

## THE AESTHETIC WRITINGS OF SCHILLER

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WHEN Schiller turned to Kant, he hoped to find in the Kantian philosophy an escape from the conflict between the principles of art and his creative impulses, to which his early philosophic studies had given rise, and to regain, as well, his inner life and artistic spontaneity which they had destroyed. Exactly how he felt about the matter can be seen from a letter to Körner, in which he says: "I am full of eagerness for some poetic task and particularly my pen is itching to be at 'Wallenstein.' Really it is only in art itself that I feel my strength. In theorizing I have to plague myself all the while about principles. There I am only a dilettante. But it is precisely for the sake of artistic creation that I wish to philosophize. Criticism must repair the damage it has done me. And it has done me great damage indeed; for I miss in myself these many years that boldness, that living fire, that was mine before I knew a rule. Now I see myself in the act of creating and fashioning; I observe the play of inspiration, and my imagination works less freely, since it is conscious of being watched. But if I once reach the point where artistic procedure becomes natural, like education for the well-nurtured man, then my fancy will get back its old freedom, and know no bounds but those of its own making." In short, what he sought, and did find, was a poetical *modus vivendi* between natural impulse and artistic rule.

It was at the academy at Stuttgart that Schiller obtained, from the "Institutes" of Ferguson, his first ideas on aesthetic philosophy. For Ferguson, in whom there was no distinction between the moral and aesthetic domain, all truth is beauty, "the most natural beauty in the world being honesty and moral truth." Also, for him, perfection was made to depend on harmony and proportion; moral beauty upon the harmony of the individual soul with the general scheme

of things; while wrong action was equally looked upon as imperfection. And virtue, inclining toward the general harmony, meant, necessarily, happiness. Such were the thoughts that defined Schiller's early philosophic writings, as the letters of Julius and Raphael, and the second book of *The Ghostseer*. But towards the end of his first year at Weimar, a new field of exploration was opened to him. For the author of *The Gods of Greece* and *The Artists* as one of the essential factors in human perfectibility, had assumed such vast proportions of importance that he felt it of the gravest concern to understand it, this feeling, in fact, largely influencing him to utilize the Danish pension to a thorough study of the Kantian aesthetics.

A course of lectures on the theory of tragedy was the initial result of this interest in art, and though they were never published their general import is contained in the two essays, "On the Rational Basis of Pleasure in Tragic Themes," and "On the Tragic Art." In the former, Schiller began by first contending that art has no higher aim than the giving of pleasure, saying that its aim is not morality but "free pleasure," by "free" meaning subject to no law but its own, and that if morality becomes its final aim it ceases to be "free." He then passed on to a discussion of the problem of our experiencing pleasure in painful representations. To him, all pleasure descends from the perception of *Zweckmässigkeit* (the quality of adaptability to the furtherance of an end); and as man meant to be happy, human suffering must be a "maladaptation" which affects pain. Since, however, we are incited to activity by this pain, reason recognizes in it a higher "adaptation" and therefore knowing it is good for us we take pleasure in our own pain. From which he arrived at the conclusion that the effect of tragedy is dependent upon the proportion in which this higher sense of adaptation is present.

The gist of this argument is that aesthetic judgments are considered to be dependent upon concepts of the mind, the reason, with its various abstractions, being viewed as the prior and dominating factor. In the other of the two essays we find, nevertheless, that emotional excitement may give pleasure in and of itself; and though numerous illustrations are given which indicate that Schiller did not neglect the non-rational element in the pleasure afforded by

tragedy, yet he attached little importance to it for he claimed that we are acquainted with only two sources of pleasure, the satisfaction of the inclination for happiness and the fulfillment of moral laws. After struggling with such hazy abstractions, he finally attempted a practical discussion of tragedy gradually coming to regard its sole aim as being the excitation of "sympathy."

