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# PLAY AND IRONY: SCHILLER AND SCHLEGEL ON THE LIBERATING PROSPECTS OF AESTHETICS

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Friedrich Schiller<sup>1</sup> and Friedrich Schlegel<sup>2</sup> are responsible for shaping much of aesthetics, literature, and criticism for generations of continental philosophers after Kant. Both writers were able to transmit a conviction that freedom in some sense defines what it means to be human and that literature is uniquely capable of embodying and expressing that freedom. For both writers, literature

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1. Friedrich Schiller (November 10, 1759–May 9, 1805; born in Marbach; died in Weimar) studied medicine at the Military Academy (Karlsschule) 1773–80, before launching his career as playwright and poet. His plays include: *Die Räuber* (*The Robbers*; 1781) [60]; *Kabbala und Liebe* (*Intrigue and Love*; 1784); *Don Carlos* (1787); the Wallenstein trilogy (1798–99); *Maria Stuart* (1800); *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* (*The Maid of Orleans*; 1801); and *Wilhelm Tell* (1804). Despite the onset of ill health in 1791, which ended a two-year stint as professor of history at University of Jena, Schiller completed *Geschichte des dreißigjährigen Krieges* (*History of the Thirty Years War*) in 1792. Fichte, Goethe, Kant, Lessing, and Rousseau, were significant influences.
  2. Friedrich Schlegel (March 10 1772–January 12, 1829; born in Hannover; died in Dresden) studied law at Göttingen and Leipzig (1790–93) before devoting himself to the study of literature and philosophy. Together with his brother, August Wilhelm, he published *Athenaeum* (1798–1800), the main organ of the Romantic movement. Fichte, Goethe, Herder, Kant, Lessing, Plato, Schiller, Spinoza, and his friends in the Romantic movement exercised significant influence on his thinking. His major works include: [61] *Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie* (*On the Study of Greek Poetry*; 1797); “Fragments,” “Ideas,” and “Dialogue on Poetry” in *Athenaeum*, the novel *Lucinde* (1799); *Charakteristiken und Kritiken* (*Characteristics and Critiques*; 1801); *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* (*On the Language and Wisdom of India*; 1808); *Geschichte der alten und neueren Literatur, Vorlesungen* (*History of Ancient and Modern Literature, Lectures*; 1815). For translations of key contributions to early Romanticism, see Jochen Schulte-Sasse et al. (eds), *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

is transformative – personally, morally, and politically transformative. However, they differ significantly on how literature liberates and, by extension, on the freedom it expresses. Whereas a holistic notion of play, a semblance of canceling time in time, is at the center of Schiller’s conception of an aesthetic education, Schlegel’s conceives Romantic poetry as a fragmentary combination of wit and irony, an endless, historically riveted striving. Schiller asserts the liberating potential of art’s capacity to express the ideal satisfaction of human striving; Schlegel counters by affirming the equally liberating potential of art’s capacity to disillusion or, better, to remind itself that any such expression reproduces the “endless play of the world.”<sup>3</sup> In the following essay, I attempt to make these differences more precise by reviewing first Schiller’s and then Schlegel’s most influential statements of their positions. The aim of the exercise is to make clear why their aesthetic imaginations *in tandem* have been (and continue to be) so compelling for philosophical reflection on art and literature.

#### I. PLAYFUL FREEDOM: SCHILLER ON TRAGEDY, AESTHETIC EDUCATION, AND THE PROMISE OF POETRY

##### *Beyond good and evil in early essays on tragedy*

Despite considering comedy superior, Schiller not only wrote tragedies but also made his first major contributions to post-Kantian aesthetics in a series of essays on tragedy, published in the early 1790s. Schiller’s account of tragedy and, in particular, the pleasure that it affords is framed by Lessing’s interpretation of sympathy and Kant’s analysis of dynamic sublimity. Yet Schiller departs significantly from both of his illustrious forebears as he elaborates a notion of freedom that, precisely in being beyond good and evil, is both sublime and an object of sympathy. Following Schiller’s own development, I begin with his account of the sympathies at work in the tragic genre before moving to his construal of the sublimity of the genre.

According to Lessing, the object of our sympathy is precisely the sort of evil that we fear for ourselves; as he puts it, “where this fear is not present, neither is any sympathizing.”<sup>4</sup> On this account, the dramatist, in order to succeed, must present us with circumstances and situations similar to our own. “From this similarity arises the fear that our fate could very easily be just as much like his as

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3. Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, Ernst Behler *et al.* (eds) (Munich: Schönigh, 1958–), vol. 2, 324. Hereafter cited as KFSa followed by the volume and page numbers. All translations from KFSa will be my own.

4. Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, 75 [62], and Stück [63], in *Werke*, Karl Eibl *et al.* (eds) (Munich: Hanser, 1973), vol. 4, 578–82.

we feel ourselves to be like him and it is this fear that sympathy brings, as it were, to fruition.” In Schiller’s early essay “On the Art of Tragedy,” he also emphasizes that the purpose of tragedy is to arouse sympathy.<sup>5</sup> Other purposes (e.g. moral or historical) take a back seat to this ultimate purpose. Tragedy centers on moral themes simply because they are a source of pleasure, indeed, the source of the greatest pleasure.

Schiller rejects several explanations of this pleasure: Lucretius’s and Hobbes’s view that it results from comparison with our safety or the view that the pleasure satisfies a love of justice or gratifies a desire for revenge, in the case of someone suffering from some transgression. He contends instead that “the same tender feeling that has us shrinking back from the sight of physical suffering or even from physical expression of moral suffering allows us, in sympathy with the pure moral pain, to feel a pleasure all the sweeter” ([65] 2). In these opening paragraphs Schiller distinguishes two sorts of sympathy in terms of what he takes to be the two competing sources of pleasure and pain: sensual and moral. Like Lessing, he recognizes the inherent pleasure of emotions and the theater’s capacity to communicate these emotions on one or more of these levels. He is not about to deny that sympathy with another’s suffering and the pleasure afforded it can be largely sensual. However, to the degree that moral capacities get the upper hand in someone, she is more likely to be sensitive to the pleasure that, thanks to a connection with morality, combines with even the most painful state. “Such a frame of mind is most capable of enjoying the pleasure of compassion” (4). Otherwise, the tragic stage’s only appeal would be the sensational and the lurid, the sheer spectacle of gallows, mortal combat, and cries of anguish.

Schiller accordingly countenances, at least *prima facie*, two types of sympathy, that is, sympathy for someone’s sheer physical pain or “pure moral pain.” The two sorts of sympathy, both of which can be found in the dynamics holding between the stage and the audience, are in inverse relation to one another, and the degree of sympathy with the “pure moral pain” as well as the degree of pleasure entailed by that sympathy are relative to the moral state or character of the sympathizer. Schiller offers little argument for these controversial claims; instead he seems content merely to register the fact that some of the paramount pleasures afforded by the tragic genre depend on moral sensibilities on the part of the audience. Yet the question remains why this sort of sympathy is pleasing and why this sympathetic pleasure is in proportion to the sorrowfulness of “tragic emotions.”

