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Rüdiger Safranski
Schiller or the Invention
of German Idealism

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Prologue

After Schiller's death on May 9, 1805, an autopsy was performed on his body. The report concluded that his lungs were "gangrenous, mushy, and quite dysfunctional," his heart was "devoid of muscular substance," his gall bladder and spleen were abnormally distended, and his kidneys were "disintegrated and completely atrophied." Doctor Huschke, the personal physician of the Duke of Weimar, added this succinct statement to the autopsy report: "Under these circumstances it is surprising that the poor man was able to live such a long time." Hadn't Schiller himself said that it was the mind that molded the body? He had evidently succeeded in doing so. His creative enthusiasm kept him alive beyond his body's expiration date. Heinrich Voss, who was with Schiller when he died, noted: "His infinite mind is the only possible explanation for how he was able to live such a long time."

The autopsy report yields the first definition of Schiller's idealism: Idealism is when you live longer than your body would allow owing to the strength of your enthusiasm. It is the triumph of a bright, enlightened will.

For Schiller, the will was the instrument of freedom. He responded to the question of whether there was such a thing as free will in no uncertain terms: How could the will not be free, since every moment reveals a horizon of available options? The options may be limited, but they are inexhaustible. To this extent, freedom is open time.

However, it is not simply a matter of choosing among an array of options. The creative aspect of freedom is a decisive factor. An individual can influence things, people, and himself using ideas, intentions, and strategies. Creative freedom contributes something to the world that would not otherwise exist; it is always a *creatio ex nihilo* as well. It is also the power of annihilation; it can resist deleterious effects, such as onslaughts of bodily pain. Schiller had a combative relationship to nature, even to his own. The body is your assassin! Schiller explained that we ought not to regard our *physical condition, which*

can be determined by nature, as part of ourselves, but as something extraneous and foreign (V, 502).

His great antipodean and friend Goethe could not warm up to that idea. He called it Schiller's "gospel of freedom" and contended that he "did not wish to see the laws of nature diminished."

Schiller, in turn, found that notion absurd. He considered nature powerful enough to stand on its own, whereas imperiled intellectual rights required support, and the power of freedom needed to be ensured. The adventure of freedom was Schiller's passion; he was a virtual Sartre of the late eighteenth century. Schiller's idealism was rooted in his conviction that it is possible to be in control of things rather than being controlled by them. Like Sartre, he contended that it is a matter of making something out of what you were made to do.

People who knew him well concurred that Schiller was almost always tense, busy, and alert; he was curious and overly observant to a fault. According to his wife Charlotte: "To him, reality was driven by anxiety." In contrast to Goethe, Schiller did not have a calm and composed faith in the world. He did not have the feeling of being borne along by a gracious nature. You have to do everything yourself! In both his life and his works, he became an athlete of the will.

In the beginning was the misery? Not really; his upbringing was not that bleak. A loving mother, a father who was away most of the time. His background was petit bourgeois, but hardly wretched. The world of his childhood was almost idyllic. Then he attended the *Karlsschule* military academy, where he was subjected to the authority of an often-tyrannical Duke. He loved his own father, but feared the sovereign, who followed him into his bedroom like a father figure—until Schiller rebelled against him. Schiller was a sickly child who grew too fast; he was pimply, awkward, and gawky. He did not inhabit his body. In his school uniform, he resembled a scarecrow. He did not like his outer shell. Something was stirring within him and causing trouble every which way. He felt

as though he had been projected into existence, and he countered with projects. Some project or other was always in the works, which was the only way life could be made tolerable. He was often inhibited, and would frequently come to a standstill, only to let loose suddenly with a flood of words. Anyone who was listening to him would soon lose any sense of whether he was coming or going.

Schiller's enthusiasm grew out of his queasiness about life, which he had to overcome time and again, and which found powerful expression in his play *The Robbers*. In this brilliant play, which created a phenomenal sensation in the German theater world, Schiller traced evil back to its origins. He exposed the scandal of meaninglessness and injustice of a nature that privileges some and penalizes others. Quite by accident, people wind up in dire circumstances; there are good reasons to distrust life. A poisonous resentment could well up as a result. For the sake of the creative life, Schiller struggled against that, and his enthusiasm for freedom also entailed a self-imposed detoxification, which was crucial especially once he had come into contact with Goethe. His friendship and collaboration with Goethe—a stroke of luck and a highlight of German cultural history—was possible only because Schiller pushed himself to realize *that the only freedom possible in the presence of excellence is love* (to Goethe, July 2, 1796).

