

1797, The ‘Year of the Ballad’— In the Poets’ Workshop

by Rosa Tennenbaum

The year is 1797. Eight years after the beginning of the French Revolution, all hopes which had initially been placed in this uprising were dashed by the bloody terror of the Jacobins and the guillotine. The attempt to bring the American Revolution back to Europe had failed.

In answer to this failure, Friedrich Schiller, the great German poet and dramatist, had already shown, in 1795, in his letters *On the Aesthetical Education of Man*, how the natural state, which depends solely on raw power, can be replaced by a state of reason, which takes into account the dignity of the free man. This aim could only be attained through the education of man into a self-conscious, responsible citizen, and only the fine arts could lead him there, because they alone address man in his entirety, and set into motion simultaneously his sensuous and his spiritual nature.

Schiller himself, and with him Johann Wolfgang Goethe¹ and a few others, answered this challenge and broadened the “realm of beauty”—through which we necessarily must pass to reach the “realm of freedom”—with ever more poetic and dramatic works, which he laid before his pub-



*Poets Johann
Wolfgang Goethe
and Friedrich
Schiller, Weimar,
Germany.*

EIFANS/Ujrike Lillige

The Dichterpflänzchen (Budding Poets) is a group of amateurs, who love poetry and would like to preserve the art of the spoken word for the future, as well as making it available again to our contemporaries. They constitute a loose working group, associated with the Schiller Institute, which recites programs of poetry all over Germany. Several programs have presented the poems in biographical context; for example, a program on Heinrich Heine, celebrating his 200th birthday. The following article is based on a program of recitation of some of the beautiful ballads of Friedrich Schiller and Johann Wolfgang Goethe, including excerpts from letters and diaries of the former and their friends, on the 200th anniversary of the 1797 “Year of the Ballad.” The program was performed last year in Germany in honor of Schiller’s birthday, which the Schiller Institute celebrates around the world on November 10.

lic. His extensive correspondence, especially that with his poetic friend Goethe, is an eloquent testimony to the great extent to which he struggled for self-perfection, and strove for the ever-finer development of his aesthetic works.

An animated exchange of ideas had developed with Goethe, over the previous three years, since their unexpected, fortunate meeting at the Society for Natural Research in Jena, on July 20, 1794, which was extremely fruitful for both and had a lasting influence on the development of each. They discussed their own works as they created them, exchanged books and articles by others, and saw to it that the other was informed about the current debates in the fields of literature, philosophy, and politics; and, they even shared their daily worries, troubles, and joys.

Goethe's new poetic project, his epic poem "Hermann und Dorothea," which he deliberately composed in hexameter, the ancient meter of Homer, powerfully rekindled the interest of both poets in the Greek classics. From the beginning of the year 1797, both devoted themselves more intensively to the study of the "great ancients," above all Homer and Sophocles. Out of these activities there developed a fascinating dialogue on the essential questions of everything literary, on content and form: The artistic style which the author chooses, must be based "on the essence of things" (Goethe); and, that different themes require different poetic forms.

Out of these discussions there developed what Goethe called "our study of ballads." The ballad unites epic, lyric, and dramatic elements, and is best suited to test all three forms in the limited space of a poem. In the notes for the "West-Östliche Divan," Goethe writes: "There are only three truly natural forms of poetry: the clear narrative, the enthusiastically excited, and character development: epos, lyric, and drama. In the smallest poem we will find them often united, as we see in the most treasured ballads of all peoples." And elsewhere: "By the way, by choosing some of these poems, all of poetics could be set forth, because here the elements are not yet

divided, but are, as in a living original form, united."

Ballads could thus serve as a field for experimentation, to sound out the possibilities and artistic functions of each poetical form. Schiller and Goethe critically tested whether each poem "had been organized and thought out with complete prudence" [Schiller to Christian Gottfried Körner, Oct. 29, 1798]. And they poetized with such joy, that Schiller finally named the year 1797, "the year of the ballad."² The two poets soon found themselves in a downright competition: Between the end of May and the middle of September, Goethe composed five and Schiller six great ballads.

Guided by the correspondence between Schiller and Goethe and their closest friends Wilhelm von Humboldt³ and Christian Gottfried Körner⁴, we may watch as the poems are composed, and see how they are received by contemporaries. Let us, then, employ the method of *analysis situs* to look over the shoulder of the poets.

In the Poets' Workshop

To finish his epic poem "Hermann und Dorothea," Goethe had escaped from his numerous duties as minister at the Duke's court in Weimar, to Schiller in Jena. On May 23, 1797, he sent Schiller the following little note:

. . . Herewith I send you another small poem, in the hope that you may find it good and enjoyable. Otherwise things are going so well with me that Petrarch's reason would have every cause to give me a long sermon.

