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‘Cast off
the fear
of the earthly...’

Beauty as a Necessary Condition of Humanity

by Helga Zepp-LaRouche

Were we to look upon mankind today with the eyes of Friedrich Schiller, what would we see? The wishes and desires of the majority of our contemporaries, the way they paint themselves in the kind of “entertainment” they prefer—just consider the aggrandizement of bestial violence and sexual perversion of the video industry, or the unbearable banality of soap-operas and the game-shows—people manifest themselves as thoroughly corrupted egoists, brutalized to an astonishing degree and fundamentally completely uncreative.

While, on the one hand, the world has become a village through the effect of the electronic mass media, and we can see catastrophes in the most distant continents in our own living rooms, the complete indifference toward the blatant genocide, on the other hand, be it in Bosnia or Rwanda, shows that this reality means nothing to most

people, and that they have lost the capacity for compassion.

The old and the sick, poor people, are denied medical care with a shamelessness which would make the Nazis pale with envy—in Holland or Oregon there are even laws which legitimate assisting someone to commit suicide—and rich people simply buy the organs of the poor, who usually give them up by no means voluntarily.

No, to be sure, it is not a pretty picture which our human society gives of itself today. And in spite of the various forms of progress in different areas of life, we must ask ourselves today the same question which Friedrich Schiller posed, as an indictment, two hundred years ago: “Why is it, that we are still barbarians?”

Schiller posed this question in the *Letters on the Aesthet-*

Leonardo da Vinci, “Pointing Lady in a Landscape,” “Profiles of an Old Man and a Youth.”

ic Education of Man, which he wrote in 1793 to Duke Christian of Schleswig-Holstein-Augustenburg. At that time, the terror of the Jacobins had just destroyed the hopes of all the republican forces in Europe, that the example of the anti-oligarchical revolution in America might be repeated in France, and the inalienable rights of *all* people, including those on the European continent, could be realized in a constitutional republic. Schiller wrote:

The edifice of the natural state is wavering, its brittle foundations are cracking, and there seems to be a *physical* possibility to put the Law upon the throne, to finally honor man as an end unto himself and to make true freedom into the foundation of a political union. Vain hope! The *moral* possibility is lacking, and the generous moment finds an unresponsive people.

In retrospect, we have to observe that unfortunately it was not only the “generous moment” of the French Revolution which was missed; for it was also that which had rightly been called the great historical opportunity for Europe, the opening of the borders and the collapse of communism in the year 1989.

Instead of fulfilling the hopes of the people in the East with a grand design for reconstruction, combined with a cultural Renaissance, there was the economic devastation of the so-called “Free Market” economy, purely oriented to the policy of quick money. As a consequence of that policy, we are facing today economic ruin and threatening social explosion in the East. Unfortunately, the “*moral* possibility” to exploit the historical moment and to give history a new, more positive direction was lacking here too—and this is true both for governments as well as for the populations, although for different reasons.

It is therefore urgent that we investigate the reasons for this subjective failure in the face of an objectively so unique opportunity, for the collapse of the Soviet Union will in all likelihood, despite the enormous upheavals there, represent only the first and mild wave of an epochal shift that is currently underway.

To put it more precisely, the historical cycle of the so-called modern period of some six hundred years, which began with the Golden Renaissance in Italy, and the conflict since then between the humanistic, Renaissance idea of mankind, which conceives of *all* people as *imago Dei*, as in the image of God, and the oligarchical system spreading outward from Venice, and its irreconcilable enmity, is now coming to an irreversible end.

What is at stake is the question of whether a worldwide Dark Ages, with many regional wars, the proliferation of old and new epidemics, starvation catastrophes, annihilation of entire geographical areas, and a degeneration into a far more profound barbarism will emerge out of the end of this era of mankind, or whether we will

shape political conditions upon this earth in a way which finally corresponds to human dignity. Since the answer to this question will decide the issue of whether we will still find something which deserves to be called “human civilization,” it is worth thinking about how we can create the “*moral* possibility” in the people of our time.

The answer to his question of why “we are still barbarians,” for Schiller, lay in the separation of theoretical reason (and by that he meant the notion of Reason of the Enlightenment of the Eighteenth Century) and its legislation, from the emotions and character of people. Schiller saw it as his particular pedagogical task to “ennoble” the “fragmented” human beings toward a completeness of character, and thus to intervene into the crisis of his time, and to show a way out of the crisis for a “disjoined society.”