Schiller unhesitatingly declared that love was the universal power that bonded an individual to humanity as a whole. As a young man, he developed a philosophy of love that carried on the time-honored cosmic theme of the “great chain of being.” Schiller was a master of autosuggestion. He was able to soar up to the point of declaring: *Be embraced, o Millions...* (I, 133), yet he could just as easily crash back down and be gripped by a nihilistic paralyzing fear. He was well aware of the abyss of meaninglessness, which is why his visions of the universal brotherhood of man invariably convey a Protestant sense of “in spite of it all.” This was Schiller's challenge: let's just see who wins this tug of war, the mind or the body!

Schiller set out to prove that one is not merely the recipient of the hand of fate one is dealt; one is also the dealer of the hand. He could not help noticing that his own ability to

radiate his kismet was both attractive and contagious, which explained his capacity for friendship and his charisma. Even Goethe was carried away by Schiller's enthusiasm. In the end, Schiller invigorated an entire epoch. This vigor, and its resonance, especially in the field of philosophy, was later called "German Idealism." Beethoven set it to music: *Joy, beautiful spark of divinity...* (I, 133).

As the following discussion will reveal, Schiller worked away at himself, leading his life as drama and dramatization. Once he was famous, he became a public persona. His crises, changes, and transformations unfolded before the eyes of a public that observed this life on stage full of awe and astonishment. Goethe later positively glorified the protean nature of his friend: "He was a wondrous great man. Every week he was a different and a more superlative person."

Schiller's works are the playful expressions of this lifelong labor. He stuck to his stated principle that *man is ... only truly human when he plays* (V, 618). The game of art is the epiphany of freedom. Like Nietzsche, Schiller might have claimed: Art saves us from destruction by life.

From Schiller's perspective, idealism had regained its luster. There is nothing antiquated about idealism if we understand it in Schiller's sense of the term: freedom needs an outlet for expression, and the mind's outlet is the body. Hence, Schiller was also a great stimulus for philosophy at the close of the eighteenth century. He was a key figure in the epoch-making philosophical events spanning Kant and Hegel. Our discussion will show how Schiller participated in inventing German idealism, and how he and Goethe were able to become the leading lights of German intellectual life. Schiller was a powerhouse of stimuli even for his adversaries. The Romantics dissociated themselves from him in order to find themselves. Their quest to break free of him ultimately meant that they could not break away from him.

The result was a grand opera of the mind. In one historic moment of unparalleled creative intensity the whole group shared the stage: Goethe, Herder, Wieland, Moritz,

Novalis, Hölderlin, Schelling, the Schlegels, Fichte, Hegel, and Tieck—with Schiller, the master of the glass bead game, front and center.

Schiller marked a new epoch, and hence a biography of Schiller also encompasses the epoch of classicism and romanticism. The political drama that commenced with the French Revolution serves as the backdrop to this story.

Heinrich Heine once remarked that the Germans had realized their revolution only in the “celestial realm of dreams.”

Perhaps idealism was a dream. Then what was the actual revolution? A bad dream? When Schiller accepted a certificate of honorary French citizenship in 1798, after a five-year delay, bearing the signatures of Danton and all the others who had long since been decapitated, Goethe and he came to the conclusion that these Frenchmen had sent him citizenship “from the realm of the dead” (March 3, 1798).

Schiller takes the reader into another facet of the past: the unforgettable Golden Age of the German mind. These magnificent years help us preserve a sense of what is truly significant and intellectual in life.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The Tell story. How Goethe relinquished it to Schiller. Schiller's cultural patriotism. "German Grandeur." In praise of slowness. "William Tell," the celebration of freedom. From the imperiled idyll into history and back. Conservative revolution. Tyrannicide. Brutus or the holy dragon slayer. Popular appeal. Kotzebue or satire of Schiller commemorations in advance.