Goethe was always in high spirits when he stayed with Schiller, or when he hosted Schiller in Weimar. Then, there were long discussions concerning all questions of the poetic world, which resulted in the following weeks' work being accomplished more quickly. These reciprocal visits increased. This is unfortunate for us today, because, during these visits, the exchange of letters, which gives us deep insight into their spiritual world and their workshop, becomes less informative. Goethe reached Jena on

May 19, and was to leave on June 16; four long weeks about which we know relatively little. Schiller responded to Goethe on May 23:

Thank you for your dear note and the poem. The latter is so exceedingly beautiful, round and perfect, that, while reading it, I very distinctly felt how even a small work, a simple idea, when perfectly represented, can afford the highest enjoyment. It is perfect even down to the smallest requirements as regards meter. I was also amused to notice, from this little poem, the mental atmosphere in which I think you must have been living, for it is altogether very sentimentally beautiful! . . .

The “small poem” has the title “The Treasure Seeker,” and has, as we see so often with Goethe, autobiographical characteristics. Goethe had ordered a lottery ticket in Hamburg and was hoping to win the first prize, a farm estate in Silesia. But he very soon came to realize that this was a useless undertaking. Reason, depicted in the poem by a beautiful youth, carrying a full, beautiful chalice, returns and disabuses the treasure seeker from his foolish superstition.



Schiller's garden in Jena.

The Treasure Seeker

(Goethe)

Many weary days I suffered,
Sick of heart and poor of purse;
Riches are the greatest blessing—
Poverty the deepest curse!
Till at last to dig a treasure
Forth I went into the wood—
“Fiend! my soul is thine forever!”
And I signed the scroll with blood.

Then I drew the magic circles,
Kindled the mysterious fire,
Placed the herbs and bones in order,
Spoke the incantation dire.

And I sought the buried metal
With a spell of mickle might—
Sought it as my master taught me;
Black and stormy was the night.

And I saw a light appearing
In the distance like a star;
When the midnight hour was tolling,
Came it waxing from afar:
Came it flashing, swift and sudden,
As if fiery wine it were,
Flowing from an open chalice,
Which a beautiful boy did bear.

And he wore a lustrous chaplet,
And his eyes were full of thought,

As he stepped into the circle
With the radiance that he brought.
And he bade me taste the goblet;
And I thought—“It cannot be,
That this boy should be the bearer
Of the Demon’s gifts to me!”

“Taste the draught of pure existence
Sparkling in this golden urn,
And no more with baleful magic
Shalt thou hitherward return.
Do not seek for treasures longer;
Let thy future spell-words be,
Days of labor, nights of resting:
So shall peace return to thee!”

Following this within two weeks are “The Legend,” “The Bride of Corinth,” and “The God and the Bajadere.” All three have religious themes as their content: “The Bride of Corinth” criticizes a bigoted, fossilized religiosity, which we today call fundamentalism; “The Legend” centers around the life of Jesus Christ; and, in “The God and the Bajadere,” Goethe takes up the New Testament motif of Mary Magdalene.

The letter exchange pauses again for two weeks, but we know, from the notes of Goethe’s diary, that during the visits with Schiller which occur every evening and are called by Goethe “my general pilgrimage,” the “study of ballads” is at the center of their discussions. Normally these visits would start at about four o’clock in the afternoon and last until late in the night. Schiller in the meantime had begun work on “The Diver.”

The Diver

(Schiller)

“Which knight or esquire, which one will dare
To dive down in this deep gulf?
A golden goblet I throw now down there,
Devour’d it already the swarthy mouth.
Who can the goblet to me be returning,
He may thus possess it, it is his earning.”

The King thus speaks it, and hurls from the height
O’th’ cliff so abrupt and steep,
Which hangs o’er the sea stretched endless in sight,
The goblet in Charybdis’ howling deep.
“Who will be the brave one, again I wonder,
To dive far into these depths down under?”

And the knights and the vassals ’round him be,
They listen, but silent remain,
Looking below to the savage sea,
And none doth the goblet desire to gain.
And the King, for the third time his question bareth;
“To go down under, then, no one dareth?”

But all remain mute, knight and esquire,
And a noble squire, meek and rash,
Steps from the timorous vassals choir,
And his mantle throws he, tosses his sash,
And all of the men around him and women,
On the glorious youth their stunned gazes fasten.

And as he steps to the rocky slope
And looks in the gulf below,
The waters that she so deeply did gulp,
Does Charybdis now howling backwards throw,
And as with the distant thunder’s uproaring,
They burst from her ominous womb outsoaring.