Schiller took it as self-evident, that events had proven that any improvement in political conditions would only be possible by ennobling individual people. What were the conditions under which he wrote that?

The French Revolution represented a radical collapse of the philosophy of the Enlightenment, which had dominated France in the Eighteenth Century, despite some republican tendencies here and there. This collapse was no less dramatic than the failure of communism in our time, i.e., it confronted the thinking people in the population with the fact that, obviously, the entire system of axioms upon which the thought of the Enlightenment had been based since Descartes, was based on entirely false premises.

How else could it have happened that the area of enlightened Reason, which pretended to liberate people, nevertheless ended in the bestial slaughter by blind forces, in the Jacobin terror and the Thermidor, so that Reason had actually no political application at all?

The conclusion which Schiller drew from this collapse of the Enlightenment, was that he had to develop a completely new conception of Reason, one based on his ideal of Art and aesthetics, and thus a notion of Reason with a qualitatively different meaning. For Kant, who wrote his *Critiques* of pure and practical reason at approximately the same time, the Enlightenment was the release of individuals from their “unencumbered minority.” Schiller, to the contrary, connected his notion of aesthetic Reason once again directly to the tradition of Cusanus and Leibniz, namely, the tradition in which Reason is the source of creativity.

For the very reason that the “genius” of the time was moving in a direction which threatened to take it further away from the “Art of the Ideal,” Art, according to Schiller, as he demanded in his Second Aesthetic Letter, would have to take

leave of reality and elevate itself above want with honest boldness; for Art is a daughter of Freedom, and it will

receive its prescriptions from the necessity of the mind and not from urgent need. Now, however, need rules, and sunken humanity bends under its tyrannical yoke. *Utility* is the great idol of the time, to which all powers should be enslaved and all talents should pay homage. Upon this coarse balance the intellectual merit of Art has no weight, and deprived of all encouragement, it disappears from the noisy market of the century.

In poetically beautiful language, Schiller here describes the spirit of the time which was dominated by the ideas of Bentham and utilitarianism, which he condemns as the “yoke of mankind.” Is Schiller only talking about his own time, or he is talking about the materialism and the cost-benefit thinking of our time?

As a consequence of the tyranny of these ideologies, Schiller wrote in the Fifth Letter, “in the lower and most numerous classes” the most crude and lawless drives proliferate, “which unleash themselves once the bonds of civil society have been loosened, and with unbridled rage hurry toward their bestial satisfaction.” Is he talking about the *sans culottes* of his time, or the uninhibited pleasure-addicts of our own present time?

“On the other hand, the civilized classes give us a most disgusting sight of torpidity and a depravity of character, which is all the more outrageous, because culture itself is its source. I no longer recall which of the ancient or modern philosophers made the remark, that the more noble is the more horrible in its destruction, but one will find it confirmed in the area of morals as well.” Is Schiller here talking about the degenerate Voltaire, or is he talking about the Jet-Set lifestyle of today’s money-elite?

Does not Schiller’s description sound similar to the problems of today? Where is the ennoblement of the individual—and in this I agree with Schiller, the *only* possibility to improve conditions politically—where is this supposed to come from, if the masses are brutalized and the elites are degenerate?

Contrary to the debased image of mankind of the French and English Enlightenment, which views the human being as a beast which can only be constrained with a social contract, seeking pleasure and avoiding pain without a will, Schiller establishes an image of mankind which defines the human being in the highest possible way: “*Every* individual man, one can say, carries by predisposition and destiny, a purely ideal man within himself, to agree with whose immutable unity in all his alterations is the great task of his existence.”

The question of the meaning of life—which would later drive the existentialist philosophers like Heidegger and the nihilists of all sorts out of their minds—Schiller here answers with an immensely culturally optimistic concept of man, which essentially accepts man as genius and as a beautiful soul, that this is the

only condition corresponding to his inborn dignity.

That human being is a beautiful soul, who has so educated his emotions to the high level of Reason, that he can blindly trust all of his impulses, because for him Reason and Passion, Necessity and Freedom, have become one. A beautiful soul is the Good Samaritan, who, without caring for his own advantage, does what is necessary.

Since the present is fragmented, Schiller observes, people themselves develop only fragmentarily, and never develop the harmony of their being; “. . . instead of expressing humanity in his nature, [man] becomes merely an expression of his business, his science.”