Schiller had been deathly ill several times by now. He was quite familiar with the aura of farewell, even of the ultimate farewell. Over tea, he said to Christiane von Wurmb, a distant relative of Lotte's, who was living with the Schillers for a while: "The entire wisdom of man should actually consist in seizing every moment with full force and using it as though it were the only one, the last one."

He made this remark shortly after visiting the Körners in the fall of 1801. Schiller sensed that this would most likely be their last reunion. The Schiller family was spending a month with his sister-in-law Karoline von Wolzogen at the home of the Körners, who lived near the Loschwitz vineyard, where Schiller had written the song "Ode to Joy," which sparkled with amity and spirit. Everything here reminded him of a past full of new beginnings, hopes, and expectations. He felt an emotional connection to the little porch, which he called the *cradle of Carlos*. During this time, his friends found him venturesome, yet elegiac. He was both cheery and melancholic, and looked back on his life with pride and contentment. He knew that he had achieved something, but he felt the need to go on. He had not finished with everything he wanted to accomplish quite yet. Recalling a time of expectations spurs on new expectations. He talked about his plans a great deal, especially about *The Bride of Messina*. In Karoline's words, "We often asked whether the princes of Messina were about to ride in." Schiller had become famous by this point, and the innumerable portraits of him in circulation made him a public persona who attracted onlookers and admirers. They also made their way to the vineyard just outside Dresden, where Schiller brought together a convivial group of friends along with several invited and uninvited guests. Most likely this was where he brought up the

subject of Wilhelm Tell; the rumor was spreading from Dresden that he was working on a play about the Swiss national hero. At this time Schiller had not had any intentions of writing this play. The rumor persisted nonetheless. He told Cotta a few months later that he had been subjected to the false claim *that I was working on a Wilhelm Tell so often that my attention was finally drawn to this subject and I studied Tschudi's Chronicon Helvetium. I found it so appealing that I am now mulling over the idea of working on a Wilhelm Tell for real; we need to make sure that the play entails honor* (March 16, 1802).

However, the rumor that he was writing this play was not his only impetus to sit down and work on it. First Lotte, and then Goethe, had drawn his attention to the story. Lotte had read Johannes von Müller's *History of the Swiss Confederation* and had written to Schiller on March 25, "The history of free people is surely twice as interesting because they fight so fervently for their constitution. It has a special quality."

For the time being, however, Schiller was preoccupied with his heroes of the lowlands—he was in the middle of writing his book about the Netherlands—and did not want to delve into the mountain heroes just yet. He granted that the latter had astonishing *strength*, but not really human *grandeur* (as he wrote to Lotte on March 26, 1789). Years later, on October 14, 1797, Goethe wrote him about his trip in Switzerland, reporting that a poetic subject had come to his attention "that instills a good deal of confidence in me. I am almost convinced that the story of Tell could be treated in epic form and if I were to succeed in my undertaking, the result would be quite strange: the fairy tale would attain its absolute truth by means of literature." Goethe sought to have the story of Tell evolve from the customs, traditions, and foundations of this primeval landscape. His letter described the land and the people to help Schiller visualize this "highly significant locale." He succeeded so well that Schiller's imagination was sparked instantaneously. At this point he was not thinking in terms of a work of his own, but more along the lines of a collaborative effort that would result in a gradual fruition of ideas. The Romantics did not go beyond waxing enthusiastic about a synthesizing aesthetic form they called *Sympoesie*, but Goethe and Schiller actually achieved it.

Schiller replied on October 20, 1797: *The concept of Wilhelm Tell is quite auspicious; the material, which is significant and narrowly defined, will yield the ultimate brilliant life. ... At the same time, this lovely material offers a glimpse into the breadth of the human race, like a vista into the open distance between high mountains.* He wrote that he was looking forward to Goethe's return, when they would be able to exchange their ideas about this subject in detail. Over the course of the next year, they did indeed spend a great deal of time talking about Tell. Goethe stuck to his plan for a while, but kept postponing the project. Schiller was intrigued; he could not hear enough about it. At some point between the fall of 1801 and the spring of 1802, Goethe relinquished the subject to Schiller. Schiller could now find out whether he would be able to open a vista into the open distance, into the *breadth of the human race* between mountains he had never seen. In Goethe's later conversations with Eckermann, he recalled: "I related all of this to Schiller, in whose soul my landscapes and my acting figures were formed into a drama. And since I had other things to do, and the implementation of my design kept getting deferred, I handed over my subject entirely to Schiller, who proceeded to write his admirable play" (May 6, 1827).

