

# SCHILLER

T.J. Reed



PAST MASTERS

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For Malcolm Pasley

## Note on references

- H refers to the Hanser Verlag edition of Schiller's works in five volumes, edited by Gerhard Fricke and Herbert G. Göpfert, Munich 1958-9. Quotations are by volume (small Roman) and page (Arabic), e.g. iv. 63.
- P and D in the discussion of *Wallenstein*, refer respectively to the second and third parts of the trilogy, *The Piccolomini* and *Wallenstein's Death*.

All Schiller's verse-plays are quoted by line-numbers. Letters are quoted by date and sender and/or recipient. All translations are my own.\*

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## Introduction

In a letter of 27 August 1794 confirming their new-found friendship and looking forward to an alliance which would transform the German literary world, Goethe wrote to Schiller: 'I have always had a high regard for the rare integrity and seriousness that are plain in everything you have written and done.' The simple testimony is easily overlooked amid the wealth of literary insights and projects that crowd the early pages of their correspondence. Yet Goethe's words go to the core of the man. High seriousness is the stamp of everything Schiller undertook and achieved. No writer was ever more committed to the civilizing purposes of literature, its vital place in the public forum, its capacity to change human beings and their society. Few can have argued that case to a greater philosophical depth or with more passionate eloquence. Perhaps no critic has placed literature in such a grand and coherent framework of historical development and intrinsic values, while at the same time making so many concise individual judgements that are intuitively persuasive. Certainly no literary legislator ever made greater demands on poetry and poets—on himself most of all: he wore out his health meeting them, and died at the age of forty-six.

The dominant image of Schiller is accordingly that of a tireless crusader, a moral authority, a lofty idealist of whose commitment to truth, goodness and beauty Goethe could later write in a commemorative poem that it left 'behind him, as a sham without a substance, The mean banality that tames us all'. Many of the dramatic characters Schiller created seem to reflect this. In grim situations they assert elevated values and win moral victories of a kind at odds with modern pessimistic assumptions. They make the moral issues explicit and mark the moment of victory in memorable formulas, which were duly memorized and much quoted by cultivated people in the nineteenth century and have lived on as increasingly worn common-places to irritate later, more sceptical generations. Nowhere in



## *Schiller*

Schiller's work is there successful comedy, and he made few and strictly localized attempts at it.

All this may suggest that Schiller not only led a strenuous intellectual and moral life himself, but will also prove to be a bit of a strain for the reader—that the moral authority will turn out to be a moralizer, the crusader a humourless prig, the idealist short of the necessary realism to make his vision convincing. The answer is that Schiller, though a moralist, is not a moralizer. He can be and has been made to appear one only when the aphorisms that come at climactic points in his dramas are taken, against all the rules of good reading, in isolation from the struggles that give the dramas their substance. There is rarely priggishness because his characters and their situations are realized in accessible and moving terms. The men and women who achieve victories over their circumstances and themselves are shown with none of their human weaknesses hidden, they are not beings of a different world from ours. For them, and for Schiller himself in his poems and essays, ideals by their very nature are enough to keep those who try to achieve them realistic, humble, human. The odds against fulfilling a high aim, and the length of the task that stretches ahead once we are committed to it, are part of his theme. The tone is consequently more often wistful and elegiac than hortatory.

Given all this, it would be premature to rule Schiller's literary idealism out of court. High aspirations do not automatically demand to be ironized, however unfashionable they may have become. Irony is an often necessary salt, but there are some great dishes it must not be allowed to spoil. What is more, Schiller's vision is generous and inclusive. He knows what we need to make us whole, even when—or rather, especially when—it is something that his character or circumstances denied to him personally. Thus he devoted most of his working life to the creation of tragedy, yet in his overall conception of literature he gives the higher place to comedy; for only in the harmonious conclusions that comedy characteristically achieves do we rise above the harshness of mere heroic struggle and taste something of the serenity of the gods (v. 1018). In the same spirit, though his plays and his theoretical essays on drama both focus on the processes of rational reflection and

anguished decision, he believes that ethical perfection would—and in rare fortunate individuals does—consist in a spontaneous natural grace of action. Similarly, although by the necessity of cultural history as he saw it he himself was a highly reflective modern writer, he located supreme poetic achievement in distant ages of naïve unselfconsciousness—or, once again, in the rare individuals who had somehow managed to retain or restore in themselves that enviable primal state. More fundamentally still, the essence of all aesthetic experience lay for this earnest mind in the activity of *play* (*Spiel*). That made art the highest and richest of mankind's activities, because human beings only play when they are in the fullest sense human, and they are only fully human when they play (v. 618).