Schiller criticizes societies which value human beings only by utilitarian criteria—the one person is valued only for his memory, the other only for his thinking in columns of numbers, and another for his mechanical talents, and the society is completely indifferent with respect to the character of people as long as they demonstrate that they know something, even praising the crassest brutality of mind if only law and order are respected. The consequence is, that individuals become cripples, “the abstract thinker often has a *cold heart*,” and the businessman a *narrow* one.

“But can it be the purpose of man to fail himself for the sake of some other purpose?” Schiller asks. “Is it possible that Nature, for the sake of her purposes, shall deprive us of a perfection which Reason, for the sake of its own purposes, prescribes to us? It must therefore be wrong, that the development of the particular capacities of a person makes it necessary to sacrifice the whole; or, even if the Law of Nature thrust in that direction, we must nevertheless be capable of restoring, by means of a higher art, this wholeness in our nature, which art has destroyed.”

In order that people who are either too tired and exhausted from battling with material need, or who are impeded by the inertia of nature and by cowardice of heart, may nevertheless find their way to this goal, the heart must be opened, which is the prerequisite for their being able not only to recognize Reason, but also to learn to love it. “Development of the capacity of feeling is therefore the most urgent requirement of the time,” says Schiller, “not only because it becomes a means to make improved understanding effective in life, but just because it awakens this improvement of understanding.”

Since the constitution of the state is of a barbaric character, this ennoblement of character must issue from a different source, one which can keep itself free of political corruption, and this, according to Schiller, is fine art, since both art and science can preserve to themselves “an absolute immunity against the arbitrariness of men.”

For the artist, if he really deserves the name, must not serve the spirit of the time, he must be guided by the uni-

versal truths of Classical periods, in order then to return into his own century as a “foreign form,” “not to make his time happy with his appearance, but to purify it terribly, like the son of Agamemnon.”

Of course, Schiller concedes, in ancient times there were also people like ours of today, people who close themselves off from the efficacy of beautiful art: “I do not speak of them, the people who despise the Graces only because they have never been favored by them.” And in a renewed attack upon utilitarianism and pragmatism, he continues:

Those who know no other standard of value than the work it takes to obtain something and the profit they can lay their hands on, how should they be capable of doing justice to the quiet work of aesthetic taste upon the outer and inner human being, and how should they not lose sight of the fundamental advantages of beautiful culture in the sight of its incidental disadvantages? The human being who lacks form, despises all grace as if it were bribery, all elegance of manners as if it were a disguise, all delicacy and greatness of behavior as exaggeration and affectation.

But, for beautiful art to be able to fulfill the immense task it has, although it addresses itself to emotional capacities, and to capacities which are in the area of sensuality, it must not be based upon sensuous experience as its source, because it is just that which has to be tested: i.e., whether what one experiences as beautiful, really is beautiful.

With that, with this kind of testing, Schiller prepares the way for defining a new “Legislation for the Aesthetic World,” not only to reply to the bankruptcy of aesthetics of people like Shaftesbury, which collapsed along with the philosophy of the Enlightenment, but Schiller picks up the feud started by Kant, who had claimed in his *Critique of Judgment* that there can be objective standards for Reason, but not for aesthetic taste. Kant went so far as to claim that it would denigrate a work of art if we could recognize in it the plan of the artist, and an arabesque arbitrarily thrown upon the wall would be superior in any case to such a work of art.

So, a valid notion of beauty cannot be derived from the field of sensuous experience, according to Schiller’s requirements. He writes:

This notion of beauty, derived from pure *reason*, if such a notion can be demonstrated, must be sought in an abstraction—because it cannot be derived from any concretely given example, but, instead, this abstract notion must justify and guide our judgment of each concrete case—and this abstract notion must be capable of demonstration out of the possibility of sensuously reasoning nature. In a word: it must be demonstrable that beauty is a necessary condition of humanity.

What Schiller expresses here, is nothing less than that humanity cannot actually exist without beauty, at least not in any way which does justice to the idea of humanity. By defining anew a purely rational notion of beauty, and, connected with that, the notion of Aesthetic Reason, he simultaneously achieves a completely new point of departure for initiating political change.

Schiller continues:

We must therefore elevate ourselves to the pure notion of humanity, and since experience demonstrates to us only particular circumstances of particular people, but never humanity as such, we must discover that which is Absolute and Lasting out of these individual and changeable forms of appearances, and, by casting away all of the fortuitous limits, seek to empower ourselves with the necessary conditions of our existence.