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5. Friedrich Schiller, *Essays*, Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (eds) (New York: Continuum, 1993), 6, 16, 19, 20. Hereafter, all citations from Schiller [64] will be cited parenthetically by page number from this edition unless otherwise noted.

The answer, Schiller claims, is the fact that the assault on our sensuous life is the condition for igniting the power of our minds to act, that is, our rationality, and this rational “activity produces the pleasure that we take in sympathetic suffering” (5). Sympathizing with someone battling their natural, selfish interests satisfies or at least approximates vicariously satisfying an urge in us to do likewise. For this satisfaction to take place, Schiller adds, there must be (i) a display of conflict and suffering, paradigmatically between moral interests and self-interest, and (ii) a rational desire to resolve the conflict in the favor of the moral interests. As Schiller puts it, “the pleasure that sorrowful, tragic emotions give us originates in the satisfaction of the urge to act” (5). We may, to be sure, fear for someone else or for ourselves, sympathies requiring a communication of suffering and a degree of identification with the victim of suffering. But the aim of tragedy is not to produce sympathy with someone else’s pain either because we fear for them (as Mendelssohn contends) or for ourselves (as Lessing contends). Tragedy’s aim is to arouse sympathy with a protagonist’s moral battle with suffering since that sympathy is preeminently pleasurable.

That very state of mind, therefore, that above all proclaims this power and awakens this higher activity, is the *most purposeful* to a rational being and the most satisfying for the instinct to act. Hence, it must be linked with a superior degree of pleasure .... The particular art that establishes the pleasure of sympathy as its purpose is the called *the art of tragedy* in the most general sense of the term. [66] (6)

Schiller links sympathy directly to our capacity for empathy, our ability to put ourselves in someone else’s situation, an ability that requires in turn that we have already been in the same sort of situation. Furthermore, the object of our sympathy must have the same nature as we do. So the pleasure of sympathy is the pleasure that derives from putting ourselves in a condition or situation in which someone like ourselves finds herself and doing so in such a way that we share in the action that is her moral response to that condition or situation. Herein, moreover, lies the distinctiveness of the genre. Whereas lyrical literature depicts feelings, tragedy depicts actions; history depicts actions, too, but to instruct and not, like tragedy, to arouse sympathy.

Given this summary of what Schiller means when he says that the aim of tragedy is to arouse sympathy, we can see how clearly it departs from Lessing’s view on the matter. For Schiller it is not fear for ourselves, indeed, not even fear, affection, or love for others, that underlies the sort of sympathy that he regards as proper to tragedy. Tragic emotions, the emotions that we feel in sympathizing with a tragic figure, are pleasing because they vicariously satisfy and thus confirm our capacities as rational, moral agents to take charge of our

natural condition and, in that sense, in the very struggle, to transcend or move beyond who we have been. It satisfies our drive to act, our urge to exert control over ourselves and our emotions by means of a capacity that is distinctly ours as human beings. We sympathize with protagonists on a moral plane because we identify with them, not in their victory or defeat and not, as we shall see, in the goodness or evil of their ways, but simply in their moral struggle as such.

Adapting the terminology of Kant and other late-eighteenth-century figures, Schiller also characterizes this moral struggle as something sublime. When Schiller first addresses the notion of sublimity, he follows Kant in sharply contrasting representations of what is stirring and sublime from representations of beauty. What distinguishes representations of sublime objects is precisely the fact that they bring about a pleasure from something displeasing or, equivalently, provide us with a feeling of purposiveness that presupposes something counter-purposive. A sublime theme or object, for example, makes us feel the pain of our impotence (*Ohnmacht*) on the one hand, and exult at the existence of a power in us superior (*Übermacht*) to nature on the other. That pained feeling that seems to serve no natural purpose turns out in fact to be a sensual condition for, and thus in purposive harmony with, a higher, rational capacity within us.

In “On the Sublime,” [67] Schiller revises Kant’s notion of the dynamical [68] sublime into what he calls the “practically sublime,” the moral neutralization of nature’s physical power over us, exemplified by a protagonist’s moral defiance of pain, suffering, and other assaults on her natural well-being and even her life. Schiller sometimes speaks of nature as sublime, other times of the resistance to nature as sublime. But in either case, the sublime object is such because it “discloses the very power within us that does not feel itself bound to these conditions” in nature and this very disclosure is the ground of the pleasure afforded by the sublime (25f [69]). Indeed, according to Schiller, the experience of the practically sublime not only discloses, but also expands our power. In this connection he cites Kant’s own characterization that “nature is judged to be sublime, not insofar as she arouses fear, but because she calls up in us a force [*Kraft*] of ours (that is not of nature).”<sup>6</sup> Schiller adds that the force in question is not our capacity, as natural beings, to master nature by natural means, but instead our moral ability, as rational beings, to withstand it. The sublime object must be frightening without inciting actual fear, since “only in a detached consideration of something and through the feeling of the activity inside ourselves can we take pleasure in something sublime” (29). The playwright necessarily walks a fine line here. She must represent scenes and characters that, on the one hand, are vivid enough to produce something analogous to genuine fear without actually

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6. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Paul Guyer (ed.), Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (trans.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 145, translation modified.

frightening the audience and, on the other hand, disclose a humanity intrepid and defiant of nature. “Hence, any object that shows us our impotence as natural beings is practically-sublime, as long as it also discloses a capacity within us to resist that is of a completely different order” (35).

In this general account of the dynamically sublime [70], Schiller makes no mention of sympathy. However, he subsequently distinguishes two types of such sublimity, contemplative and pathetic. The former consists merely in some power of nature superior to us, that we are left to contemplate or not in relation to our physical or moral state. But in the case of the pathetically sublime where we are presented with images of people suffering the catastrophic consequences of this power, Schiller says that we “suffer sympathetically.” “The image of another’s suffering, combined with the emotion and consciousness of the moral freedom within us, is *pathetically sublime*” (42). Here we see the convergence of the themes of sympathy and sublimity in Schiller’s account of tragedy, a convergence that Kant eschews – at least in so many words.<sup>7</sup> We sympathize with someone painfully struggling in a crisis because that sympathy is pleasing and it is pleasing because it reconfirms our own power to act. The image of precisely that struggle is sublime and, hence, tragedy is defined by the sublimity of its themes.