And it bubbles and boils and hisses and booms,

Like when water with fire doth blend,
To the heavens splutter the vaporous foams
And flood on flood doth press without end,
And wants to be drained and empty never,
As would yet the sea one more sea bear ever.

Yet fin’lly, the power so wild has left,
And black from the argent swell
Opens downward a dark yawning cleft,
Boundless, as though to the realms of Hell,
And raging sees one the surge of the billows,
Beneath in the twist of the rotating funnels.

Now swift, ere the breakers reappear,
The stripling to God doth pray,
And—is heard all around him a shriek of fear,
And already the whirlpool has washed him away
And clandestinely over the daring swimmer
Locketh the jaws, appeareth he never.

And stillness falls over the water’s gulf,
In the deep doth a hollow roar swell,
And trembling hears one from mouth to mouth:
“Magnanimous stripling, fare thee well!”
And one hears it howling duller and duller,
And they wait still with worry, with moments of horror.

And should’st thou thy crown itself down there fling
And say: “Who e’er brings me the crown,
He shall then wear it, and be the King”—
For this precious reward I no longing do own.
What the howling there deep down under concealeth,
To no fortunate soul of the living revealeth.

Well many a craft, by whirlpool held fast,
Shoots quick to the depths of the wave,
Yet while shattered to pieces, the keel and mast
Emerge from the e’er inextricable grave.—
And like tempest’s howling, clearer and clearer,

One hears its raging, e'er nearer and nearer.

And it bubbles and boils and hisses and booms,
Like when water with fire doth blend,
To the heavens splutter the vaporous foams,
And wave on wave doth press without end,
And as with the distant thunder's uproaring,
It bursts from her ominous womb outpouring.

And lo! from the ominous womb atide,
Something rises white as a swan,
And an arm and a glistening neck are espied,
And it paddles with strength and with diligence on,
And 'tis he, and in his left hand swinging,
Waves he the goblet, so joyfully bringing.

And breathed he long and breathed he well
And he greeted the heavenly light.
With joyfulness each to the other did call:
"He lives! He is there! It stopped not his flight!
From the grave, from the eddying water's shiv'ring,
Hath this brave one rescued his own soul living."

And he comes, now encircles the crowd joyous so,
To the feet of the King he falls,
The goblet he offers him kneeling low,
And the King to his daughter enchanting calls,
Who fills it with wine to the border glist'ning,
And the youth doth then turn to the King who's list'ning:

"Long life to the King! Rejoice in full,
Who do breathe in the rose-colored light!
For down below it's horrible,
And let man not tempt the divinities' might,
And desire never and ne'er to uncover
What they kindly by night and by fear do cover.

"It ripped me down under with speed of light—
Then thrust me in crag-covered shaft,
Wild flooding a spring rushed with all of its might:
It seized me in double stream's furious wrath,
And like as a gyro gets dizzily twisted
Drove me 'round, I could no longer resist it.

"Then God showed to me, to Him I did cry
In that terrible need so great,
In the deepness a rocky reef did lie,
Which I grasped at quickly and from death escaped—
And there hung too the goblet on coral appalling,
Else would it in bottomless waters be falling.

"For 'neath me still lay it, mountain deep,
In darkness of deep purple hue,
And though to the ear 'tis like lasting sleep,
The eye did with shudd'ring to the depths view,
How the salamanders and dragons and monsters
Do stir in the jaws of a Hell of terrors.

"A horrible mixture did swarm there in black,
All balled up in hideous clumps,
The rock fish, the ray fish with thorny back,
The hammer's dreadfully shapeless lumps,
And threatening me with teeth all in motion
The terrible shark, the hyena o'th' ocean.

"And there hung I and was with great horror possessed,
From the succor of man far apace,
Among specters, the singular sensitive breast,
Alone in this hideous, lonely place,
Deep under the ring of man's conversation,
'Mid the monsters' melancholy desolation.

"And shudd'ring I thought, it's crawling near,
Moved a hundred limbs at once alive,
While snapping at me—in nightmarish fear,
I let loose from the coral I'd clutched to survive;
Was seized by the whirlpool with furious raving,
And it threw me back up, it was thus my saving."

The King is now taken by wonderment,
And speaks: "The goblet's thine own,
And to grant thee this ring's my intent,
Adorned with this exquisite most precious stone,
Attempt thou yet once more and bring me tidings,
What thou saw'st of the sea in the depths of thy divings."

The daughter did hear this, with softness of heart,
And with flattering words made her plea:
"Leave, Father, enough with thine hideous sport!
He hath just surmounted what none dared for thee
And canst thou thy heart's appetites not be taming,
Then maybe the knights can the esquire be shaming."

Then the King doth grasp for the goblet in haste,
In the whirlpool he flings it aright:
"And bring'st thou the goblet and here be it placed,
Thou shalt be to me the most excellent knight.
And shalt her today as thy loving wife marry,
Who now doth thee mercy in tender pray'r carry."