And he makes a characteristically Platonic remark with respect to this requirement: “. . . he who does not dare to supersede reality [by which he means the world of sensuous experience], will never conquer the truth!”

This is Schiller’s discussion of the necessity for the aesthetic education of mankind in the first ten letters. From Letter XI to XXVII, he generates this notion of Aesthetic Reason philosophically. When he uses the terms “material-instinct,” “form-instinct,” and “play-instinct”—terms he had newly coined—these terms have nothing whatsoever to do with “instinct” or “drive” theory in psychology.

In Schiller’s use of these terms, they characterize various ways in which people behave. “Material-instinct,” for example, is by no means sensuous experience understood only negatively; for instead, it describes the capability to encompass a growing richness of phenomena. Every assimilation of reality depends upon such an openness to the outside, and were the material-instinct to be realized in its extreme potentialities, the human being would realize himself entirely, and ultimately become part of the phenomenal world in time.

Nevertheless, the material-instinct, the way Schiller conceives of it, is an essential feature of the human personality:

However laudable our principles be, how can we be just, kind, and human toward others if this capacity is missing, to be able to assimilate foreign natures in our own, appropriate foreign situations, and make foreign emotions into our own? But this capacity is suppressed in the education we receive, as well as in that we provide ourselves to the extent that one seeks to break the power of desires and make the character firm by means of principles. Since it takes some effort to remain true to one’s principles amidst the excitement of emotion, one grasps upon the more comfortable means of procuring security for character by blunting the emotions; for it is obviously infinitely easier to be

calm in the face of a disarmed opponent than to prevail over a courageous and robust adversary.

Thus, the material-instinct should not be suppressed (quite the contrary, as our capacity to have human emotions depends upon it), but we do have to counter-steer it, nevertheless, which we do by means of the “form-instinct.” Schiller does not mean by this the area of artistic forming, but rather, that feature in a person in which the idea of the Absolute, that existence which is founded upon itself, is situated: the absolute capacity of freedom based in Reason. Form-instinct signifies the lawful inner development of the human being, by means of which he participates in the species.

Between these two direction-vectors of his personality, the human being seems initially torn this way and that. Either he is receptive of the wealth of emotions, thus running the danger of losing his relationship to the species and his spiritual development, or, as a creature endowed with Reason, he tends more in the direction of giving priority to the ordering power of Reason, and all too often thereby sacrificing the multiplicity of phenomena in the process.

In the Thirteenth Letter, Schiller describes how progress in the natural sciences depends upon this openness with respect to phenomena, and also the damage which is done by systematizing the phenomena too quickly:

This premature striving for harmony, before one has collected the individual tones which ought to constitute the harmony, this violent usurpation of the power of thought in an area where it is not its prerogative to rule unconditionally, is the reason for the sterility of so many thinking minds for the best of science, and it is difficult to say whether it is sensuousness, which takes on no form, or Reason, which awaits no content, which has done more damage to the expansion of our knowledge.

In order to attain to Schiller’s idea of the whole personality, it is by no means necessary to seek a bad compromise between lowest common denominators of these two tendencies; again, on the contrary, both of them must be realized to the extreme of their potentiality. He writes: “For the very reason, that both are necessary, and yet both strive for contrary objects, the Will maintains a complete freedom between the two.”

Only now, in this condition of double, mutually balancing tension, is there the possibility of real human Freedom, only here is it possible for the individual to realize his human-beingness.

Schiller calls that which develops out of the reciprocal effect between these two “instincts” or “drives,” the “play-drive,” and what he means by that, is the aesthetic condition which alone permits the human being to

find wholeness at a higher level. He writes:

Were there cases, however, where [man] has this double experience simultaneously, where he is at once aware of his freedom and perceives his thinking, where he senses himself as material and also comes to know himself as spirit, then in these cases, and only in these cases, he would have a complete vision of his humanity, and the object which provided him this vision would become a symbol for him of his fulfilled destiny (since this is only to be attained in the totality of time), and it would serve him as a representation of the Infinite.

The process of becoming conscious of this aesthetic condition, by which—as we will soon see—Schiller means the spiritual attitude from which alone the creative act is possible, signifies for the human being the recognition of his humanity, his “fulfilled destiny,” and thus serves as a “representation of the Infinite.” By that he says nothing other, than that the creative act itself is the key to the actual infinite.