Schiller set the project in motion in February 1802. On March 10, 1802, he wrote to Goethe that Tell was captivating him *with a power and intensity* that he had not experienced in quite a long time. He interrupted his work for several months to complete *The Bride of Messina*, then returned to Tell in the spring of 1803, and began the final composition in August 1803. In a letter to Iffland on November 9, 1803, he wrote *I am now living and breathing Tell*. He even considered taking a trip to Switzerland to visit the original sites, but decided against going for reasons of ill health, and also because he had the feeling that his imaginary Switzerland could portray its hero in sufficiently vivid detail. Goethe made him all the more determined to do so.

When Schiller began working on *Tell*, Switzerland had just lost its political freedom, and to a certain degree its inner freedom as well. The country had been the battlefield in the second Coalition War between France and Russia/Austria. Napoleon had occupied the

country in 1799, plundered the national treasury in Bern, eliminated the old cantonal constitution, and installed a compliant government. In the founding cantons, which had played a notable role in the Tell story, resistance to French rule was once again quite obstinate. Of course French policies also met with some approval, since patrician privileges were eliminated and replaced with bourgeois civil rights. Nonetheless, territorial loss and oppressive taxes to France kept alive a will to resistance and a sense of indignation. Recalling the heroic history of the liberation from Habsburg and the empire assuaged the wounded pride of the Confederation in the “Helvetian Republic” imposed by Napoleon. Thus, the myth of Tell was able to regain popularity beyond the borders of Switzerland and into Germany, where a will to freedom against French hegemony began to stir. The western portion was directly ruled by Napoleon, the southern portion suffered from the war, and in the northern portion, which was still neutral, people feared being drawn into the war. It was a perplexing situation, because it was hard to tell exactly what to think of Napoleon. Some continued to regard him as a revolutionary, which made them either fear him or pin their hopes on him, depending on their points of view. For others, he was nothing but a tyrant. As the evolving structure of the anti-Napoleonic wars of liberation began to take shape, the political demand for freedom and patriotism would combine with the forces of tradition to fight against Napoleonic foreign rule. In this context of the formation of a movement that was both revolutionary and conservative, the renewed myth of Tell fit especially well at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This was the way Schiller found it, and he used Stauffacher as the mouthpiece for his view in Stauffacher’s big speech at the occasion of the Rütli oath: *No, there is a limit to a tyrant’s power./When the oppressed can never find justice,/When the burden becomes unbearable—they reach up/To heaven with confidence and courage/And bring down their eternal rights,/Which are perched up there inalienably/ And as indestructible as the stars themselves—/Nature’s old primeval state recurs* (lines 1274-1281; II, 959).

Eliminating tyranny and attaining political freedom based on natural rights were also the demands of the French Revolution. But were Tell and the Rütli-alliance conspirators really revolutionaries? Might they have even been textbook examples of Jacobins? The

play could be understood as a revolutionary drama, and it was understood as such to some extent, especially by political officials, which prompted attempts to put a stop to or tone down performances of the play. It took more than half a century until *Wilhelm Tell* could appear on the stage uncut. At the premiere in Weimar, the allusions to the Habsburg dynasty were omitted. In Vienna, the play was not allowed to be performed at all for a period of time, and in Berlin Iffland took the precaution of striking the whole fifth act with the parricide scene. The triumph of the play on the German stages was not impeded by these cuts; on the contrary, all these dealings heightened its explosive force, which was also evident much later when Adolf Hitler prohibited the performance of this play.

How the play was interpreted was one thing; how Schiller intended it was quite another.