Then a heavenly force overcomes his soul there,
And a boldness shines forth from his eye,
And he sees as a blush paints her features so fair,
And sees her then whiten, and sinking lie,—
It drives him to capture the prize he doth cherish,
And he dives down under to live or to perish.

Well hear all the breakers, well do they return,
They're proclaimed in a thundering call—
They bow themselves under with gazes that yearn;
They're coming, they're coming the waters all
They rush on upwards, they rush on ever,
The stripling they bring back never.

—translated by Sheila Anne Jones

Wilhelm von Humboldt, who was at that time travelling, praised this work:

To Schiller. Dresden, July 9, 1797.

The great art in your *Diver* lies, I believe, in the distribution of the action into the different moments. You only rest where the reader expects it, and you hasten there where he himself is anxious about the outcome. A very beautiful modification of sentiment begins with the appearance of the daughter of the king, and the end is exceedingly moving. Some parts are great beyond all concept. Especially the description of the lower regions, the verse: "Long life to the king, etc.," and then "Among specters, the singular sensitive breast, etc." One feels overpoweringly the distance from all human, speaking and feeling beings. Splendid also is the description of the maelstrom itself, and very picturesque the resurfacing of the youth. Oftentimes you create a grand effect simply by choosing a fitting adjective. For example, the "rose-colored light," "with busy diligence," "the daughter with softness of heart," etc., "the living soul." The meter is excellent and very fittingly executed. . . .

As all descriptions in your *Diver* have such great truthfulness in them, I wished that you would remove the water newts and salamander from the bottom of the ocean. They are indeed amphibian, but never live at that depth, but rather in swamps. With the dragons you may be more liberal, as they are creatures of fable and fantasy.

Körner, Schiller's long-time friend, was, however, critical:

To Schiller. Dresden, July 9, 1797. Sunday

. . . A single adjective, "purple darkness," took me aback, and this I also noticed in others. I know that the ancients made use of such an expression, but here I think it does not contribute to the description, but rather awakens irritating side ideas. . . .

Minna [Körner's wife-RT] declares herself in favor of the purple darkness. In attacks of dizziness she often has the feeling that dark objects appear to her as violet. Of dizziness I know nothing. She also likes the richness of the expression, which I indeed acknowledge, but would not tolerate unless the adjective could be justified.

The different temperament of the letter writers is obvious: Humboldt judges profoundly philosophically, Goethe gives poetic

advice, while Körner argues mostly practically. In Schiller's answer to Körner, it becomes clear how consciously he chose and placed every single word:

Jena, June 21, 1797.

. . . With regards to "the purple darkness," you need not worry. Though I thank Minna for sending me her experience of dizzy spells as a reinforcement, my *Diver* and I can make do without it. The adjective is by no means idle. The diver does indeed see, under the glass dome, green lights and purple shadows. This is also why, as he resurfaces from the deep, I have him conversely call the light rosy, because this phenomenon occurs after a previously green-lighted glow.

On June 16, Goethe returned to Weimar with the intention of immediately departing for Italy, but his departure was delayed for two weeks. Humboldt had already left Jena at the end of April to begin an educational journey to Italy. However, the invasion of French troops into Northern Italy, and the ensuing war, forced both of them to change their travel plans. Humboldt went with his family to Paris, and Goethe only reached Switzerland.

That both friends would leave Schiller's circle for an extended time was bitter for Schiller, who was forced to stay at home because of his delicate health. He expresses this clearly in a letter to Goethe:

Jena, June 18, 1797. Sunday

Since your departure, I have already had a foretaste of the great loneliness into which I shall be thrown when you leave us altogether. Fortunately the weather is favorable, and I can spend much time outside . . . however I have also been poetizing a little: a short after-piece to the *Diver*. . . .

The decision as to whether you are to go further than Switzerland is also of importance to me, and I shall be impatient to hear your decision. The greater the number of the relationships to which I have become indifferent, the greater is the influence which the remaining few have upon me, and that which is most decisive is your living presence. The last four weeks have done much in building up and settling matters in my mind. You are leading me ever further from the tendency of passing from the general to the individual (which in all practical, and especially in poetical matters is a bad habit) and

lead me thus conversely from the single cases to grand law. The point from which you are wont to start is always small and narrow, but it leads me into broad regions, and therefore does my innermost nature good, for the other path which I, when left to myself, am so inclined to follow, leads from the broad into the narrow, and I have the unpleasant feeling of finding myself poorer at the end than I was at the beginning. . . .

Farewell, I am longing to hear from you again soon.