The “play-drive,” the power which realizes all of the potentials of a person in reciprocal effect, is, according to Schiller, aimed at “suspending time within time, reconciling Becoming with Absolute Being, Change with Identity.” With that, he says nothing else than that the play-drive, as the source of creativity, is capable of producing transfinite ideas in a coherent way, whose changing predicates are held together by a higher level which connects all Becoming into Unity. The play-drive, so defined, is thus the key to Plato’s idea of change as the primary reality, which is the issue in the *Parmenides* dialogue. Schiller speaks of the “play-drive” as “freedom in general,” which suspends the “compulsion of perception” as well as the compulsion of reason.”

In Letter XXI, Schiller calls this aesthetic state of mind the “consummated Infinity”; only here, in play, is there complete freedom for human beings. This aesthetic conception of freedom is different from the purely political conception, which is already realized in the human being who governs himself as a sovereign citizen. Schiller speaks of an “aesthetic supersession of duty,” which he calls “noble,” and which he obviously esteems more highly than mere moral fulfillment of duty.

On the one hand, only the aesthetic freedom of the playing, creative human being allows him to be entirely human. But, on the other hand, this is limited to art. In Letter XV, Schiller expresses it this way: “To finally say it straightforwardly: man plays only where he is man in the fullest sense of the word, and he is only fully man where he plays.”

What does Schiller mean by that? And why should this aesthetic condition have any effect in the political arena? Play is the realm of the Ideal, and here the human

being creates rules freely, and by fulfilling these rules in play, he thus wants *voluntarily* that which he should want according to Reason. Thus, he anticipates in his individual life what ought to be so in the state. For in the state, too, a condition is to be achieved, in which the human being no longer perceives his duty as a compulsion, but wills it passionately.

In the Ninth Letter, Schiller discussed the issue of how to deal with the fact that a person who is still barbaric, cannot be reached with appeals, and that it is therefore the task of the artist to seek to educate him by different means.

To the artist he writes:

The seriousness of your principles will frighten them away from you, but they will accept them in play; their taste is more chaste than their heart, and that is where you must take hold of the shy one who is fleeing you. You will besiege their maxims in vain, to no avail will you condemn their deeds, but you can try your formative hand with their indolence. Chase away what is arbitrary, the frivolity, the crudeness from their pleasures, and in that way you shall banish these, unnoticed, from their deeds and finally their beliefs. Wherever you find them, surround them with noble, with grand, with brilliant forms, surround them with symbols of what is excellent, until the appearance vanquishes reality, and art vanquishes nature.

Is this not a fundamental problem of our time? One might demonstrate, with a chronology of the past thirty years, how the negative paradigm shift, which has occurred in this span of time, has brought about an erosion and transformation of values in the so-called entertainment industry, which Schiller calls “pleasures.” The Sex-Rock-Drug counterculture has worked in precisely the opposite direction from that which Schiller laid out: it has let what is arbitrary, frivolous, and crude grow into unprecedented dimensions.

Everyone knows that countless youth have been seduced by perverse violence-videos to commit their own crimes; and that, not so much because of the practiced examples provided, but because the sight of such brutality causes a brutalization of the emotions of the viewers, which tears down the previously existing moral barriers.

It is Schiller’s main idea in his concept of aesthetic education, that beautiful art, in that it takes hold of people exactly at the point where the creative act is demonstrated in the work of art, sets free a positive power in the audience, which remains even after the experience of the work of art—as he explains in the prologue to *The Bride of Messina*:

The self-activity of Reason is opened upon the field of sensuousness by the aesthetic state of mind, the power of feeling is broken within its own limits, and the physical human being is ennobled to such an extent, that the spiritual

human being need only develop out of the same, according to the laws of freedom.

Thus, “ennoblement” occurs, in that the spiritual part of the person has already become effective in the area of sensuousness. The human being, says Schiller, “must learn to desire more nobly, so that it will not be necessary for him to desire sublimely.”

If the human being, through the experience of beautiful art, learns to “suspend time within time,” and to replace “Becoming with Absolute Being,” then he can return to reality and its fragmentation, and set his state-forming power to work in this newly achieved fashion. That is why beautiful art is not an island of beauty, but in this way takes effect in the political arena. This effect can only be understood from the nature of beauty and its influence upon human nature.