Not to be overlooked here is the crucial dimension common to sympathy and sublimity: the dimension of power. We are pleased by the sympathy, allegedly because it reconfirms a power that is distinctively human, and that sympathy reconfirms this power because we are sympathizing with someone who displays it by resisting any forfeiture or surrender of her control not only to something or someone else but also to a part of her that, in the form of instincts, is already under the sway of the power of nature. This emphasis on power and, indeed, a clash of powers, an emphasis already pronounced in Kant’s account of sublimity,<sup>8</sup> is particularly evident in Schiller’s essay “On the Pathetic,” where he insists that, while the mere depiction of suffering can never be the aim of art, it is the necessary means of portraying a human power invincible to that suffering. “The first law of tragedy,” he tells us, is to depict suffering, the second law to depict “moral resistance” to it (48). In contrast to physical resistance, the pitting of one natural instinct against another, this moral resistance to suffering is resistance born of a commitment to an “idea of reason.”<sup>9</sup> In what may well be a mild rebuke of Kant’s views in this connection, Schiller thinks that the theater is capable of portraying this commitment through depiction of human phenomena that are contrary to or not determined by instinct, namely, “phenomena that are

7. See *ibid.*, 157f. [71]

8. See *ibid.*, 147f. [72]

9. Here again Schiller is simply aping Kant; see *ibid.*, 148f. [73]

subject to the will's influence and control or that we at least can regard as such, that is to say, phenomena that the will *could have prevented*" (52).<sup>10</sup> The tragedian has the job of presenting both suffering and resistance or, as Schiller also puts it, pathos and sublimity. Indeed, the more violent the passion expresses itself in the animal realm without being able to maintain the same force in the human realm, the more evident the latter. "The pathos and the power of tragedy lie precisely in this *reference to something transcending sensuality*" (53 n.).

At the same time Schiller refuses to infer that the moral resistance must be successful. The ethical propensity or "independence of spirit in a state of suffering" can take two forms, negative or positive, depending on whether a person's suffering has no effect on his moral disposition or issues from his moral character. The former scenario yields what he calls a "sublime composure," the latter a "sublime action." His list of portraits of sublime composure includes Milton's Lucifer and Medea. Paradigms of sublime actions include not only those who suffer for doing their duty, but also those who suffer for violating their duty.<sup>11</sup>

If Schiller had stopped here, we might be justified in reckoning his view of the tragic hero quite traditional, fully subject to moral considerations of good and evil. But he takes the further step of distinguishing the sublime, entailing evidence of a capacity for morality, from the morally sublime as the actualization of that capacity (61). While the morally sublime is morally satisfying, the sublime alone is aesthetically pleasing. The two senses of sublimity may converge; for example, in the case of Leonidas's self-sacrifice at Thermopylae, "we applaud the fact that Leonidas *actually made* the heroic decision that he did, but we shout for joy, we are positively thrilled that he *could* make it" (63). By contrast, Peregrinus Protheus's self-immolation at Olympia produces a negative moral assessment and a positive aesthetic one. From a moral point of view, he violated the *duty* of self-preservation, but from an aesthetic point of view, he set aside the *interest* of self-preservation.

Schiller's differentiation of the aesthetic pleasure afforded by the sublime from the moral satisfaction of morally sublime actions is in keeping with his insistence throughout his career that the purpose of the theatrical art is pleasure and not moral improvement. At the same time, as in his *Aesthetic Letters* [75], he cannot resist muddying the waters somewhat by pointing out certain advantages of aesthetic judgments over moral judgments and according a more liberating potential to the former than to the latter.

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10. According to Kant, though ideas cannot, strictly speaking, be represented, the sublime can determine the mind to think "the unattainability of nature as a presentation of ideas" (Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 151).

11. In "On the Art of Tragedy," Schiller maintains that our compassion is no less weak when it is mixed with revulsion at the object of sympathy ([74] 8).

In making aesthetic judgments we veer from actual things to possibilities and rise up from the individual to the species, while in making moral judgments we descend from the possible to the actual and enclose the species within the limitations of the individual. No wonder, then, that we feel ourselves broadened in aesthetic judgments, but confined and restricted in moral judgments. (64)

Iago, Richard III, and Medea are not merely moral failures, violating the strictures of our moral imaginations, but for all that they are aesthetically pleasing, sublime subjects of tragic theater.

This account of a sublimity beyond good and evil further embellishes Schiller's explanation of the sympathy that the tragic stage calls for. We sympathize with the moral potency of scoundrels and sinners no less than that of heroes and saints. Schiller adds that the experience is itself enriching: "It is merely the *capacity* for a similar dutifulness that we share with him and the fact that we see our own capacity in his that explain why we feel our spiritual power elevated" (66). Although Schiller does not specify the precise sense of that enhancement (e.g. aesthetic, moral, or both), he clearly puts great stock in the art's capacity to "shape humans morally" – not directly, but indirectly. That indirection follows, for Schiller, from the fact that art's direct aim must be pleasure not moral edification and that art directly influences the character, not the actions of people.

The two direct aims converge. In her attempts to please, the dramatic artist comes to realize that the greatest pleasure is afforded by creating sublime characters with whom we can sympathize, protagonists caught up in a moral conflict, because this sort of sympathy confirms and even enhances a power within us, as rational beings, to transcend or overcome ourselves as creatures of instinct. What is striking about Schiller's conception of tragedy is precisely this affirmation of a sublimity that is beyond good and evil, the sublimity of a tragic figure with whom we can sympathize and who, for that reason, pleases us aesthetically even if we find him or her morally repulsive. The Nietzschean ring of this aesthetic freedom and the possibilities of self-overcoming it presents is patent.<sup>12</sup>

As far as *his* [the poet's] interest is concerned, it makes no difference if he intends to take his heroes from the class of pernicious or of good characters, since the very measure of power required for the good can quite often, for that very reason, be demanded of something evil. When we make aesthetic judgments, we focus far more

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\*12. For discussion of Nietzsche's aesthetics, see the essays by Daniel W. Conway and Gary Shapiro in *The History of Continental Philosophy: Volume 2*.



on power than on its orientation and far more on freedom than on lawfulness. (67f) [76]

Not surprisingly, Schiller also places this distinctively aesthetic freedom at the core of his project of a humanizing education, for which aesthetics provides both means and end.

### *Aesthetic education*

Schiller published *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters* (hereafter *Letters*), his most celebrated contribution to aesthetics and, in particular, to the age-old question of its moral and political significance, in three installments (*Letters 1–9*, *10–16*, and *17–27*, respectively). In the first, largely diagnostic installment, Schiller identifies the dire plight of humanity, particularly in the wake of the failed promise – in his eyes – of the French Revolution. A lack of moral readiness on the part of the people is allegedly responsible for that failure. But this lack exemplifies a basic dilemma confronting politics and political theorists and animating the *Letters*. For while the character of a society's political life depends on the character of its people, the reverse is no less true.<sup>13</sup> But if politics itself cannot provide a way out of this conundrum, then nor can reason; as Schiller puts it pointedly, why in an “enlightened age” are we still barbarians? Nor would history suggest that the arts provide a way out of the dilemma. Echoing Rousseau, Schiller acknowledges that “in almost every epoch of history one finds humanity diminished where the arts blossom and taste rules” (*Letter 10*). Nevertheless, on this very question of the moral and political efficacy of the arts, Schiller parts ways with the Genevan in no uncertain terms. “If man is ever to solve the problem of politics in practice,” Schiller contends, “he will have to approach it through the problem of the aesthetic, because it is only through beauty that man makes his way to freedom” (*Letter 2*).<sup>14</sup>

There are at least two reasons motivating this contention. First, in the Greek world, Schiller notes, there is historical precedent for the opposite of the disharmonies characteristic of modern culture (disharmonies between the senses and reason, between the individual and the mechanisms of economic and political life

13. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du contrat social* (Paris: Garnier & Frères, 1962), bk II, ch. VII; published in English as *On the Social Contract*, Donald A. Cress (trans.) (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), 38–41.