By the year 1793, Schiller had become familiar with aesthetic speculations and moreover had found what he considered as a weak point in the system of Kant, that if it were futile to try to establish an objective criterion of beauty all aesthetic judgments must necessarily be reduced to a matter of taste,—a most undesirable conclusion. To Kant, the aesthetic faculty came under the jurisdiction of the "judgment," a judgment, according to him, being teleologic if implying a pre-existing notion to which the objective is expected to conform, aesthetic if the object gives rise directly to pleasure or pain; in other words, though we have an interest in the good and the agreeable, the beautiful is that which pleases us without appealing to any interest. However, this is merely its character under the category of quality, for under that of quantity it is universal pleasure, while under that of relation it is a form of adaptation. And, finally, under modality it is "necessary" because of the *sensus communis* of mankind, that is, it is determined rather by their agreement in taste than by any objective criterion.

Aesthetics, then, for Kant was a subjective matter. To him, it was not so much as what made objects beautiful, but rather as to how we "judge" them to be beautiful; in short, the essence of beauty was to please without reference to any intellectual concept such as objective attributes of form, proportion, harmony, etc. The fault with this is that a judgment which has no connection with the intellect is not a judgment but a feeling, but despite this he had, at least, the merit of distinctly showing the necessity of distinguishing more clearly between the beautiful and the good and agreeable. Furthermore, though insisting that beauty could not depend upon a mental concept, he recognized "adaptation," notwithstanding its being a concept of the mind, as a form of beauty, meeting this inconsistency, however, by making a distinction between free beauty (*pulchritudo vaga*) and adherent beauty (*pulchritudo adhaerens*). And, lastly, though he held that the highest use of beauty is to

symbolize moral truth, he claimed, at the same time, that pure beauty was impossible in a moral action since it does not please in and of itself.

With such a philosophy, Schiller could not be satisfied. In a letter to the Prince of Augustenburg, dated the 9th of February, 1793, he clearly expressed his attitude by saying in part: "When I consider how closely our feeling for the beautiful and the great is connected with the noblest part of our being, it is impossible for me to regard this feeling as a mere subjective play of the emotional faculty, capable of none but empirical rules. It seems to me that beauty too, as well as truth and right, must rest upon eternal foundations, and that the original laws of the reason must also be the laws of taste. It is true that the circumstance of our feeling beauty and not cognizing it seems to cut off all hope of our finding a universal law for it, because every judgment emanating from this source is a judgment of experience. As a rule people accept an explanation of beauty only because it harmonizes in particular cases with the verdict of feeling, whereas, if there were really such a thing as the cognition of beauty from principles, we should trust the verdict of feeling because it coincides with our explanation of the beautiful. Instead of testing and correcting our feelings by means of principles, we test aesthetic principles by our feelings."

In a series of letters to Körner, Schiller now set about to solve the problem which Kant had regarded as impossible of solution. Although he agreed with the latter's view that beauty cannot depend upon a mental concept,—the feeling of pleasure is the prior fact, he could not, at the same time, shake off the conviction that beauty must in some way fall under the laws of reason. He escaped from this difficulty, however, by removing the aesthetic faculty from the jurisdiction of Kant's "judgment" and giving it to the "practical reason," his argument being that the practical reason must have freedom just as well as the "pure reason" rationality, for freedom is the form instinctively applied by the practical reason upon the presentation of an object, and is satisfied when, and only when, the object is free and autonomous. Furthermore, practical reason, upon the presentation of an object, can discard all concepts of the pure reason and if then the object appears free, autonomous, it is satisfied, the effect thus produced is pleasurable and we call it beauty.

However, as Schiller pointed out, it is all a question of appearance for the object is not free as freedom is only possible in the supersensual world, yet the practical reason imputes this freedom to it. Hence he arrived to his solution that beauty is freedom in the appearance (*Freiheit in der Erscheinung*).