Finally—and most famously, because Beethoven took the young Schiller's words and built them into the climactic choral movement of his last symphony—what may lie beyond all human earnestness and effort is the condition of joy. Not, it is true, a self-indulgent emotion, nor the kind of sublime but still individual sentiment that Wordsworth felt in nature's lonely places, but a generous elation which grows out of the forms of happiness people experience in their separate lives and carries them beyond individuality and social convention into loving community. When he wrote his ode 'To Joy' in 1785, Schiller had been lifted out of despair by the enthusiastic appreciation of a group of young people in Leipzig whom he had never met. It was a moment, rare in his life, when reality seemed briefly less resistant to his efforts, and human warmth and solidarity seemed the norm.

Johann Christoph Schiller was born in 1759 on 10 November (Luther's birthday) in the small town of Marbach in Württemberg, and spent his childhood years in that neighbourhood. His father was a man of humble origins who had begun to learn the surgeon's trade, but then been tempted to 'go for a soldier'. He had seen action as a mercenary (on both sides, by the chance of capture) in the War of the Austrian Succession. He was now a recruiting officer in the service of the Duke of Württemberg and not in easy circumstances, in part because he was sometimes left unpaid. Later, in 1775, he became overseer

of the gardens at one of the Duke's new castles, Schloss Solitude. He had an eye for practicalities and an urge to communicate: he wrote books, on agriculture in Württemberg (1769) and on tree-cultivation in general (1795). Both of these works edged beyond the merely practical into the social. The Württemberg economy, half ruined by a succession of spendthrift dukes, could well do with the improved farming practices Johann Kaspar Schiller had observed in the course of his campaigns; and his passion for trees inspired him to address the mighty of his day in forthright terms: 'Your fine houses and gardens are closed to the country people. Recompense them with the sight and enjoyment of a thousand avenues of trees, and their descendants will bless you for it.' By 1789, Johann Kaspar was claiming to have planted some thirty thousand trees and shrubs himself. It is all a gentle portent: the concern for society's welfare, the address to the powerful, and that massed natural growth springing up from within the artificiality of one of the petty courts by which eighteenth-century Germany was divided-and-ruled, together make an apt prelude to the young Schiller's work, which links social rebellion with natural growth and impulse.

These too were being cultivated, though not by design, at Castle Solitude where Schiller was undergoing an education he had not wanted. His reaction to it was eventually to cast him out, with only his genius to support him, on a society neither welcoming to genius nor designed to accommodate it. The 1770s in Germany had seen a revolt by a group of slightly self-conscious literary 'geniuses', the so-called 'Storm and Stress' (*Sturm und Drang*) writers, against literary rules and more substantive social restrictions. But this brief 'genius period', though it beneficially loosened up literature, gained no substantive freedoms. For Schiller, coming a little later, his chosen freedom meant struggling to survive in a harsh environment where literary patronage was hard to come by and where the literary market had not yet developed even the simple institutions like copyright which can make it feasible to live by the pen. And freedom in his case also meant exile from his native duchy and separation from his family and friends, a dismal rootlessness which was hardly relieved by the opportunity it gave him to claim that he was now an Enlightenment cosmopolitan

(v. 855). True, it was exile from a limiting provincialism, a move to a cultural centre that looked more promising and where he had achieved a sensational first success in the theatre. But the promise stayed unfulfilled, the prospects dissolved, the 'centre' finally rejected him. There was no true literary centre to this fragmented Germany, which was still as far from cultural as from political nationhood. An adequate base from which to create what Schiller had it in him to create was something which itself still had to be created. Helping Goethe to do that was to be one of Schiller's achievements.

Meantime, body and soul had to be kept together by literary makeshifts that stole time from more ambitious projects, hampered the growth of a poet's mind, and used up energies that were not boundlessly renewable. So that by the time Schiller did have a settled centre for his work and was truly free to follow his chosen course, he had just one decade left. It became a decade of intense creative work, matched and stimulated by Goethe's equally intense activity, and given a sense of coherent purpose by their partnership. Schiller wrote his dramatic masterpiece the trilogy *Wallenstein*, four more major plays, numerous adaptations and translations (of Euripides, Shakespeare, Racine), an impressive body of poetry, two great essays in aesthetics and literary criticism, and a correspondence (especially with Goethe and with Wilhelm von Humboldt) which is a mine of insights. All this by stubborn persistence against the ill health that was the legacy of his early struggles. It issued a clear warning as early as 1791, when he suffered months of severe illness.