14. Although Schiller sometimes (e.g. *Letter 14*) ascribes freedom and morality solely to the rational side of human nature, the overriding sense of freedom at work in the *Letters* is freedom as self-mastery, equally liberated from the tyranny of nature and the tyranny of ideas. In a footnote to *Letter 19*, Schiller acknowledges the possible misunderstandings caused by these two notions of freedom.

as a whole). In light of his differences with Schlegel's Romanticism (see below), it bears noting that Schiller's admiration for Greek culture, while profound, was measured, owing to his sense of its limitations and the cost of moving beyond them born by subsequent ages. "The appearance of Greek humanity was indisputedly a maximum that on this level could neither continue nor rise higher" (*Letter 6*). The second reason why, despite Rousseau's historical argument, Schiller is more sanguine about the prospects for educating humanity aesthetically is his rejection of that argument's working assumption of an empirical conception of beauty. In the second installment of the *Letters* Schiller proposes instead to pursue a "transcendental path" to a purely rational conception of beauty as "a necessary condition of humanity," with the explanation that this departure from concrete phenomena is required to establish "a secure, unshakable ground of knowledge" (*Letter 10*).

Schiller contends that, for every human being, there is at once an enduring person and a transient condition, each dependent on the other and demanding its due. As a result, there are two basic, ostensibly antithetical laws of human nature, that of "externalizing" (realizing) everything within the person and "formalizing" everything outside it. We are accordingly "driven" by two opposing forces, a "sensuous" drive toward the material content of life's individual, momentary sensations and a "formal" drive toward freedom in the form of universal, eternal laws (*Letters 11–12*). Inasmuch as each drive acts as a constraint on the other (the sensuous drive as a physical, the formal drive as a moral constraint), culture's "task," as Schiller puts it, is to intensify each drive to the point where they have a moderating effect on one another. While Schiller's notion of formal drive's connection with universal laws is plainly of Kantian inspiration, he takes cues from Fichte's conception of reciprocity to elaborate a notion of freedom that requires, not the subordination of one drive to the other, but their coordination.

Without denying the utopian character of this liberating task of coordination, Schiller counters skepticism toward it by invoking the experience of play. Construing play as an experience in which both drives, that is, feelings and thought alike, merge, he declares that "man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays" (*Letter 15*).<sup>15</sup> Whereas the sensuous drive is preoccupied with life and the formal drive with form, the play drive, as Schiller calls it, reconciles these disparate drives in its preoccupation with its own distinct object, beauty, defined as a living form. Thanks to this definition, Hegel later emphasizes, Schiller

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15. For sources of Schiller's use of play (Lessing, Kant, Ramdohr [77]), see Frederick Beiser, *Schiller as Philosopher: A Re-examination* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 142f. [78]; see *Letter 27* for a genealogy of play, extending from physical play (in overflowing nature) to free play (in human fantasy and association) and, ultimately, aesthetic play, capable of transforming sexual desire.

performed the “great service of having broken through the Kantian subjectivity and abstraction and having dared to go beyond it, grasping unity and reconciliation as the truth intellectually and realizing it artistically.”<sup>16</sup> In this aesthetics of play, beauty cannot be adequately understood in strictly subjective or objective terms. As a form, it points to the subjective or, more precisely, imaginative dimension (spatial and/or temporal configurations) in terms of which Kant characterizes beauty. But for Schiller, the playwright-philosopher, this form is not an empty form without purpose, the preoccupation of a tasteful play of faculties. Instead, beauty is a living form and only by virtue of this objective, organic, and purposeful dimension does it yield the experience of play that is definitive of human nature, the key to the means and end of human existence.<sup>17</sup> The real, historical prospects for an aesthetic education of mankind – for a revolution not only in name – turn on the possibilities of creating playful experiences of beauty, experiences capable of generating, regenerating, and consummating the freedom that is, at least ideally, the destiny of mankind.

There remains, however, the considerable problem of explaining how the playful experience of beauty is possible at all, given that it allegedly unites (coordinates and facilitates) opposites (matter and form, passivity and activity, sensuousness and thought). In the final installment of the *Letters* – and in a move that anticipates much of German idealism and Romanticism – Schiller responds to this problem by invoking the will. The noncontradictory unity of the human spirit resides in the will inasmuch as it is not merely distinct from the two basic, opposed drives but also enjoys complete freedom relative to both of them. Although opposed, each of two basic drives pursues its own object and, hence, does not act directly on the other. Schiller accordingly declares: “In a human being there is no other power than his will” (*Letter 19*). In a direct departure from Kant, Schiller understands this freedom of the will not as the freedom proper to someone with intelligence alone, but as a freedom grounded in the “mixed nature” of human beings and, indeed, as an effect of nature, one capable of being furthered or thwarted by natural means. What Schiller dubs the “aesthetic condition” negates and is accordingly free of the sensuous and rational determinations characteristic of our physical and moral conditions respectively (*Letter 20*). Yet, precisely by being – like the sublime object of tragedy – beyond moral constraints, beauty has the capacity to restore our freedom regularly to us, while providing a paradigm of self-determination arising out of indeterminacy.

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16. G. W. F. Hegel, *Werke, Bd. 13: Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), 89; 89–98 [79]; *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, T. M. Knox (trans.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), vol. 1, 61; 61–69 [80].

17. “Sie [Schönheit] ist also zwar Form, weil wir sie betrachten; zugleich aber ist sie Leben, weil wir sie fühlen. Mit einem Wort: sie ist zugleich unser Zustand und unsre Tat” (*Letter 25/ Essays*, 164) [81].

Indeed, the aesthetic condition is necessary if human beings are ever to move beyond “the dismal state of nature” and the demands of “animal self-love”; in other words, human beings are sensual and, hence, cannot be made rational until they have first been aesthetic (*Letters* 23f [82]). In yet another, obvious counterpoint to Rousseau,<sup>18</sup> Schiller accordingly declares: “Man in his physical condition merely suffers the dominion of nature; he emancipates himself from this dominion in the aesthetic condition, and he acquires mastery over it in the moral” (*Letter* 24).