This doctrine Schiller applied, in a letter of February 23, 1793, to an exposition of the relation between nature and art. According to the theory, the problem of an artist is to convey, in the representation of the object, the suggestion of freedom, which he can only do by making it appear to follow its own law; and which it must have and obey while seemingly free, this law (the basis of our impression of freedom) being that revealed by technique. Following Kant's saying that nature is beautiful when it looks like art, and art beautiful when it looks like nature, Schiller employed a large number of illustrations in support of his theory, finally concluding by saying: "Therefore the empire of taste is the empire of freedom: the beautiful world of sense being the happiest symbol of what the moral world should be, and every beautiful object about me being a happy citizen who calls out: Be free like me."

Schiller was aware though that this criterion of beauty was after all an idea of the reason, a difficulty which he promised to meet, but unfortunately his aesthetic correspondence with Körner was not continued. In May and June of the same year, that is, 1793, he was led to test his theory of beauty in the human form, in an essay on Winsomeness and Dignity, by Kant's dictum that there is no pure beauty to the human form because the human form expresses the moral dignity of human nature which is but an idea of the reason. As an illustration of his point, he made use of the girdle of Venus, saying that though Venus was pure beauty on coming from the hand of nature, her girdle made her "winsome;" winsomeness being then something distinct from beauty, something transferable, movable: defined as beauty of motion, as the element of beauty which is not possessed by nature but which is produced by the object. Schiller then went on to make a distinction between architectonic and technical beauty, the former being a beautiful presentation of the aims of nature, while the latter refers only to the aims themselves. And it is the former with which the aesthetic faculty is concerned, for in the contemplation of an object it is alone affected by its appear-

ance which it isolates irrespective of purpose or adaptation, though at the same time freedom is imputed to it by the reason. In a word, when the object is a human form this imputed freedom, by which it appears to assert its own autonomous personality, and which is furthermore added to the beauty which nature creates by the law-governed adaptation of means to an end, is winsomeness.

Fully satisfied that beauty consists of the two elements, sensuous pleasure, and rational gratification, caused by personality, and the adaptation to an end, Schiller next considered the questions of moral beauty and ideal of character. Of Kant's insistence upon the categorical imperative of duty, he disapproved, for a man, he claimed, above all else must be free, the slavery of duty being to him no better than any other kind of slavery. Inclination to duty is, however, virtue, the ideal being found in a perfect state of balance between the sensuous nature and the rational. And as winsomeness is the expression of a beautiful soul, so he defined "dignity" as the expression of a lofty mind,—the expression of that intellectual freedom which controls the impulses by moral strength, and manifested in suffering ( $\pi\acute{\alpha}\delta\omicron\varsigma$ ) as winsomeness in behavior ( $\gamma\delta\omicron\varsigma$ ).

Following this essay, Schiller next published *On the Sublime*, in which was included a special chapter "On the Pathetic" and "Scattered Reflections on Various Aesthetic Subjects." Two other papers "On the Artistic Use of the Vulgar and the Low," and a second disquisition "On the Sublime," though written during the same period were not, however, published until 1801. Like Kant, he defined the sublime as the impression produced by an object which excites in man's sensuous nature a feeling of weakness and dependence, and at the same time in his rational nature a feeling of freedom and superiority. He objected though to the former's terminology, and proposed instead, for Kant's terms of the mathematical and dynamic which he had given to the two kinds of sublime, the names of the theoretical and the practical, by the former meaning that which tends to overawe the mind, by the latter that which tends to overawe the feeling. But the most important phase of the practical sublime is the subject of tragic pathos, and here Schiller took the view that the final aim of art is the representation of the supersensuous, declaring that the essence of tragic pathos is

the representation of moral superiority under the strain of suffering. The spectacle of suffering is in itself no end, for the sensuous has inherently no aesthetic value; it is the moral resistance alone that is of any account, the suffering being needed only to prove the necessity of resistance. In short, the hero's sufferings must appear real in order that he may receive proper credit for his moral triumph.