Highpoint, maturity, and decline thus virtually coincide—or rather, there is no decline, no mellow descent into age after the high plateau of maturity, no late wisdom, no final statement with rich autumnal colouring. Only an abrupt cessation. Like Keats, who wondered whether his pen would ever fully 'glean his teeming brain' and bring the 'full ripened grain' safely in, Schiller consciously worked against time. His image is as striking as the one Keats used, and has an even more urgent note of danger: 'I will do what I can,' he wrote to Goethe on 31 August 1794, 'and when the building collapses I will perhaps have rescued what is worth preserving from the fire.' He died on 9 May 1805. A new historical drama lay partly worked out on his desk.

# 1 Absolutism and revolt

## *An education*

Schiller was both victim and beneficiary of eighteenth-century absolutism. In 1773, already at the age of fourteen resolved to study theology and train for the Church—the classic start in life of middle-class Swabian intellectuals—he was torn from family, school, and chosen career and placed in the Duke of Württemberg's Academy, the 'Hohe Karlsschule' or 'Karl's High School'. It was the Duke's own doing: Karl Eugen kept an eye open for signs of ability in reports from schools and in chance encounters with his subjects. His offer to educate your son was then a virtual command; a father who declined it risked disfavour and the ruin of his own career. Schiller's father did decline at first, on the ground that the Academy could not offer the theological training his son wanted. It was not in an easy position to do so, as the foundation of a Catholic Duke in a jealously Protestant state, which already had a time-honoured faculty and famous seminary at Tübingen. But the subject's personal preference counted for little. At the third time of asking, already dangerously late, Schiller's father yielded. In return the Duke promised that the boy would be better provided for than any preacher. Schiller was put down to be a lawyer; later he switched to medicine when the new faculty was added, perhaps because of his father's old interest.

Founding his Academy was the most striking act of Karl Eugen's later reign. Being pressed into it was the dominant experience of Schiller's early life. Two forces normally opposed to each other in eighteenth-century society here meet in a paradoxical mixture: on the one hand education, through which Enlightenment thinkers hoped to bring about social change and human fulfilment, and on the other hand arbitrary power, which limited that fulfilment drastically and cried out for change most urgently. Here for once was power promoting

education. Which element in the mixture dominated? Was it a truly enlightened absolutism, or was it despotism thinly disguised? The answer matters, not just for our judgement of a not very significant eighteenth-century ruler, but for our judgement of Schiller's in every sense dramatic beginnings and of their place and value in his life's work.

Karl Eugen came to the throne of Württemberg in 1744, aged sixteen and prematurely declared to be of age for the purpose. Over the next twenty-five years he was virtually a caricature of unenlightened absolutism. He strained the resources of his small state so as to emulate the glories of a greater—he had stayed briefly at Louis XV's court in 1748. He spent freely on ballet, opera, festivities, and an army. He built on a grand scale, castles and palaces (seven in one decade) lodges, gardens, and one of the largest opera-houses in Europe. He engaged the best Italian and French dancers, artists, and craftsmen. The Württemberg Estates at first met his demands without demur, which is surprising, since he was continuing a long dynastic tradition of excess. But their resistance grew with his demands and the peremptoriness of his tone (he upbraided them for opposing 'the just commandments and desires of a most gracious father of his people'). Withholding money was the only power the Estates had, not enough to make Württemberg the 'only other constitutional monarchy in Europe', as Charles James Fox called it, but enough to ensure a constant battle between court extravagance and bourgeois obstinacy. Karl Eugen's attempts to bypass the Estates and finance himself from other sources were unsavoury. Treaties at different times with France and Prussia brought him in 'subsidies' in return for an undertaking to provide troops should they ever need them. In effect, he was selling his subjects. The practice was admittedly common enough in eighteenth-century Germany. So was the perception of a fundamental opposition underlying the financial conflict, namely that between pious bourgeois rectitude and cynical court immorality. The Duke filled the conventional role exactly: his female artistes often did double duty; contemporaries numbered his mistresses in treble figures, colour-coded shoes for the current favourite helped keep track of a fast-changing situation. More seriously, justice was flouted and

corrupted. People were imprisoned for being personally or politically inconvenient: a singer who revealed an early *affaire* of the Duke's to his wife was held for ten years; a rival of the Duke's Minister Count Montmartin for four years, on the evidence of a forged letter; the celebrated lawyer and spokesman of the Estates, Johann Jakob Moser, for five years on the ground of 'unruly and unbridled behaviour' (i.e. speaking out against the Duke).

