved for the time being. By 1800, only fifteen members were left in Avignon.

Pernety died in 1796. According to his Polish biographers, Grabianka remained in Avignon for most of the decade, except for visits to London and Paris, where he was briefly imprisoned. He returned to Avignon after his release, and then, in 1799, he went to Poland to face a family council called to discuss his continued financial extravagance. His wife and sons refused to provide any more money for his religious activities. Grabianka returned to Avignon once again; then, sometime in 1802 he left, moving eastward by easy stages until he reached St. Petersburg three years later.

The reports on the last four years of Grabianka's life are vague and contradictory. He seems to have continued propagating the doctrines of the Avignon Society. He was said to have enjoyed considerable notoriety in the Russian capital in occult and Masonic circles, both as a bearer of secret wisdom and as a healer. He died in prison in 1807 after being arrested on suspicion of plotting against the czar.

A few members of the Avignon Society continued on in St. Petersburg for another decade, but practically nothing is known

56. Quoted in Viatte, Sources occultes du romantisme, 1: 235, 238.
57. Bricaud, Les Illuminés d’Avignon, pp. 94-100.
about them. Not much more is known of the brothers who remained in Avignon or who drifted back there when it was again safe to do so. A letter in the Bibliothèque de la ville de Lyon indicates that the society’s millenarian expectations changed little over the years. Its writer told Willermoz that the society had been predicting “great events very soon” for several months. He added: “What puts me the most on my guard against this association is the promise that it makes to all its proselytes of being surely preserved at the great day of the Lord which is to precede or coincide with the second coming and the return of the Jews.”

When the abbé Grégoire was compiling his Histoire des sectes religieuses some fifteen years later, his principal informant concerning the Avignon Society was Gombault, still a frequenter of all the mystical circles in Paris. Gombault said there was only a handful of brothers left by 1804. One was a former priest named Guillaume Chais de Sourcesol, who later emigrated to Wilmington, Delaware. In his Livre des manifestes, published in 1800, he had predicted that when Jesus Christ returned to earth, there would come “the perfect restoration of the People of God”—the term the Avignon Society’s members had long used to describe themselves.

The Avignon Society had one more moment of public notoriety before it disappeared. In 1800, a member of the Irish House of Commons named Francis Dobbs delivered a speech in that chamber in which he denounced the contemplated Act of Union between England and Ireland as inexpedient and impious, citing the books of Daniel and Revelation to prove the latter point. The speech received considerable public favor. Dobbs was encouraged by the response to publish both a nine-volume summary of world history and, in one volume, A Concise View, from History and Prophecy, of the Great Predictions in the Sacred Writings, That Have Been Fulfilled.

It was in the latter work that Dobbs wrote about the Avignon Society. A Swedenborgian, it may be that he had heard of the group during Grabianka’s long sojourn in London in 1786. It was not long after this that Dobbs abandoned his political career temporarily in order to study the fulfillment of millenarian prophecy in history. By the time he resumed political activity in 1797, his religious convic-

59. Quoted in Le Forestier, Franc-maçonnerie, pp. 516, 999.
61. Guillaume Chais de Sourcesol, Le livre des manifestes (n.p., 1800), pt. 2, p. 77 n 1. The Library of Congress’s copy has the manuscript inscription: “Gift of the author to Thomas Jefferson.”
tions and his Irish patriotism had combined to produce the conviction that the Second Coming was imminent and would occur in Ireland. He had said that much in his speech in the Irish House of Commons. In his *Concise View*, he went much further. The Messiah would come either that year (1800) or the next—soon enough to prevent the Act of Union. 62

One group of men was particularly called to follow Christ and prepare for his Second Coming: the Avignon Society. Dobbs told his readers that its members declared that "these are the glorious times when the Messiah is personally to appear and restore all things. . . . They affirm that all the old prophets, apostles, and martyrs are now upon the earth, and have been literally born again." 63 The society’s directing council of seven said that Antichrist was on earth, and they knew him. Their own leader was a Polish nobleman whom they believed to be Moses; another of the seven was Aaron.

The Act of Union was passed and put into effect; Christ did not come to Ireland. Francis Dobbs, a man of charm, poetic talent, and political ability, was quickly forgotten. He died, mad and impoverished, in 1811.

The Avignon Society seems simply to have dispersed. Some of its members are said to have turned to the other-worldly mysticism of their old acquaintance Saint-Martin. One of the society’s founding members, William Bousie, became a Swedenborgian. 64 The mysticism and occultism of the post-Revolutionary era was quite different from that of the 1780s; one of the casualties was the Avignon Society. In England in the period after 1800, it is not difficult to trace the trend of the millenarian followers of Richard Brothers away from his message of political-religious renovation. It may well be that the same thing happened among the Avignon brotherhood, but the same kinds of source materials do not exist. It may also be that the absence of the remarkable Count Grabianka from Avignon produced a vacuum that nobody else could fill.

The last of the faithful was the marquis de Vaucrose, whose country house had been the society’s headquarters since Pernety’s arrival in Avignon. In 1804, after Grabianka’s departure, he attempted to


reconstitute the society, but without success. Two years later, he contacted Willermoz in Lyons, saying that he wanted to associate “with the masonic Regime of Lyons,” but he refused Willermoz’s suggestion that he found an affiliated lodge. He and his associates would submit only when it was God’s will to do so—a time that apparently never came. A decade later, the marquis was still waiting. In 1816, he wrote a friend that he continued to believe, as he had done for thirty years, “that we are on the eve of extraordinary times, that they will come soon, and will be at last miraculously terminated by the justification of the good and by the destruction of the wicked.”

Although the Avignon Society was on the periphery of the world of mystical and occultist sectarianism that flourished in the late eighteenth century, it is important as one of the conduits by means of which the sense of imminent political and spiritual regeneration that characterized the period was transmitted to the nineteenth century. The positive, man-centered mysticism of Saint-Martin was one heir to the kind of socioreligious faith that the French Revolution had in part affirmed and in part destroyed. Swedenborg’s theology, which expressed a similar confidence in man’s capacity to transcend himself and a similar conviction that the spiritual world was both accessible and comprehensible, had an equally impressive revival throughout the Atlantic world. Thus the world of mystical Masonry did not disappear with the lodges that had been its center; and the sense of imminent, transcendental regeneration of man and his world would again play an important part in the climate of opinion that preceded the revolutions of 1848.