In that moment when the person participates in the creative act of the artist, and a resonance occurs with that aesthetic condition in himself, at least at that moment a simultaneity of calm and movement, of tensed effort and relaxing harmony, is generated. Schiller calls this moment of creative suspense, “to participate in the Divinity.” But that which is always One, is God, the human being can only attain in approximation in a process of continuous reciprocity of material and form; and thus, the human being participates in the Divinity all the more, the more he approximates the Ideal established in art. Schiller writes:

While, therefore, the aesthetic state of mind, in one respect, must be considered as zero, as soon as one directs his attention to particular and specific effects, then, in a different respect, it is to be viewed as a condition of *utmost reality*, to the extent that one is attentive to the absence of all limits and to the sum of forces which are mutually effective in it. One cannot say, therefore, that those people are wrong, who proclaim the aesthetic condition to be the most fertile with respect to knowledge and morality. They are quite correct, for a disposition of mind which comprehends the entirety of humanity in itself, must necessarily include each particular expression of it, as potential. A disposition of mind which removes all of the limits from the entirety of human nature, must necessarily remove them from each particular expression of it. Just for that reason, that it takes no particular function of humanity exclusively under its protection, is it favorable to each one, without distinction, and it favors none predominantly, because it is the foundation of the possibility of all of them. All other exercises give the mental disposition of a person a particular skill, but also establish a particular limit for him; only the aesthetic disposition leads to the Unlimited. Every other condition into which we may come, refers back to a previous condition, and requires a succeeding condition as its resolution; only the aesthetical condition is a whole unto itself, since it joins all the conditions of its origin and its continued existence in itself. Here alone do we feel ourselves as if torn out of time,

and our humanity expresses itself with purity and integrity, as if it had not yet experienced a rupture from the effect of external forces.

If one considers all of the aesthetical and philosophical writings of Schiller as a whole, there can be no doubt that this aesthetical condition of human beings was for him not only a stage of development, a particular place on a path—even if he writes in the Letter XXIII: “There is no other way to make the sensuous person reasonable than that one first make him aesthetical.” The aesthetical is actually the center of man’s being.

In the same letter, Schiller says: “In order to lead the aesthetical person to knowledge and greater disposition, nothing more is necessary than to give him important opportunities; in order to obtain the same effect from a sensuous person, one must first change his nature.”

If there is a proof in recent history for the correctness of this thesis, then it is in the relative failure of the epochal opportunity which resulted with the opening of the borders of Europe from 1989 onward. In the case of German unification, the opportunity was not used for just this reason, because neither the government, nor the majority of the population, in the West or in the East, were capable of responding to the opportunity with a great disposition—because everyone was dominated by materialism, albeit in different ways, and could not rise above the arena of the sensuous.

And so it is the task of art and the artist, to project the ideal, which indeed can never be attained in reality, but without the existence of which humanity can never cut itself loose from being bound to the earth. Once the beautiful design, the grand idea, is born, then the path reality must take, is laid out, a path human beings can follow and elevate themselves to the higher domains of their potentials.

In a letter to Countess Schimmelmänn in 1795, Schiller expressed it this way: “The highest philosophy ends with a poetic idea, as does the highest morality, and the highest politics. It is the poetic spirit which provides the idea to all three, and to approximate it is their highest perfection.”

Schiller’s *Thought-Poetry*

The poem “The Artists” appeared four years before *The Aesthetic Letters*, and it is one of the most magnificent examples for a species of poetry in which Schiller establishes a standard previously unattained. Schiller’s *thought-poetry* demonstrates not only the identity of the origin of poetry, rather it expresses the most profound philosophical ideas with such poetic beauty, that they are much more gripping than the most beautiful philosophical treatise could ever be. Here he treats poetically the same fun-

damental idea of the role of beauty in the development of the individual human being, which he later discusses in the letters philosophically.

Wieland, who corresponded with Schiller during the period he was writing “The Artists,” and who published the poem in the *Teutschen Merkur* when it was completed, wrote on March 4, 1789:

Truths can be just as exciting as emotions, and if the poet not only teaches, but communicates his excitement, he still remains in his own domain. That which the philosopher must prove, the poet can state as a bold thesis, and can throw out as an oracular statement. The beauty of the idea has the effect, that we take him at his word.

In a letter to his friend Körner on March 9, 1789, Schiller formulated it this way: “It is a poem, and not philosophy in verse; and for that it is not a worse poem on account of that which makes it more than a poem.” In the same letter, Schiller states the leading idea of “The Artists”: “Cloaking truth and morality in beauty.”