Goethe answers immediately:

Weimar, June 21, 1797. Wednesday

The Glove is a very happy subject and the execution successful; let us in the future at once

make use of such subjects when they occur to us. Here we have the complete plain action without a purpose or rather with an opposite purpose, which is so peculiarly pleasing. . . .

We have, during the last four weeks, really made some good progress again, both theoretically and practically, and if my nature has the effect of drawing yours into the finite, I, on the other hand, gain through you the advantage of being occasionally drawn beyond my own limits, at least of not wandering long about one confined spot. . . . I send you back your Glove, which certainly forms a good after-piece and pendant to your Diver, and by its own merit enhances the merit of the latter poem. Farewell, and let me hear from you soon.

The Glove

(Schiller)

Beside his lions waiting,
The games anticipating,
Sat Franz the King,
And round him the kingdom's great powers,
And up in the balcony towers
The ladies in a lovely ring.

And as with finger he motions,
A cage in the distance opens,
And inside with deliberate strides
A lion glides,
And with no sound
Looks round,
With long yawns making
And mane hair shaking
His limbs exposes
And down reposes.

As the King further motions,
There opens with ease
A second door,
From it flees
With savage dashes
A tiger to the fore,
When the lion he 'spies,
Loud he cries,
Strikes with his tail
A frightening flail,
His tongue he flashes,
And in circles shy
Round the lion goes by
Fiercely growling,
He stretches out scowling,
By the lion reposes.

And the King again motions,
Then spew from the house twice-opened before
Two savage leopards as one to the fore,
They plunge out with stout-hearted battle-lust
On the tiger-beast;
He clutches them both with his claws ferocious,
And with roar that is shrill
The lion stands—all is still,
And round in a knot,
In bloodlust hot,
Lay down now the cats so atrocious.

Then falls from the terrace above,
From a beautiful hand a glove,
In between tiger and lion it lay
Just at midway.
And to Knight Delorges, so mockingly
Fair Lady Cunigund turns now:
"Sir Knight, if your love is as hot for me
As every hour you do avow
Why, my glove to me now return."

And the knight with a speedy turn
Climbs down in the frightful enclosure
With steady paces,
And from the monstrous middle spaces
Seizes the glove now with daring finger.

And with horror and with sensation
Watch the knights and the noblewomen
And he coolly brings back the glove without fear.
Then from every mouth his praises shower,
But now a loving glance most dear—
Which promises his bliss is near—
Receives he from Cunigund's tower.
And he throws in her face the glove he's got:
"Your thanks, Lady, I want that not!"
And he leaves her that very hour.

—translated by Marianna Wertz

Humboldt praised the poem in a letter to Schiller on July 9:

You gave *The Glove*, which in the hands of every other poet would have become only pretty and good, something great, by the magnificent descriptions of the animals. In this poem you create a monument for your favorite, the lion. Furthermore, the meter is inimitably beautiful, and the succession of very short and longer verses has a splendid effect. . . .

Körner writes somewhat impatiently to Schiller on July 11:

I have again found great pleasure in your ballads. Especially *The Diver* is delightful, I also love *The Glove* very much, where especially in the verse-structure a unique art is employed. These poems are again a confirmation of my statement that you need only to follow your fantasy, without disturbing her by transcendental ideas, to convince yourself of your profession as a poet. Here is the object in all its clarity,

liveliness and splendor. Such poems do not necessitate knowledge with specific ideas, they affect generally, and therefore satisfy the educated reader no less.

The work became ever easier. The two poets took undiluted pleasure, as Goethe expressed it, “in romping about in the world of the ballads.”⁵ The literary world, which as of no later than the *Xenien* had been at odds with the two poets, gossiped, and actually hoped, for an outright competition in which one would try to outdo the other. Their hopes were disappointed. Schiller and Goethe were not in a competition, but in a fruitful partnership which inspired both to new works. Goethe greatly treasured Schiller’s ballads, and defended them against all criticism, including that of Schiller himself. Thus, for example, he writes to Körner on July 20:

You have heard through Schiller that we romp about in the world of the ballads.

The Sorcerer’s Apprentice

(Goethe)

Huzzah, huzzah! His back is fairly
Turned about, the wizard old;

And I’ll now his spirits rarely
To my will and pleasure mold!

His spells and orgies—ha’nt I
Marked them aright?

And I’ll do wonders, sha’nt I?
And deeds of mickle might.

Hear ye! Hear ye!
Hence! your spritely
Office rightly,
Featly showing!
Toil, until with water clear, ye,
Fill the bath to overflowing.

Ho, thou battered broomstick! Take ye
This old seedy coat and wear it—

Ha, thou household drudge! I’ll make ye
Do my bidding; ay and fear it.

Don of legs a pair, now;
A head, too, for the nonce!