Schiller considers the transition to the aesthetic condition the more difficult of the two transitions (inasmuch as its emancipatory character anticipates the moral condition). He explains the transition through the notion of “aesthetic semblance.” When basic needs have been met, human beings tend to indulge in the sheer semblances (*Scheine*) of things, a tendency underlying the play-drive and the mimetic proclivity to shape sights and sounds into an “aesthetic semblance” pleasing in itself. The very essence of arts is semblance and semblance is aesthetic only if it is “honest (expressly renounces all claims to reality) and autonomous (dispenses with all support from reality)” (*Letter* 26). To the extent that aesthetic semblance takes hold for individuals or whole peoples, it performs the essential, humanizing task of demarcating and securing the distinctiveness of truth and morality. On the final pages of the *Letters*, Schiller draws the political consequences of his account as he introduces the notion of “the realm of aesthetic semblance” or the “aesthetic state” (*ästhetischer Staat*). Beauty’s capacity to transform sexual desire into love also signals its capacity to resolve competing desires in society at large. Only in an aesthetic state can we confront each other, not as enforcers of our respective rights (“the fearful kingdom of forces”) or as executors of our wills (“the sacred kingdom of laws”), but as free and equal citizens: “the third joyous kingdom of play and of semblance” (*Letter* 27).

### *Modernity and the promise of poetry*

Schiller’s final major work in aesthetics, *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* (1795–96) contrasts the naturalness of naive poets, typified by ancient writers such as Homer, with the more self-conscious and, in this sense “sentimental” style typical of modern writers such as Ariosto. In this somewhat idiosyncratic use of the terms, “naïve” signifies a direct, not an unsophisticated manner of writing; “sentimental” does not mean mawkish but self-reflective. Whereas the naive style is straightforward with an air of objectivity and without any intrusion by the author, the sentimental poets cannot refrain from introducing their own subjective feelings and opinions into the writing. Schiller puts the difference in terms of

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18. See Beiser, *Schiller as Philosopher*, 157–61.

naturalness (“The poet either is nature or will seek it. The former constitutes the ‘naïve,’ the latter the ‘sentimental’ poet”), task (“The sentimental poet does not complete his task, but his task is an infinite one”), cause-and-effect (“Sentimental poetry is the progeny of detachment and stillness, inviting us to them; naïve poetry is the child of life and it also leads us back to life”), dependency (“Thus, while the naïve genius is in need of some external support, the genius of the sentimental poet consists in nourishing and purifying himself on his own”), and one-sidedness (“spontaneity overrides sensitivity in the sentimental poetic spirit as much as sensitivity overrides spontaneity in naïve poetry”) ([83] 200, 234f [84], 241 [85]). Perhaps the central contrast lies in the fact that the sentimental poet alone calls attention to a particular sense of the difference between reality and his ideas and idealizations. She does so by mocking reality in pathetic or playful satires,<sup>19</sup> by mourning the absence or loss of the ideal in elegies, or by celebrating its future realization in idylls.

Despite frequently casting the difference between naïve and sentimental poetry in historical terms, Schiller traces it to antithetical modes of poetic consciousness, ancient or modern, and even between contrary traits within a single poet (e.g. Goethe).<sup>20</sup> Prefiguring Hegelian dialectics, he also introduces the difference in terms of a journey that individuals as well as mankind as a whole must make: “Nature makes a human being one with himself, art separates and divides him; by means of the ideal he returns to oneness” (202). Revisiting this parallel at the end of the essay, he concedes “that neither the naïve nor the sentimental character, considered in itself, can completely exhaust the ideal of beautiful humanity, an ideal that can only emerge from the intimate union of both” (249). Schiller is less sanguine about the prospect of such a union than he is at the conclusion of *Letters*. Underlying the poetic difference between the naïve and sentimental is, he submits, a fundamental and debilitating psychological antagonism resolved only in “a few, rare individuals” – the difference between permitting nature (realists) or reason (idealists) to determine theory and practice. Indeed, the essay ends with a clear echo of the Terror as he grimly notes the far greater danger presented by the false idealism of a visionary than by the false realism of those who only believe what they can touch. Yet even on these final pages Schiller remains confident in poetry’s paradigmatic capacity to reconcile basic oppositions. The sides of all such oppositions, epitomized poetically by the difference between the naïve and the sentimental, ultimately come

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19. Comedy “moves toward a more important goal”: freedom from passion and the clarity, composure, and good humor entailed by that freedom (Schiller, *Essays*, 209).

20. On this terminological expansiveness, see Lesley Sharpe, *Schiller: Drama, Thought and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 172f [86], 176–81.

together – “in their difference from and need of one another” – in the concept of the poetic (249).

## II. IRONIC FREEDOM: SCHLEGEL ON ROMANTIC POETRY

### *Getting over the obsession with objectivity: explaining the Romantic turn*

*The Greeks and the Romans* (finished in December, 1795, although not published until January, 1797) is the fruit of Schlegel’s early efforts to do for Greek poetry what Winckelmann had done for the plastic arts of antiquity, namely, demonstrate its paradigmatic capacity to exhibit the ideal, objective form of beauty operative in nature. In the preface, Schlegel acknowledges that his study would have been much improved, had he been able to read *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* before his study went to press. He notes, in particular, how Schiller’s essay shed new light on the limitations of classical poetry and expanded his insight into “interesting” poetry (KFSa 1, 209). Schlegel uses “interesting” as a metonym for “modern” (a usage that springs in part from his appropriation of Kantian conceptions of the disinterestedness and freedom involved in the experience of beauty, to characterize Greek poetry’s achievement). “Interesting” denotes an unflattering and ultimately incongruous characteristic of the goal of modern poetry: unflattering because it is a criterion for restless, self-absorbed moderns unsatisfied with the ancient, objective standard of beauty, and incongruous because it is an unlimited and subjective, unprincipled and ultimately unattainable goal. In other words, for a certain stripe of modern aesthetes, Schlegel contends, it is more important for art to be interesting than for it to be beautiful, even if what makes it interesting is quite individualistic or subjective and permanently transient, not least for the individual who initially finds it interesting. In this sense, mixing genres and even mixing philosophy with poetry can make for interesting art.<sup>21</sup> The dominance of this orientation toward interesting poetry is, Schlegel submits, a self-destructive and thus passing crisis of taste.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, as Schlegel puts it, “Greek poetry has actually attained the *ultimate limit of the natural formation* of art and taste, *this supreme epitome of free beauty*”; for all times, it is “the paragon of art and taste,” containing “a complete collection of examples for all original concepts of art and taste” (KFSa 1, 287f [877], 293, 307). Not surprisingly, Schiller characterized this early work of Schlegel as a bit of “Graecomania.”

21. For a review of features of “interesting” art, later taken up in Schlegel’s account of “romantic” art, see Frederick Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 109.