In his discussions on the sublime and the pathetic, Schiller felt at many times that he was on the point of being carried away into the region of barren speculation, and to offset this tendency he thought it necessary to present his ideas in a popular form as well as to show their relation to the practical concerns of human life. It was this thought that finally led him to undertake a series of letters to the Prince of Augustenburg, declaring, in a letter of July 13, 1793, that the political dream of the century, of recreating society upon a foundation of pure reason, had dissolved into thin air for "man" had failed to show himself fit for freedom. Though his chains might be removed, he was still a slave,—a slave to unruly passion, despite what the century had done for the enlightenment of his mind; and what was needed was evidently rather a discipline of the feelings. In 1795, Schiller published, in the *Horen*, his "Letters on Aesthetic Education" of which his letters to the Prince had formed the basis, and which serve as the most agreeable expression of his aesthetic philosophy. The first ten were devoted to a discussion of the spirit of the age and to demonstrate the necessity of some form of educational process by which mankind could be prepared for the higher state of freeman, the problem being, in a word, the transformation of the state-ruled-by-force into a state-ruled-by-reason. To attain this end it was necessary that man should first learn how to overcome the despotism of sense, which leads to savagery, and the supineness of mind, which leads to barbarism, the savage, Schiller defining, as a man whose feelings control his principles, and a barbarian as a man whose principles destroy his feelings. The man *comme il faut* must not only establish but preserve a state of balance between his sensuous and rational natures. But how was this to be done? For neither the state nor philosophy could help him as the former treated him as if he had no reason, the latter as if he had no feelings. For the poet, his salvation lay, then, only in the aesthetic sense, the love of beauty.

To show how the aesthetic sense could accomplish this Schiller had recourse of two ultimate instincts or bents of mankind which he called the "thing-bent" (*Sachtrieb*) and the "form-bent" (*Formtrieb*), the problem of culture being to bring them into harmony. As a means to this latter end, he then made use of the "play-bent" or "Spieltrieb," his idea being that in the moment of aesthetic contemplation both the sensuous and rational instincts find their reckoning; that is, the act of escaping from the pull of thought and feeling to a mental state which satisfies both without yielding to either was analogous to the act of playing, the word meaning, as he employed it, a surrender to the illusion of art. Play being thus symbolic of the highest self-realization, man becomes completely man only in playing.

Schiller then went on to say that the natural corrective to the emotional excess which leads to savagery is what he called like Kant *schmelzende Schönheit* (melting beauty); while the antidote to the mental inertness which leads to barbarism is *energische Schönheit* (energizing beauty, that is, the sublime), the aesthetic state being recognized as being neutral as far as it concerns the influencing of the will. But it is because of this that it is valuable morally, for when a man is under the exclusive domination of either principles or feelings he is in danger of becoming a slave, and must be redrawn to the neutral zone of freedom. "In a word," said Schiller, "there is no other way of making the sensuous man rational except by first making him aesthetic." The pith of all this is that sanity and refinement being exigencies good art serves to realize them and in so doing indirectly furthers progress in right living and right thinking, a seemingly small result to have been obtained by so much laborious logic-chopping, yet after all the value of the "Letters" is not to be found in the logic-chopping nor in "the dreadful array of first principles, the forest huge of terminology and definitions where the panting intellect of weaker men wanders as in pathless thickets and at length sinks powerless to the earth, oppressed with fatigue and suffocated with scholastic miasma,"<sup>1</sup> but rather in their wealth of suggestive comment.

In conclusion, we have only to mention his later minor papers as "On the Necessary Limits of the Beautiful," in which he took

<sup>1</sup> Carlyle's Life of Schiller.



the view that the philosopher, aiming at truth, should not try to write beautifully, for being concerned rather with fact and logic the lure of beauty may endanger truth by relaxing the mind, just as it may relax the will and endanger morality, this latter thought being carried still further in his essays "On the Dangers of Aesthetic Culture" and "On the Moral Benefit of Aesthetic Culture" which are, however, merely an extension of ideas contained in the "Letters."