To the river there, now
Bear the pail at once!

Hear ye! Hear ye!

Hence your spritely
Office rightly,
Featly showing!
Toil, until with water clear, ye,
Fill the bath to overflowing!

See ’tis off—’tis at the river
In the stream the bucket flashes;
Now ’tis back—and down, or ever
You can wink, the burden dashes.
Again, again and quicker!
The floor is in a swim,
And every stoup and bicker
Is running o’er the brim.
Stop, now stop!
You have granted
All I wanted.
Stop! Od rot it!
Running still? I’m like to drop!
What’s the word? I’ve clean forgot it!

Oh, the word, so strong and baleful,
To make it what it was before!
There it skips with pail and pailful—
Would thou wert a broom once more!
Still now streams he scatters,
Round and ever round me—

His, as you already know, have turned out very well: I wish that mine in some degree might stand beside his: he is much more qualified in every sense for this form of poetry than I am.

One week after “The Glove,” Schiller sent “The Ring of Polycrates” to Goethe. Goethe in the meantime had composed “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice.” In this poem he sends the anti-Xenists packing. The Xenien were those small distichs in which Schiller and Goethe had, the year before, settled their accounts with all of educated society. These two-liners had provoked a veritable storm, and some of those addressed gave way to anger and answered small-mindedly with inscriptions which culminated in “To the slapdash cooks of Jena and Weimar”—referring to Schiller and Goethe. The small-minded were again ridiculed in Goethe’s “Sorcerer’s Apprentice.”



Goethe-Schiller tomb in Weimar.

Oh, a hundred waters,
Rushing in, confound me!
No—no longer,
Can I brook it!
I’ll rebuke it!
Vile abortion!
Woe is me, my fears grow stronger,
What grimacing, what contortion!

Wilt thou, offspring of the devil,
Drench the house in hellish funning?
Even now, above the level
Of the door, the water’s running.
Stop, wretch! won’t you hear me?
You for this shall pay.
Only you come near me!
Stop, broom, stop, I say!
Stop, I tell you,
I’ll not bear it,
No, I swear it!
Let me catch you,
And upon the spot I’ll fell you
With my hatchet, and despatch you.

Back it comes—will nought prevent it?
If I only tackle to thee,
Soon, O Kobold! thou’lt repent it,
When the steel goes crashing thro’ thee.

Bravely struck, and surely!
There it goes in twain;
Now I move securely,
And I breathe again!
Woe and wonder!
As it parted,
Straight up started,
’Quipped aright,
Goblins twain that rush asunder.
Help, O help, ye powers of might!

Deep and deeper grows the water
On the stairs and in the hall,
Rushing in with roar and clatter—
Lord and master, hear me call!
Ah, here comes the master—
Sore, sir, is my strait;
I raised this spirit faster
Far than I can lay’t.
“Broom, avant thee!
To thy nook there!
Lie, though spook, there!
Only answer,
When for my own ends I want thee,
I, the master necromancer!”

—translated by Theodore Martin

In the meantime, Goethe had started a new ballad with the title “The Cranes of Ibycus.” Three weeks later, during Schiller’s visit to Weimar, he hands the theme over to Schiller. This was not unusual; it would happen again later with the play *Wilhelm Tell*. From July 11 to 18, Schiller was the guest at Goethe’s house in Weimar. Both were happy with the outcome of this week-long reunion:

Goethe to Schiller. Weimar, July 19, 1797.

As a farewell, you could not have given me anything more delightful or more beneficial than your visit of the past week. I think that I do not deceive myself, when I say that our being together was once again very fruitful and many things developed in the present and were prepared for the future, so that I depart with more contentment, for I hope to be pretty busy on the road, and on my return shall look forward to having your participation. If we continue thus getting through various works at the same time, and, while proceeding gradually with the larger ones, cheer and amuse ourselves with the smaller ones, many a thing can be accomplished.

I herewith send you back your Poly-

crates, hoping that the Cranes will reach me soon

Schiller to Goethe. Jena, July 21, 1797. Friday
I can never leave you without feeling that something has been stirred up within me, and I should be glad if, in return for the great good I gain from you, I could help you in setting the wealth of your mind in motion. A relation of this kind, upon mutual perfectibility, must ever remain fresh and active, and in fact gain in variety, the more harmonious it becomes, and the more that that contrast vanishes, which in so many other instances alone prevents uniformity. I venture to hope that we shall gradually come to understand one another in all such points as can be explained, and that in the case of those which, according to their nature, can not be understood, we shall remain close to each other in sentiment. . . .

The news I receive from you will bring a fruitful change into the simple existence to which I am now confined, and besides the news which you supply to me, will bring back to life within me the old subjects that have been discussed between us. And so farewell, and think of me, as you will always be present with us. My wife bids you a hearty farewell.

