

## FRIEDRICH SCHILLER



Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805)

Though not a Romanticist, Friedrich Schiller is the bridge between Kant and Romanticism. He develops and extends Kant's discussion of the aesthetic and is the first to take up Kant's suggestion of a higher role for art. In his *Letter of an Aesthetic Education of Man* Schiller, influenced by Goethe and Johann Joachim Winckelmann, puts forth a history of the whole of Western Culture. Winckelmann had developed an "aesthetic paganism" that influenced all later German thought. Winckelmann emphasized a "nobility and simplicity" of Greek life that has never since been realized. In contrast to the sharp Cartesian dualism between human beings and the natural world, for Winckelmann nature and human beings dwell together in beauty. There in the beauty of nature, a moment of "festival and play" occurs allowing human beings to dwell in his or her own beauty both as living artwork and as the highest manifestation of nature. Kant had insisted this idea was unrealized and unrealizable. Winckelmann

believed this ideal was actualized in Periclean Athens. Schiller takes up this exaltation of Greek culture, contrasting it with the fragmentation and *alienation* of modern man. Schiller is one of the first to take up the idea of modern alienation. For Schiller the cure for this alienation lies in art. In contrast to Winckelmann, the ideal "aesthetic society" is not an unrecoverable past, but rather an ideal to which society can progress toward.

The aim of Schiller's aesthetic education is to realize the Kantian ideal concretely by establishing an aesthetic state in which individual members are harmoniously related in an organic social totality. With the notion of the artist-philosopher as the aesthetic educator who leads humanity to the ideal state, Schiller anticipates the notion of the *avant-garde* that would later prove so influential in the development of modern art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In these *Aesthetic Letters*, as they are sometimes referred to, Schiller transforms Kant's account of aesthetic experience into an anthropological insight into human nature, conceiving beauty as "our second creatress" which offers us the "possibility of becoming human beings" (21<sup>st</sup> letter). It is thus through art and aesthetic experience that the human being is fully developed. In this Schiller takes up Kant's suggestion of the *aesthetic* as reuniting the realms of *nature* and *freedom*.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> letter we see this notion of the aesthetic as mediating between sensation and thought, necessity and freedom. In the aesthetic state one "does indeed act freely, is in the highest degree free from all compulsion, but is in no wise free from laws." In mediating between sensation and thought, Schiller is the first to see "aesthetic unity" to be active not only in art but in thought itself.

Perhaps Schiller's most important notion is the *Spieltrieb* (play drive). With this notion, Schiller brings together Kant's idea of the "free play of the powers of representation" and Fichte's idea of the drives (*Triebe*). Human experience is suspended between a "sensuous drive" (*Sinntrieb*) which chains individuals to nature and a "formal impulse" (*Formtrieb*) which aims to bring harmony into experience. If fragmentation is to be overcome and integration achieved, neither the rational nor the sensuous side of experience can be repressed. The *Spieltrieb* "sublates" (*aufgehoben*) the "sensuous

drive” and the “form drive.” In the 20<sup>th</sup> letter Schiller distinguishes between the “sensuous drive” and the “form-impulse” and then suggests a “middle disposition” by which one passes from sensation to thought. This “middle disposition” will later be developed as the *Spieltrieb*.

According to Schiller it is in art that this play drive emerges. Only in the play of art are the sensuous drive and the formal drive brought together, only in contemplating the beautiful is man harmonized with nature, only here does man find a happy medium between the moral law (*freedom*) and physical exigency (*necessity*). The experience of beauty thus offers an instance of moral freedom being compatible with sense. It leads the sensuous man back to form and thought and the spiritual man back to the world of sense. This idea that human beings reach their fullest potential when ‘playing’ with beauty is Schiller’s unique contribution to the philosophy of art. It develops the Kantian notion of an aesthetic attitude as a detachment from practical or intellectual concerns.

Schiller argues that aesthetic sensibility is essential for a liberal society. Here there is an important distinction between aesthetic semblance and mere illusion. He follows Kant in treating art as a matter of *Schein* (semblance or illusion) and not truth, thus adhering to Kant’s distinction between the aesthetic and non-aesthetic. Kant’s insistence on the autonomy of aesthetic judgment had led him to deny that art has “truth value.” For Schiller, we are drawn to the “free play” of art, not by any supposed revelation of truth, and this is what separates both Schiller and Kant from the later Romantics.

In the 26<sup>th</sup> letter, Schiller makes a distinction between “logical semblance” which is deception or illusion, and “aesthetic semblance” which is play. In aesthetic semblance we distinguish between semblance and truth and love semblance because it is semblance.