In short, for the first half of his reign Karl Eugen enjoyed all the opportunities and fulfilled none of the responsibilities of power. His former patron Frederick the Great, in whose Berlin he had spent the two years before acceding, but without apparently picking up anything of the Prussian King's frugal dedication to duty, wrote that 'the Duke enjoys disorder and seems determined to leave his successors a ruined country'; he had indeed managed to emulate the French monarchy at least in the size of his debts. In 1764, all else failing, the Estates laid a formal list of complaints before the Imperial Council in Vienna, and in 1770 a judgement was passed on all points in their favour, though tactfully disguised under the title 'hereditary settlement'. But just as the Duke's powers were being limited from without, in 1771 he met Franziska von Leutrum who was to be his mistress and eventually wife for the rest of his days, and she achieved his reform from within. So much so that on his fiftieth birthday in February 1778 he had a 'manifesto' read from every pulpit in the land, confessing his past failings, declaring himself born again, and promising in the 'second period of Our life' a new devotion to justice and the welfare of his people.

This is the changed man who in 1771 founded the Academy and spent much of his time overseeing it. There looks to be a satisfying symmetry: half a reign as profligate and despot, then, saved by the love of a good woman, the second half filled with virtue and good works. The pulpit manifesto, too, seems edifying in the manner of a baroque morality play, not to say a parody of moral decision in one of Schiller's own late dramas. But then Karl Eugen had, if nothing else, a taste for theatre—comic theatre, it seemed to Schiller, whose poem 'The Evil Monarchs' (published in 1782) includes these words:

You pay the debt of youthful bankruptcy  
With vows and virtue laughable to see,  
Inventions of a clown. (i. 107)



And, motives and sincerity apart, how deep did change go in practice? Württemberg life was not transformed at a stroke. Finances remained shaky, the Duke still went in for extravagant building and entertaining, there was a further 'subsidy' treaty, this time with Holland. Worse, his most infamous act of arbitrary imprisonment fell in the 'reformed' years. In 1777, the poet and journalist Schubart was lured on to Württemberg territory and arrested. He had coined the phrase 'slave plantation' for the Academy, and celebrated its founder's new leanings with an epigram:

When Dionysius of Syracuse  
Gave up the ways of tyranny,  
What did he choose to be?  
A country dominie.

Schubart was held for ten years, again as in the earlier cases a vindictiveness out of all proportion to the offence. Franziska, apparently, looked on as Schubart was led into the Hohenasperg fortress.

All this suggests more continuity than contrast between the two halves of Karl Eugen's reign. So does the history of the Academy itself. As a 'military seminary' for sons of the nobility and middle classes to be trained for the army and the professions, it dates from 1771. But it was not founded on a sudden new beneficent impulse. Humbler training enterprises preceded it: an academy of arts, a school for the building trades: expensive foreign artists and craftsmen were to be replaced by cheaper local products wholly under the Duke's control. That would ease his financial difficulties. The Academy's purpose was just as practical: to train cadres of unquestioningly loyal public servants, indebted for and indoctrinated by their education. Thus a scheme to lessen the Duke's bills was backed by a scheme to lessen the traditional Württemberg spirit of opposition.

The Academy was run accordingly: the pupils in military uniform, under military discipline and close supervision; no holidays or compassionate leave; rarely visitors. An application to leave the school for good was treated as something between a breach of discipline and a personal affront to the Duke. If granted, it meant repaying the full cost of the education so far



received. The Duke's regular visits had to be met with regular obsequiousness towards him and his mistress, particularly in ceremonial addresses of flattery and gratitude which the pupils (Schiller included) had to compose and deliver.

Local historians and apologists for Karl Eugen argue that some of this—uniform, separation from parents—was Enlightenment practice, found in other schools of the period; that Schiller would have been as cramped and constrained in the Tübingen Seminary which his ambition would have preferred; that taking education out of the hands of the Protestant authorities was forward-looking; that many sound men were trained at the Academy who looked back on it with gratitude; and that for anyone but a poet, with it (it is implied) an excessive and unrepresentative 'lust for liberty', this was an undertaking of enlightened modernity.

Yet the 'lust' for liberty is crucial, and no institution that represses it can properly be called 'enlightened'. True Enlightenment, as it was already understood for example in Kant's essays of the 1780s, which sum up the values evolved in Germany over several decades, means giving free scope to the individual's perceptions and potential without laying down a fixed course for their development, in the faith that human variety and its free interaction are ultimately to the public good. Karl Eugen's strictly instrumental use of local abilities was neither enlightened nor, in the true sense, education. It was training. And though Schiller's reaction in his first play, *The Robbers*, goes far beyond the Enlightenment's measured conception of social change, and does so with a violence of action and language that was consciously designed to get the work 'burned by the public hangman', that does not make his frustrated desire for freedom merely eccentric or unrepresentative. The explosive force of words and imagination which makes him exceptional is his way of being, precisely, representative. For what else does the poet's function consist in, if not to voice human experiences and needs where others grope for expression or do not dare to speak?

That freedom was centrally at issue in the Academy was plain even to the casual eye. A young woman visitor in 1783—seven years later she was to become Schiller's wife—wrote that 'the