On July 30, Goethe started his journey, and would only return four months later. His poetic work was thereby interrupted. Schiller finished “Ritter Toggenburg” on July 31.

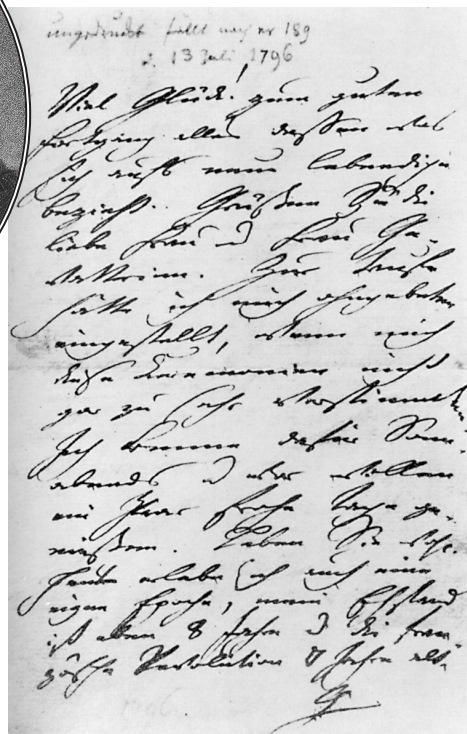
Schiller was now under pressure to complete the *Muses’ Almanac for the Year 1798*, which was to be presented at the Michaelis fair in Frankfurt at the end of September. In addition to this, along with his own works, poems and articles had to be constantly reviewed and edited for publication in his monthly publication *Die Horen*.

Work on the drama *Wallenstein* had to be continued, and work on a new great project, “The Song of the Bell,” was begun. The ballads were for amusement and relaxation, as many of the comments make clear.

Goethe’s attention was also not solely concentrated on the “story-telling poems,” as he often called them, but largely on *Faust*; he was composing such lyrical poems as “To



Corbis-Bettmann



Above: Johann Wolfgang Goethe.
Right: Goethe letter to Schiller.

Mignon,” and working on his mineralogical studies. At the same time he was sharing with Schiller studies of architecture and sculpture; various articles about Laocoon were exchanged and extensively debated, the whole aesthetical world was explored. Added to this were the daily duties of writing letters, receiving visitors, taking care of a large family, and so forth. On top of this, Goethe had to attend to many affairs of state.⁶ It was an enormous workload, which the two poets had to maintain every day.

In the middle of August, the first version of “The Cranes of Ibycus” is ready. Because Goethe is travelling, this ballad is discussed exclusively in letters. We are therefore able to look into the workshop of the poets and follow the process of creation of this ballad, which is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful of the entire poetical type. It is a beautiful example of how Schiller and Goethe worked together, how the work proceeds, and, through the critique of the other, is changed and slowly takes its final form. Here Goethe gives fruitful advice; it was often enough, the other way around.

In the middle of August, Schiller sends the ballad to Goethe:

Jena, August 17, 1797. Thursday

. . . At last you receive the Ibycus. I hope that you are satisfied with it. I must admit that in looking more closely into the subject I found more difficulties than I had at first anticipated, however I think I have overcome most of them. The two main points upon which things depended, seemed to me in the first place to give the narrative a continuity which the raw fable did not possess, and secondly, to produce the proper mood for the effect. I have not been able to put the last touches to it, as I only finished last night, and it means a great deal to me that you read the ballad soon, so that I may still have the benefit of your suggestions. The most pleasant news would be to hear that I had met your wishes in all essential points.

Goethe, who was visiting his hometown, Frankfurt, on his way to Switzerland, is excited by the work, but also detects with a clear mind where his friend should make changes to create a more perfect work:

Ein Exemplar des Al-
manachs für den ersten
Singer zum bald
erscheinen in dem
3ten Theil, nun
den Eumeniden selbst ist
auf mich zu setzen; mir
ist das Exemplar
zu geben, daß es mit
willkür und Befrey
lung heraus zu werthen.
Salve zum
ersten Sept. Sch.
Mitten. Almd.



Corbis-Bettmann

Below: Friedrich Schiller.
Left: Schiller letter to
Goethe.

Frankfurt, August 22, 1797.

The Cranes of Ibycus turned out very well, the transition to the theater is very beautiful, and the chorus of the Eumenides in the proper place. Since this turn of events has been invented, the whole fable cannot exist now without it, and I would, if I were to treat it myself, include this chorus as well.