Though Schiller did not see art as a source of truth, his *Aesthetic Letters* were read by younger thinkers to suggest that art could be a source of truth, and this opens the doors to Romanticism.

### *Letter of an Aesthetic Education of Man* ( 1794-95)

#### **Twentieth Letter**

1. That freedom cannot be affected by anything whatsoever follows from our very notion of freedom. But that freedom is itself an effect of Nature (this word taken in its widest sense) and not the work of Man, that it can, therefore, also be furthered or thwarted by natural means, follows no less inevitably [ . . . ] It arises only when man is a complete being, when both his fundamental drives [for form and matter] are fully developed; it will, therefore, be lacking as long as he is incomplete, as long as one of the two drives is excluded, and it should be capable of being restored by anything which gives him back his completeness.

2. Now we can, in fact, in the species as a whole as well as in the individual human being, point to a moment in which man is not yet complete, and in which one of his two drives is exclusively active within him. We know that he begins by being nothing but life, in order to end by becoming form; that he is an Individual before he is a Person, and that he proceeds from limitation to infinity. The

sensuous drive, therefore, comes into operation earlier than the rational, because sensation precedes consciousness, and it is this priority of the sensuous drive which provides the clue to the whole history of human freedom.

3. For there is, after all, a moment in which the life-impulse, just because the form-impulse is not yet running counter to it, operates as nature and as necessity; a moment in which the life of sense is a power because man has not yet begun to be a human being; for in the human being proper there cannot exist any power other than the will. But in the state of reflection into which he is now to pass, it will be precisely the opposite: Reason is to be a power, and a logical or moral necessity to take the place of that physical necessity. Hence sensation as a power must first be destroyed before law can be enthroned as such. It is, therefore, not simply a matter of something beginning which was not there before; something which was there must first cease to be. Man cannot pass directly from feeling to thought; he must first take one step backwards, since only through one determination being annulled again can a contrary determination take its place. In order to exchange passivity for autonomy, a passive determination for an active one, man must therefore be momentarily free of all determination whatsoever, and pass through a state of pure determinability. He must consequently, in a certain sense, return to that negative state of complete absence of determination in which he found himself before anything at all had made an impression upon his senses. But that former condition was completely devoid of content; and now it is a question of combining such sheer absence of determination, and an equally unlimited determinability, with the greatest possible content, since directly from this condition something positive is to result. The determination he has received through sensation must therefore be preserved, because there must be no loss of reality; but at the same time it must, inasmuch as it is limitation, be annulled, since an unlimited determinability is to come into existence. The problem is, therefore, at one and the same time to destroy and to maintain the determination of the condition — and this is possible in one way only: by confronting it with another determination. The scales of the balance stand level when they are empty; but they also stand level when they contain equal weights.

4. Our psyche passes, then, from sensation to thought *via* a middle disposition in which sense and reason are both active at the same time. Precisely for this reason, however, they cancel each other out as determining forces, and bring about a negation by means of an opposition. This middle disposition, in which the psyche is subject neither to physical nor to moral constraint, and yet is active in both these ways, pre-eminently deserves to be called a free disposition; and if we are to call the condition of sensuous determination the physical, and the condition of rational determination the logical or moral, then we must call this condition of real and active determinability the aesthetic. ([*Author's note:*] For readers not altogether familiar with the precise meaning of this word, which is so much abused through ignorance, the following may serve as an explanation. Every thing which is capable of phenomenal manifestation may be thought of under four different aspects. A thing can relate directly to our sensual condition (to our being and well-being): that is its physical character. Or it can relate to our intellect, and afford us knowledge: that is its logical character. Or it can relate to our will, and be considered as an object of choice for a rational being: that is its moral character. Or, finally, it can relate to the totality of our various functions without being a definite object for any single one of them: that is its aesthetic character. A man can please us through his readiness to oblige; he can, through his discourse, give us food for thought; he can, through his character, fill us with respect; but finally he can also, independently of all this, and without our taking into

consideration in judging him any law or any purpose, please us simply as we contemplate him and by the sheer manner of his being. Under this last-named quality of being we are judging him aesthetically. Thus there is an education to health, an education to understanding, an education to morality, an education to taste and beauty. This last has as its aim the development of the whole complex of our sensual and spiritual powers in the greatest possible harmony. Because, however, misled by false notions of taste and confirmed still further in this error by false reasoning, people are inclined to include in the notion of the aesthetic the notion of the arbitrary too, I add here the superfluous comment (despite the fact that *Letters on Aesthetic Education* are concerned virtually nothing else but the refutation of that very error) that our psyche in the aesthetic does indeed act freely, is in the highest degree free from all compulsion, but is in no wise free from laws; and that this aesthetic freedom is distinguishable from logical necessity in thinking, or moral necessity in willing, only by the fact that the laws according to which the psyche then behaves do not become apparent as such, and since they encounter no resistance, never appear as a constraint.)