Schiller had provided a detailed assessment of the French Revolution in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*. He considered freedom, human rights, and the ideal of a republic commendable goals when they were aspired to and fought for by people who were themselves free on the inside. He had rejected Fichte's idea that freedom can only be learned in political struggle, and promoted instead the idea that freedom must be learned and internalized by means of aesthetic education and play to be able to establish it in the world of politics. He unwaveringly held to this view from then on. Although the rise of Napoleon had fascinated him because of the magic of his power, it also infuriated him. He saw confirmation of all of his fears that in a society of unfree people the power of despotism and egoism is worshiped. Schiller felt that Napoleon could only be an idol for those who did not want their freedom, but who worship power that they do not themselves possess. Schiller abhorred the desire for subjugation that Napoleon aroused. As Karoline von Wolzogen reported, "He never had any fondness for or trust in the conqueror; he never held out any hope that he could be the source of anything good for mankind." The peace treaty of Lunéville was signed on February 9, 1801; it established the continental hegemony of Napoleon and was the first stage in the dissolution of the old empire. Soon after, Göschen asked Schiller to write a poem to celebrate this peace. Schiller refused, since *we Germans have such a disgraceful role in this peace*, and he did

not want to write *a satire of the German empire* (February 26, 1801). He did, however, articulate his view of this event in the poem “The Commencement of the New Century.” This poem denounced the treaty of Lunéville as the demise of European freedom. He claimed that it had become the spoils of the hegemonic powers of the continent (France) and the sea (England): *And the bond connecting the lands is removed,/And the old ways cave in;/.../Two mighty nations wrestle /For undivided mastery of the world,/And to devour freedom in all the lands,/They brandish a trident und lightning* (I, 459).

What had become of the will to freedom? France, where it had been so powerful until recently, had become the stronghold of oppression, tyranny, and expansionism. When the heir to the throne Karl Friedrich von Sachsen-Weimar left for an educational journey to Paris in the early part of 1802, Schiller wrote a poem as a parting gift, which was sung in Goethe’s Wednesday Circle to the tune of the popular “Rhine Wine Song”: *He tears himself away from his forefather’s halls/From loving arms,/Seeking out the proud city,/Bursting with plunder* (I, 461).

Goethe had founded the Wednesday Circle in November 1801 to combat the gloom of winter. Every second Wednesday, the group got together after the theater for supper at Goethe’s house. They avoided using the term “club,” because that would have sounded too revolutionary. “Circle” seemed like a harmless name, and the meeting was designed accordingly; fourteen select individuals gathered around the head of the household and Schiller. Guests who were acceptable to all of the members were allowed to join them. Even the Duke joined the group of guests sometimes, when he wanted to unwind with some foie gras, wine, and poetry. The atmosphere was fairly stilted, even though there was singing and conversation. Goethe described this circle as follows: “The contributors are located neither on earth, nor in heaven, nor in hell, but in an interesting intermediate state which is partly painful, partly agreeable.” It was here that Schiller expressed his condemnation of the nefarious nature of the French, and bade the hereditary prince a fond farewell: *May the spirit of your homeland be your guide,/When the shaky bridge/Carries you over to that other side,/Where German loyalty is left behind* (I, 462). He expressed the hope that the hereditary prince would be bold enough to get to the heart of the secrets

of power. Only in Paris would you be able to *descend...into the crater,/From which the lava rose* (I, 461). Another poem that Schiller recited in the Wednesday Circle dealt with “The Antiques at Paris.” The French army is portrayed as a robber of European art treasures, but the stolen treasures wreak revenge: *They will maintain their silence forever to him [the Frenchman]/Never descend from their pedestals/Into life’s fresh ranks/By him alone the Muses are possessed/Who warms them in his breast,/To the vandals they’re just stone* (I, 213). If you seek to own art, you lose it. It is revealed only to the free spirit; that is the only way it can be, because freedom, which gets lost in political life, has found asylum in art, and even there it can only find expression in freedom and not in force. Schiller advocated reverence for beauty in times of political turmoil.

Schiller was the first to present a powerful case for the idea of the German cultural nation in the cozy Wednesday Circle. This idea is implied in the poem “The Commencement of the New Century,” which opens with the question: *Noble friend! Where does a place of refuge/lie open for peace and freedom?* The poem closes with the answer: *Into the holy silent chambers of the heart/You must flee from the turmoil of life,/Freedom dwells only in the realm of dreams,/And beauty blooms only in song* (I, 458f.). Schiller planned to expound the idea of the German cultural nation in a major philosophical and political poem called “German Grandeur.” He did not complete it, but preliminary drafts have been preserved, and their trenchant formulations show quite clearly the train of thought he had in mind: *May the German at this moment, when he is emerging without glory from his lachrymose war..., may he take pride in his name and rejoice in it? ... /Yes, he may! German empire and German nation are two different things. The majesty of the German never rested on the head of his prince. Detached from the political, the German has established his own worth, and even if the Empire were to be destroyed, German dignity would remain undisputed./ It is moral greatness; it inheres in the culture* (I, 473f.).