The first twelve-line strophe is an appeal to the people of his time, and at the same time a triumphant description of the ideal of humanity, with which Schiller shaped the Weimar Classical period:

How fair, O Man, do you, your palm branch holding
Stand at the century’s unfolding,
In proud and noble manhood’s prime
With faculties revealed, with spirit’s fullness
Full earnest mild, in action-wealthy stillness,
The ripest son of time,
Free through reason, strong through law’s measure,
Through meekness great and rich in treasure,
Which long your breast to you did not disclose,
Nature’s own lord, she glories in your bridle,
Who in a thousand fights assays your mettle
And shining under you from out the wild arose!

In the following strophes, the man of the present time is no longer praised, but admonished, followed by a hymn of praise of the universal value of beauty, with the help of which alone truth can be revealed to the human spirit and senses. The third strophe begins as follows:

The land which knowledge does reside in
You reached through beauty’s morning gate.
Its higher gleam to now abide in,
The mind on charms must concentrate.
What by the sound of Muses’ singing
With trembling sweet did pierce you through,
A strength unto your bosom bringing
Which to the world-soul lifted you.

“Beauty’s morning gate” here stands as a metaphor for the leading idea of the poem, that the path toward truth leads through beauty, the “morning gate” signifies both the beginning of a process as well as the entrance into a new domain, proceeding through a gate.

This is followed up to line 90, by a glorifying address to the artists who have created this beauty, an address which is recapitulated again and again in the main body of the poem, and which peaks finally in the famous lines:

The dignity of Man into your hands is given,
Protector be!
It sinks with you! With you it is arisen!

The entirety of the main part elaborates the fundamental theme, through which Schiller, in continuously escalating images and metaphors, demonstrates how beauty and art are capable of raising the human being to ever new stirrings of the heart and heights of reason. And by describing this development, he creates himself the idea of which he speaks. The reader is caught up by the excited power of imagination of the poet, and thus leaps over the chasm which apparently lies between the different steps on this path, so that the reader can relive how art becomes the “second Creator of man.”

Strophe XIV says:

Now from its carnal sleep did wrestle
The soul, so beautiful and free,
By you unchained sprang forth the vassal
Of care in lap of joy to be.
Now limits of the beast abated
And Man on his unclouded brow rang out,
And thought, that foreign stranger elevated,
From his astonished brain sprang out.
Now stood Man, and to starry legions
Displayed his kingly countenance,
Then to these lofty sunlit regions
His thanks conveyed through speaking glance.
Upon his cheek did smiling flower,
His voice, by sentiments now played,
Unfolded into song’s full power,
Emotions moistened eye betrayed,
And jest, with kindness in graceful federation,
His lips poured out in animation.

Only when he is touched by art, and thus by the experience of the power which is also the source of his own creativity, does the “slave of sorrow” become free, which means happy. One may presume that Schiller would come to the conclusion, that Kierkegaard or Heidegger remained chained to “sorrow” only because they never came to know creativity, and were never truly happy.

The “thought, that foreign stranger elevated” is a beautiful image for what is new, the spirituality of human beings, which has become possible through art. It is this capacity for reason which lets him *stand*; thus, it is that which distinguishes him from that which is limited, the stifling limits of animality. The idea “And jest, with kindness in graceful federation,” is a genuinely Schillerian notion, for, on the one hand, the jest is itself an expression of freedom, and on the other hand, it must be with kindness, which means that it can not be injurious; and, if the jest and kindness are to be bound together by grace, then Schiller here provides one of many possibilities of the aesthetic condition.

Here are the first four lines of strophe XIX, as merely one example:

Yet higher still, to ever higher stations
Creative genius soared to be.
One sees already rise creations from creations
From harmonies comes harmony.

And from strophe XX:

So Man, now far advanced, on pinions elevated,
With thanks does Art transport on high,
New worlds of beauty are created
From nature richer made thereby.

And once the human being has already achieved a high degree of ennoblement through the works of beautiful art, and fulfills his necessity with joy, the poet writes in strophe XXI the magically beautiful lines:

With destiny in lofty unity,
Sustained in calm on Muses and on Graces,
His friendly breast exposed obligingly,
Is struck as threat’ning arrow races
From gentle bowstring of necessity.