### **Twenty-first Letter**

1. There is, as I observed at the beginning of the last Letter, a twofold condition of determinability and a twofold condition of determination. I can now clarify this statement.

2. The psyche may be said to be determinable simply because it is not determined at all; but it is also determinable inasmuch as it is determined in a way which does not exclude anything, i.e., when the determination it undergoes is of a kind which does not involve limitation. The former is mere indetermination (it is without limits, because it is without reality); the latter is aesthetic determinability (it has no limits, because it embraces all reality).

3. And the psyche may be said to be determined inasmuch as it is limited at all; but it is also determined inasmuch as it limits itself, by virtue of its own absolute power. It finds itself in the first of these two states whenever it feels; in the second, whenever it thinks. What thought is in respect of determination, therefore, the aesthetic disposition is in respect of determinability; the former is limitation by virtue of the infinite force within it, the latter is negation by virtue of the infinite abundance within it. Even as sensation and thought have one single point of contact — viz., that in both states the psyche is determined, and man is something, either individual or person, to the exclusion of all else — but in all other respects are poles apart: so, in like manner, aesthetic determinability has one single point of contact with mere indetermination — viz., that both exclude any determinate mode of existence — while in all other respects they are to each other as nothing is to everything, hence, utterly and entirely different. If, therefore, the latter — indetermination through sheer absence of determination — was thought of as an empty infinity, then aesthetic freedom of determination, which is its counterpart in reality, must be regarded as an infinity filled with content: an idea which accords completely with the results of the foregoing inquiry.

4. In the aesthetic state, then, man is Nought, if we are thinking of any particular result rather than of the totality of his powers, and considering the absence in him of any specific determination. Hence we must allow that those people are entirely right who declare beauty, and the mood it induces in us, to be completely indifferent and unfruitful as regards either knowledge or character. They are entirely right; for beauty produces no particular result whatsoever, neither for the understanding nor

for the will. It accomplishes no particular purpose, neither intellectual nor moral; it discovers no individual truth, helps us to perform no individual duty and is, in short, as unfitted to provide a firm basis for character as to enlighten the understanding. By means of aesthetic culture, therefore, the personal worth of a man, or his dignity, inasmuch as this can depend solely upon himself, remains completely indeterminate; and nothing more is achieved by it than that he is henceforth enabled by the grace of Nature to make of himself what he will — that the freedom to be what he ought to be is completely restored to him.

5. But precisely thereby something Infinite is achieved. For as soon as we recall that it was precisely of this freedom that he was deprived by the one-sided constraint of nature in the field of sensation and by the exclusive authority of reason in the realm of thought, then we are bound to consider the power which is restored to him in the aesthetic mode as the highest of all bounties, as the gift of humanity itself. True, he possesses this humanity in *potentia* before every determinate condition into which he can conceivably enter. But he loses it in practice with every determinate condition into which he does enter. And if he is to pass into a condition of an opposite nature, this humanity must be restored to him each time anew through the life of the aesthetic. ([*Author's note:*] Admittedly the rapidity with which certain types pass from sensation to thought or decision scarcely — if indeed at all — allows them to become aware of the aesthetic mode through which they must in that time necessarily pass. Such natures cannot for any length of time tolerate the state of indetermination, but press impatiently for some result which in the state of aesthetic limitlessness they cannot find. In others, by contrast, who find enjoyment more in the feeling of total capacity than in any single action, the aesthetic state tends to spread itself over a much wider area. Much as the former dread emptiness, just as little are the latter capable of tolerating limitation. I need scarcely say that the former are born for detail and subordinate occupations, the latter, provided they combine this capacity with a sense of reality, destined for wholeness and for great roles.)

6. It is, then, not just poetic licence but philosophical truth when we call beauty our second creatress. For although it only offers us the possibility of becoming human beings, and for the rest leaves it to our own free will to decide how far we wish to make this a reality, it does in this resemble our first creatress, Nature, which likewise conferred upon us nothing more than the power of becoming human, leaving the use and practice of that power to our own free will and decision.

Source for Schiller's text:

Kearny, Richard and David Rasmussen. *Continental Aesthetics: Romanticism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*. Oxford, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2001.