Germany is not prominent in the big political picture, but its *dignity* is evident in *culture*. Culture is more durable than political power, which is quickly gained and even more quickly lost. Since culture lasts longer, it is certainly the case that it takes longer for it to

be created, and for this reason, the Germans entered history belatedly. However, there are rewards to be reaped from belatedness: *ultimately mores and reason must triumph, crude force succumb to form—and the slowest nation will catch up to the quick evanescent one* (I, 475). The drawback of belatedness turns out to be an advantage: strength is not sapped prematurely in power struggles. Whereas others wear themselves out in petty issues, even when they rush from one victory to the next, Germany will work *at the ongoing improvement of mankind* and then the significance of slowness emerges: *Every country has its day in history, but the day of the Germans reaps the harvest of all of time* (I, 478). With prospects like these, how could someone not believe that it is the *universal spirit* that has *chosen* the Germans for the grand mission of promoting freedom and humanitarian beauty in Europe? Schiller would never have thought it possible that the belatedness of the nation would promote extreme hysteria and resentments instead of democratic and cultural maturation; it would have been equally inconceivable to him that a slowly evolving culture and education would not be strong enough to prevent barbarism, and that this culture would even be exploited for the purposes of barbarism.

We do not know why Schiller did not complete the poem “German Grandeur.” Had the German mission perhaps turned out too grand even for his taste? Did the realist in him object to the overly idealistic vision of the advantage of belatedness and slowness? In any case, he did not finish the poem; he put aside this proclamation of a humane mission of the Germans in world history and instead crafted another paean to freedom: *Wilhelm Tell*.

His poem “The Commencement of the New Century” says: *Alas in vain on all the atlases/You’re on the lookout for the blessed realm/Where freedom dwells in gardens ever green/Where the beautiful youth of humanity blooms* (I, 459). Now, in the mountainous world of *Wilhelm Tell*, he discovers the *garden ever green* of freedom. Here he can show that the true revolution is a conservative one; that it is not based on the quest for a new man, but on the defense of the tried-and-true man; that greatness arises when well-functioning systems defend themselves against innovations that worsen matters and people; that the idyll is not idyllic, but can defend its dignity to the point of

tyrannicide; that progress might be realized by preservation; that people can lose their bearings when they swim with the tides of time. The glade on which the allies come together to swear the Rütli oath is not the light at the end of an historical tunnel, but the ever-accessible locus of individual responsibility for communal self-assertion. *Wilhelm Tell* illustrates a freedom that does not require us to await a historic moment, because we always have freedom if we are prepared to take hold of it. This freedom is preserved more than it is fought for; it is wrested from history rather than produced by it. In “German Grandeur,” Schiller praised slowness, but he had made a mission out of it; Tell is slow, but devoid of mission. He stands on his own two feet. His slow reflectiveness makes him strong and invincible, and in the proud defense of tradition he takes control of his future.

The play owed its popularity to the straightforward simplicity of the construction of its ideas.

Endnotes

- p. 1 *gangrenous, mushy ... live such a long time:* quoted in Oellers, p. 11.
- p. 1 *His infinite mind...:* Biedermann 1974, p. 369.
- p. 2 *gospel...diminished:* Petersen 1904, vol. 3, p. 20.
- p. 2 *To him, reality...:* *ibid*, p. 64.
- p. 3 *He was...:* quoted in Wiese 1959, p. 527.
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- p. 4 *The entire...:* Biedermann 1974, p. 310.
- p. 4 *We often asked...:* *ibid*, p. 391.
- p. 5 *I related all of this...:* Goethe MA 19 (Gespräche mit Eckermann, May 6, 1827), p. 568.
- p. 7 *He never had any fondness...:* Biedermann 1974, p. 411.
- p. 8 *The contributors ...:* Boyle 1991, vol. 2, p. 715.