22. KFSa 1, 211–15, 228, 245–9, 275, 318, 311.

However, in the course of 1796, the same year that marks the inception of a feud with Schiller (in which neither author seems to have distinguished himself),<sup>23</sup> and even before the publication of his early paean to Greek poetry, Schlegel is already altering considerably his attitude toward modern poetry and the prospects of an aesthetics with transhistorical, objective principles of criticism. In the so-called *Lyceumfragmente* of 1797, he explicitly criticizes the obsession with objectivity (*Objektivitätswut*) characteristic of his earlier studies and begins to contrast modern poetry favorably with ancient (e.g. “In the ancients one sees the completed letter of all poetry; in the moderns one intimates the spirit coming to be”; “The ancients are masters of poetic abstraction; the modern have more poetic speculation”) (KFSa 2, 155, 158, 160 [88]). In publications over the next two years (see below) that further repudiate neoclassicist tendencies in poetry and criticism, he gives his most potent and influential declaration of the ideal of Romantic poetry as the “only” poetry – “since in a certain sense all poetry is or should be romantic” (KFSa 2, 183).

To what extent a reading of Schiller’s study of “naive” and “sentimental” poetry prompted the change in Schlegel’s attitudes toward ancient and modern literature – or even a template for his contrast of classical and Romantic poetry – is a longstanding controversy traceable to remarks by Goethe.<sup>24</sup> What is uncontroversial is the far greater impact that the terms “Classical” [90] and “Romantic” have exercised on literary studies, even if Schlegel extols their harmonization and, indeed, characterizes the outlook of Romantic poetry as “a classicism growing without limit” (KFSa 2, 183, 298f [91]). To be sure, the sentimental poet, like the Romantic, is bent on an infinite striving, a goal exceeding the self-sufficiency and completeness exemplified by naive or Classical [92] poetry. Yet, while similar concerns preoccupied Schiller and Schlegel, there are also patent differences, epitomized – as I argue below – by the contrast between play and irony respectively.

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23. On their public quarrel, see Hans Eichner, “Einleitung,” KFSa 2, X–XVII, and Ernst Behler, *German Romantic Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 38f. [89]

24. Goethe is said to have remarked that the concept of the Classical and the Romantic comes from him and Schiller (notably from a debate between them in which *Naive and Sentimental Poetry* figures prominently), before being taken up and extended further by the Schlegels. See J. P. Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1982), 350; published in English as *Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann*, John Oxenford (trans.) (New York: Dutton, 1930), 366. Schlegel read *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry* in December, 1795, a month after completing *Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie*. In a letter to his brother, he concedes that he learned a great deal from it, although controversy surrounds the nature and extent of his reception; see Eichner, “Einleitung,” KFSa 2, L–LII. Arthur Lovejoy, “Schiller and the Genesis of German Romanticism,” *Modern Language Notes* 35 (120 [93]) [94]: 136–44, esp. 139; Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative*, 116–19.

Given these differences, there is reason to look elsewhere for the sources of the shift in Schlegel's attitudes. Frederick Beiser argues that this shift can be traced, not so much to Schiller's influence, as to philosophical concerns of an epistemological cast. Beiser accordingly pins the shift on Schlegel's growing disillusionment with what he originally took to be the promise of Fichte's foundationalism (his "claims to first principles and a complete system") for establishing the objective science of aesthetics and criticism that eluded Kant.<sup>25</sup> In reflections in the winter of 1796–97, Schlegel comes to the conclusion that an infinite regress plagues any pretense to first principles, [95] that we, nevertheless, can and should endlessly perfect our principles of criticism without exception, doing so in a process of self-criticism that is an ongoing and open-ended part of inquiry.<sup>26</sup> “

For every concept, as for every proof, one can ask for a concept in turn and a proof of it. For this reason, philosophy, like an epic poem, must begin in the middle, and it is impossible to present it and give an account of it piece by piece in such a way that the first [principle] is completely justified and explained. It is a whole and the path to knowing it is not a straight line but a circle. (KFSa 18, 518)

*Progressive universal poetry: witty, fragmentary, and transcendental*

This process of self-critical writing requires what Schlegel understands as *wit* (*Witz*): an inspired capacity to discern unseen similarities and communicate such “abbreviated wisdom” in a form that befits it as an individual insight into an infinite, developing whole (KFSa 18, 89). Schlegel accordingly characterizes wit, on the one hand, as “an explosion of a tethered spirit,” the work of “a thick, fiery reason,” “a prophetic capacity,” what the Romans called having “nose” for things, the “principle and organ of universal philosophy,” and, on the other hand, as “the unconditioned social spirit.”<sup>27</sup>

The suitable form for communicating this wit – at once compendious, complementary, and in need of complementing – is the *fragment*. A fragment is not simply an anecdote, epigram, or aphorism – each of which might be understood as complete in itself in splendid isolation. Despite similarities with these forms of writing, fragments are self-conscious indications of incompleteness, gestures to a whole that can only be fathomed, if at all, by an endless,

25. KFSa 1, 358; Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative*, 119–28.

26. KFSa 18, 3–15, 505–21. Notably, after early misgivings with Kant's lack of principles for criticism, Schlegel can be seen as returning to a Kantian position here.

27. KFSa 2, 148, 158, 159, 163, 200; on the meanings of “*Witz*,” see Eichner, “Einleitung,” KFSa 2: XXXVI–XLI.



precarious approximation. In this sense, the fragment is the signature style of some of Schlegel's most influential writings, including his entries to *Athenaeum* (e.g. "Fragments," "Ideas"). This journal, the main literary and philosophical organ of what came to be known as the "Romantic school" or "early German Romanticism," is the fruit of a circle of close friends: [96] the Schlegel brothers,<sup>28</sup> Caroline Schlegel, Dorothea Veit, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Ludwig Tieck, Novalis, Wilhelm Wackenroder.<sup>29</sup>

Shortly after insisting on the normative character of any definition of poetry (*Fragment* [98] 114), Schlegel issues his most famous gloss of Romantic poetry, characterizing it as "a progressive universal poetry" (*Fragment* 116). In a direct reversal of views expressed in *The Greeks and the Romans*, he challenges traditional concerns about preserving purity of genre (epic, drama, and lyric) and construes a broad range of works (including the novel, essay, and even some philosophical and historical writings) as poetry in the proper sense of the term. The *universal* character of Romantic poetry lies, at least in part, in its refusal to identify poetry with any particular genre or marks of a piece of a writing that can be simply read off it (e.g. meter, rhyme, etc.). But the sense of its "universality" extends even further since its aim is not simply to unite the separate genres and put poetry in contact with philosophy, but – among other things – to mingle and fuse "poetry and prose, genius and criticism, the poetry of the educated and the poetry of the people, to make poetry alive and social and to make life and society poetic, to poeticize wit, to fill and saturate the forms of art with matters of genuine cultural value" (KFSa 2, 182).