It is thus possible for the human being to overcome inner fragmentation, if he has become calm through beauty (the Graces) and art (the Muses): he will even approach death calmly. And the poet then addresses the task of the artist again: “You imitate the great Artist”—which means nothing else, than that the Artists, through their art, imitate the creativity of the Creator.

To quote strophes XXVI and XXVII in their entirety:

If on the paths of thought without obstruction
Now roams th’investigator, fortune bold,
And, drunken with the paeans’ loud eruption,
He reaches rashly for the crown to hold;
If now it is his rash conception

To noble guide dispatch with hireling's bread,
While by Art's dreamed-for throne's erection
The first slave office to permit instead:—
Forgive him—th'crown of all perfection
Does hover bright above your head.
With you, the spring's first blooming flower,
Fair nature's soul-formation first arose,
With you, the harvest's joyful power,
Does Nature's self-perfecting close.

Emerged from humble clay, from stoney traces,
Creative Art, with peaceful victories embraces
The mind's unmeasured, vast domain.
What but discoverers in knowledge's high places
Can conquer, did for you its conquest gain.
The Treasures which the thinker has collected
Will only in your arms first warm his heart,
When science is, by beauty ripened and perfected,
Ennobled to work of art—
When he up to the hilltop with you sallies
And to his eye, in evening's shining part,
Is suddenly revealed—the lovely valleys.

The richer satisfied his fleeting vision,
The loftier the orders which the mind
Does fly through in one magic union,
Does circumscribe in one enjoyment blind;
The wider ope are thoughts and feelings growing
To richer play of harmonies now showing,
To beauty's more abundant streaming van—
The lovelier the pieces of the universal plan,
Which now, disfigured, tarnish its creation,
He then sees lofty forms bring to perfection.
The lovelier the riddles from the night,
The richer is the world that he embraces,
The broader streams the sea in which he races,
The weaker grows his destiny's blind might,
The higher are his urges striving,
The smaller he himself, the greater grows his loving.

So lead him, the hidden pathway show
Through ever purer forms, through music clearer,
Through ever higher heights and beauty fuller
Up poetry's beflowered ladder go—
At last, at epoch's ripest hour,
Yet one more happy inspiration bright,
The recent age of Man's poetic flight,
And—he will glide in arms of Truth's full power.

If one reads or recites “The Artists” as a whole, but especially the two strophes cited here, one will sense the excitement Schiller felt about his own vocation as an artist,

and in this poem he succeeds in playfully convincing us of the truth of the significance of beauty and the role which the artists play in the development of humanity, because he lets the idea dissolve into the poetic representation, and, in the composition as a whole, he lets his material be transformed into the domain of the Infinite.

He paints an image of the unfolding of the potentialities of the human species, and makes clear how art produces ever new and better levels of the existence of human beings, which did not exist previously, but he does it in such a way, that the powers of knowing Reason coincide with those of poetic metaphor.

Although, later, Schiller was not satisfied with all of the formal features of the poem, “The Artists” represents, in content, a perfect example for the thorough-composition of a theme. The poem as a whole is sustained by a single, long span of attention, and it is characterized by a movement which is continuously striving forward.

Whereas the first strophe is still a hymnical praise of man, on account of everything man has created over the centuries, this is still represented in a simple way; but in the course of the poem, a stream develops, which becomes ever richer in beautiful features and density of singularities. The poem describes nothing less than an infinite sequence of revolutions, higher levels of development of man, unleashed by beauty and art: it is a poetic celebration of the capacity of man, mediated by beautiful art, to bring forth ever new hypotheses, which are united by the hypothesis of the higher hypothesis, in the sense that Plato gave that idea.

The last lines of the last strophe summarize in a magnificently poetic way the idea of the *Parmenides* dialogue. The poet initially praises art as the most free activity of man. He presupposes that all artists raise themselves high above their own age and time and impress their own time with the ideal they have generated. If they all agree upon this high conception of art, however different the various artists may be, then art, in all of its manifold creations, permits us to see the One, the eternally true, the Divine.

On thousand twisting pathways chasing,
So rich in multiplicity,
Come forward, then, with arms embracing
Around the throne of unity.
As into gentle beams of seven
Divides the lovely shimmer white,
As also rainbow beams of seven
Dissolve into white beams of light—
So, play in thousandfolded clar'ty,
Enchanted 'round the heady sight,
So flow back in one band of ver'ty,
Into one single stream of light!