The *progressive* character of Romantic, that is, genuine poetry is tied to the fact that it is self-reflective. Self-reflection is a transcendental notion in the Kantian sense that it is the condition that enables (and accordingly ranges over, transcends) every other consciousness (unreflected or not, self-styled as poetic or not), and in the Fichtean sense that, unlike any other consciousness or object of consciousness, its reality consists precisely in its ideal, self-reflective activity.

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28. August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767–1845), Friedrich's brother and coeditor of the *Athenaeum*, is also known for his contributions to German Romanticism, not least through his criticism, poetry, and gifted translations of Shakespeare, Calderon [97], and other Romance-language authors. Through the widespread publication of his lectures on fine art, dramatic arts, and literature, given in Berlin and Vienna, he played a major role in spreading the basic ideas of Romanticism across Europe. In 1818 he became a professor of literature and art history at the University of Bonn where he would spend the rest of his life, producing notable works of criticism and inaugurating studies of Sanskrit writings.

29. Heinrich Heine, *Die romantische Schule* (Hamburg: Hoffmann & Campe, 1833); Rudolf Haym, *Die Romantische Schule: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des deutschen Geistes* (Berlin: Gaertner, 1870); Behler, *German Romantic Literary Theory*, 31ff. The *Athenaeum* contains, in addition to the noted fragments, Schlegel's notable study of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, essays on philosophy and religion, and "Dialogue on Poetry."

Schlegel incorporates each of these senses of “transcendental” into his understanding of Romantic poetry: “There is a kind of poetry whose essence lies in the relation between the ideal and real, and which therefore by analogy to philosophical jargon, should be called ‘transcendental poetry’” (KFSa 2, 204). Just as any transcendental philosophy, to be worthy of the name, must be critical, so, too, in whatever transcendental poetry depicts, it must depict itself as well and “be at once poetry and poetry of poetry” (KFSa 2, 204).

At the same time, however, progressive as it is, Romantic poetry’s transcendental character also differs fundamentally from those Kantian and Fichtean senses. It differs in being polyvalent, algorithmic, and historical. That is to say, the poem not only is the reflection of the poet and the poetry but also holds the potential for reflection of all sorts on that reflection or, better, for endless, ongoing, and thereby “progressive” self-reflection. Romantic poetry can, as he puts it, “hover on the wings of poetic reflection, in the middle between the portrayer and the portrayed, free of all real and ideal self-interest, raising that self-reflection again and again to a higher power, multiplying it in an endless series of mirrors.”<sup>30</sup>

For Schlegel, it bears *iterating* [100]. Romantic poetry is by no means the antipode to philosophy; to the contrary, it is integral to philosophy’s *telos*. “For in philosophy the path to science goes through art alone, just as the poet, by contrast, becomes an artist only through science” (KFSa 2, 216). In this sense, Schlegel’s understanding of the transcendental character of Romantic poetry directly challenges the transcendental philosophies of Kant and Fichte. Just as Hamann twenty years earlier chastised Kant for thinking of categories and concepts independently of the historical language in which they are expressed, so Schlegel’s identification of the poetry with transcendental self-reflectiveness challenges the purity of the transcendental self-consciousness, whether it be conceived as the ever-present possibility and thus enabling condition of consciousness of objects (Kant) or as the reality that posits itself in the very act of thinking (Fichte). As noted earlier, he compares philosophy to an epic poem, always having to start *in medias res*, a whole that we can come to know only by a circular path. In this spirit, anticipating views that figure strongly for the next two centuries in philosophy (think of the Husserlian zigzag or the hermeneutic circle), he criticizes the philosophy of his contemporaries for being too linear, for “not being sufficiently cyclical” (KFSa 2, 171).

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30. Schlegel, KFSa 2, 182f. [99] As for the title “Romantic,” it bears recalling that *Roman* is the German for “novel” and that the Romantics appreciated highly imaginative, genre-mixing, and ironic fantasies typified by such Romance-language writers as Dante and Cervantes – the author of “the only thoroughly Romantic novel,” in Schlegel’s view (KFSa 16, 176); Behler, *German Romantic Literary Theory*, 168f. [101]

Schlegel's repudiation of his earlier obsession with objectivity does not entail that criticism is unprincipled. Although critics lack access to "some universal ideal," they can determine the "*individual* ideal of each work" and ought to judge the work in terms of that ideal; in other words, "criticism compares a work with its own ideal" (KFSa 16, 179, 270). Determining that ideal, while never complete, requires that we understand the poet, indeed, understand the poet better than she understands herself, including her confusions.<sup>31</sup> At once echoing Pliny and presenting the basic argument for comparative literature, Schlegel adds that we can understand the poet in such a manner only if we are poets ourselves and immerse ourselves in the poet's history and historical context, including the entire literary repertoire on which the poet, wittingly or unwittingly, draws.<sup>32</sup>

*Irony as transcendental buffoonery, religion, and the realist turn*

The vocation of man, Schlegel writes, is to wed the infinite with the finite, even though their complete coincidence is "eternally unattainable."<sup>33</sup> What sustains and arouses the feeling of their "inextinguishable conflict" is irony, the "sublime urbanity of the Socratic muse" and "an actually transcendental buffoonery" (KFSa 2, 152, 160). The images of both Socrates and the buffoon of the Italian stage capture the sense of someone overlooking the scene from within, rising above (transcending) everything conditioned in it, including one's own art, in the process destroying any illusions about it, by mimicking its mannerisms (buffoonery). In just this manner a sense of irony informs the process (subjectivity) and the work (objectivity) of Romantic poetry. As the task of sustaining the feeling of the conflict, irony demands of the poet and the poem a specific sort of self-discipline, a self-restraint that is "the result of self-creation and self-destruction."<sup>34</sup> This sense of irony is also a direct expression of the fusion of philosophy and poetry mentioned earlier. For while Schlegel regards philosophy as irony's "homeland" and irony as a "philosophical capacity," he thinks that poetry can elevate itself to it and, indeed, it is the self-limiting, "skeptical" character of irony that liberates the poet from overestimating her creation, from

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\*31. For a discussion of this principle of understanding the author better than she understands herself in the context of hermeneutics, see the essay by Eric Sean Nelson in *The History of Continental Philosophy: Volume 2*.

32. Schlegel, KFSa 2, 241; 16, 168; 18, 63. Schlegel exemplifies this sort of criticism himself in essays on Jacobi, Forster, Lessing, Wieland, Boccaccio [102], and, above all, Goethe.

33. Schlegel, *Neue philosophische Schriften*, J. Körner (ed.) (Frankfurt: Schulte-Bulmke, 1935), 368.

34. KFSa 2, 149, 172 [103]. Schlegel interprets the naive as what is or seems "natural, individual, or classic" to the point of irony, a constant alternation of self-creation and self-destruction.

falling prey to her own proclivities (naive or sentimental, objective or subjective). “Irony is philosophically witty” and “In transcendental poetry,” Schlegel declares, “irony dominates.”<sup>35</sup>

In “Ideas,” Schlegel counterposes poetry as a realism with philosophy as an idealism and the role of irony, the combination of the real with the ideal, falls to religion or, better, a religion and a humanity yet to come. Thus, after arguing that “logic can develop into philosophy only through religion” and that “only someone who has his own religion can be an artist,” Schlegel advises that “there is as yet no religion” (KFSA 2, 257, 260, 264f [104]). Religion takes shape linguistically in the form of myth and, accordingly, Schlegel calls for the creation of a new mythology, one that fills the absence left by the old mythology’s demise, an absence that forced modern poets inward. While short on details, Schlegel describes this new mythology as “a new realism,” no less boundless than the idealism of the age from which it emerges (KFSA 2, 259, 312–15).

#### CONCLUSION

For all their differences, the aesthetics of Schiller and Schlegel have much in common.<sup>36</sup> Placing philosophical speculation at the center of criticism and literature, each draws critically on the transcendental philosophies of Kant and Fichte. Each writer struggles to come to terms with modernity’s increasingly rationalistic, artificial, and alienating character in contrast to antiquity’s presumed naturalness. At the same time, without denying Greek poetry its paradigmatic status, both extol the distinctiveness of modern poetry. Neither fails to appreciate the moral and political import, however indirect, of art and literature. What is at stake in literature for both of them is humanity’s defining, self-liberating potential.

Yet their differences are no less marked. “Sentimental poetry,” for example, is hardly synonymous with “Romantic poetry.” The realism of Romantic poetry has in fact more affinities with the naturalism of naive poetry than the moralism characteristic of sentimental poetry – a difference exemplified by their assessments of Shakespeare, whom Schiller considered a natural poet and Schlegel extolled as a Romantic poet. Mention has already been made of the fact that Schlegel’s distinction between “Classic” [105] and “Romantic” has, in Dilthey’s words, “proven more fruitful” than Schiller’s distinction. Dilthey and others

35. KFSA 2, 152; Ingrid Strohschneider-Kohrs, *Die romantische Ironie in Theorie und Gestaltung*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1977), 36, 44.

36. Hermann Hettner, *Die romantische Schule in ihrem inneren Zusammenhange mit Goethe und Schiller* (Brunswick: Vieweg, 1850); Fritz Strich, *Deutsche Klassik und Romantik oder Vollendung und Unendlichkeit*, 4th ed. (Bern: Francke, 1949).

attribute this development to basic differences in their project. Schiller analyzes the essence of poetry into two basic forms and, although he does so with an eye to freeing modern poetry from the criteria of Greek poetry, his understanding of those forms is shaped by aesthetic considerations framed more by anthropology than by history. By contrast, Schlegel's point of departure and method, indeed, his philosophy itself, is thoroughly historical; he understands modern, Romantic poetry as the outgrowth of classical poetry and as an organic, unfinished unity that partakes and reflects the organic, unfinished unity of culture (a culture, moreover, without European borders).<sup>37</sup>

The differences between these aesthetic legacies are patent when we compare Schiller's concept of play with Schlegel's concept of irony. In both cases, a sense of aesthetic freedom is achieved in the face of an underlying dualism via a reciprocal relation between finite and infinite. Yet for Schiller, the play drive famously joins opposing drives, the sensory-passive-material drive with the rational-active-formal drive, yielding an aesthetic condition, the counterpart to beauty, the "happy equilibrium" in which "no trace of the division remains behind in the whole" ([106] 138, 166). The content and aim of aesthetic education is "to shape [*auszubilden*] the whole of our sensory and spiritual powers in the greatest possible harmony" (146 n.).<sup>38</sup> Schiller understands the aesthetic condition – means and end of the aesthetic education – as a matter of opposing and thus negating both sensory and moral needs in order to arrive at a kind of equanimity, equivalent to what he labels "a canceling of time in time" and a "capacity of carrying out what is infinite within the finite" (126, 165). "In the aesthetic condition, the human being is accordingly *naught* [*Null*]" (147).

By contrast, Schlegel demands of the poet an awareness of the ineradicable division of conditioned and unconditioned that determines her every work and does so in every detail, entailing a constant process of "self-creation and self-annihilation." From the vantage point of this Romantic irony, there can only be an ongoing process of self-overcoming reflection and there can be no pretension to an endgame of some harmonious totality. While the playfulness

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37. Richard Brinkmann, "Romantische Dichtungstheorie in Friedrich Schlegels Frühschriften und Schillers Begriffe des Naiven und Sentimentalischen," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 32 (1958); Wilhelm Dilthey, *Leben Schleiermachers*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, XIII, Martin Redeker (ed.) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), 243f [107]. Some other differences are worth noting: Schlegel, coming from a renowned literary family, was steeped in ancient literature, reading it with ease in the original; the same could not be said for Schiller (Behler, "Einleitung," *KFSA* 1, CLXXIV); Schiller expressed his eventual disenchantment with the French Revolution while Schlegel still championed it; see Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative*, 48f [108]. A decade before his work on Sanskrit and the wisdom of India, Schlegel urges poets to look to India for "what is supremely Romantic" (*KFSA* 2, 320).

38. See Strohschneider-Kohrs, *Die romantische Ironie*, 228.

of aesthetic semblance (encompassing poet, poem, and reader) is a liberating equilibrium, Romantic irony is liberating precisely by instantiating the disequilibrium between this experience and reality. If Schiller's notion of sublimity and the aesthetic condition prefigures a Nietzschean freedom beyond good and evil, Schlegel's Romanticism anticipates the self-overcoming to which Zarathustra calls us.

Yet, as Schlegel himself notes, irony, while essential, is not the whole of Romantic poetry. His depiction of it as "a wonderful, eternal alternation [*Wechsel*] of enthusiasm and irony" suggests that irony needs the play of the aesthetic condition and semblance – even if only because it, like modern art, is a "rebellion against semblance."<sup>39</sup> So, too, in what might well be a nod to Schiller, Schlegel stresses Romantic poetry's dependence on a "naive profundity" allowing the "semblance" of an imaginary world to shine through. "The beginning of all poetry is to cancel the course and the laws of reason thinking reasonably and transport us again to the beautiful confusion of fantasy" (KFSa 2, 319). This beginning is, however, only the beginning; irony is the transcendental buffoonery that poeticizes the poem, the realistic reminder that the play of aesthetic semblance is mere play, a reproduction of "the endless play of the world."

#### MAJOR WORKS

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39. KFSa 2, 318f [318–19?]; Theodor Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1993 [110]), 157; published in English as *Aesthetic Theory*, Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (eds), Robert Hullot-Kentor (trans.) (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 102f [111]. On "the beautiful semblance" as the presupposition of all plastic art and "even an important half of poetry," see Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Walter Kaufmann (trans.) (New York: Vintage, 1967), 34f [112], translation modified.

*Über die naïve und sentimentalische Dichtung* (1795–96). In *Schillers Werke*, vol. 20, 413–503.  
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*Friedrich Schlegel*

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