Now, let me make some other suggestions: 1. The cranes as migratory birds should be a whole flock flying over Ibycus, as well as over the theater. They should appear as a natural phenomenon, and should be thus like the sun and other regular appearances. This would also take the appearance of the miraculous away, in that these do not need to be the same birds, they are perhaps only one part of the larger wandering flock, and the accidental creates, actually, in my view, the forboding and strange quality of the story. 2. Further, I would, after the fourteenth verse,⁷ where the Erinyes withdraw, add a verse, in order to describe the state of mind produced by the content of the chorus upon the people, to pass over from the serious utterances of the good to the reckless amusement of the bad, and then to cause the murderer, indeed stupidly, harshly and loudly, but only audible to the immediate



Wilhelm von Humboldt

Cobis Bettmann

circle of his neighbors, to make his foolish exclamations. This would give rise to a fracas between him and those of the audience nearest to him, whereby the attention of the people would be drawn to him, and so forth. In this way, as well as by the flock of cranes, everything would be set naturally, and in my estimate the effect would be heightened, because the fifteenth verse, as it now stands, begins too loudly and importantly and leads one nearly to expect something different. If you would pay a little more attention to the rhyme, here and there, the rest will be easily managed. And I congratulate you upon this successful work

Frankfurt, August 23, 1797.

In addition to what I said yesterday about the ballad, I must today for the sake of greater clarity, add something: I wish that, as the middle is so very successful, you would add a few stanzas to the exposition, for in any case the poem is not too long. *Meo voto* the cranes would already be seen by the travelling Ibycus, as a traveller, he would compare himself with the travelling birds, as a guest, he would, with the guests, look upon it as a good presentiment, and when in the hands of the murderers, would then call upon the already known cranes, his travelling companions, as witnesses. Indeed if it would be considered advantageous, he could already have seen these flocks while on board the ship. You see from what I said yesterday that my intention is to make a long and broad phenomenon of the cranes, which I think would connect itself well to the entangled threads of the Eumenides. In

regards to the end, I already told you my opinion yesterday. Otherwise, I have nothing further in my draft, that you could make use of in your poem.

Schiller answers delightedly:

Jena, August 30, 1797.

. . . A few minutes ago, to our unexpected and great delight, your last letter arrived. My heartfelt thanks for what you say about my Ibycus, and what can be complied with of your hints shall certainly be done. I have here again very distinctly felt how much is accomplished by a vivid knowledge and experience when one is creating. I only knew the cranes from a few parables, to which they are well suited, and this lack of a vivid view caused me to overlook the good use which could be made of this natural phenomenon. I will seek to give these cranes, which are after all the heroes of fate, a larger breadth and importance. How I should alter the transition to the exclamation made by the murderer is not immediately clear to me, even though I feel, that something is to be done there. But with the first good mood it may perhaps be found. . . .

Schiller takes Goethe's advice, except for one demand which does not agree with his poetical temperament. He sends the revised work with an extensive letter to Goethe:

Jena, September 7, 1797.

. . . In accordance with your advice, I have made essential alterations to the Ibycus. The exposition is no longer so meager, the hero of the ballad is more interesting, the cranes also fill the imagination more and draw sufficient attention to themselves so that, at their last appearance, they are not entirely forgotten by what has gone before.

But in regards to your suggestion, it was impossible for me to grant your wishes completely—If I allow the murderer's exclamation to be heard only by the spectators nearest to him, and a commotion to be created among them, which itself would only gradually spread to the whole, I burden myself with a detail, which, considering the impatient advance of expectation, would hinder me very much, weaken the whole, divide the attention, and so forth. My execution should not, however, border on the miraculous; of this I had no intention even in my first concept of it, only I had left it too indefi-

nite. The mere natural coincidence must explain the catastrophe. This coincidence leads the flock of cranes to fly over the theater, the murderer is among the spectators, the play, it is true, has not really moved him or made him remorseful, that is not my opinion, but it has reminded him of his crime, and of that which occurred there, his mind is struck by that and the appearance of the cranes must therefore at this moment take him by surprise, he is a rough, stupid fellow on which the momentary impression has full power. The loud exclamation is, under these circumstances, natural.

Further, as I imagine him sitting high up, where the common people have their seats, he will be able, firstly, to see the cranes earlier, before they have flown over the middle of the theater, by which I gain that the exclamation can precede the actual appearance of the cranes, upon which a great deal depends here, and that therefore their actual appearance gains importance. And, secondly, I achieve by having him call from above that he can be better heard. For, in this case it is not at all inconceivable, that the whole house will hear him shout, even though not all might understand his words.

I have devoted an extra verse to the impression itself which his exclamation creates, but the actual discovery of the deed as a consequence of this shouting, I intentionally did not want to depict more intricately, because as soon as the way has been opened to discover the murderer (and that is done by the exclamation along with the embarrassed fright following), the ballad is finished, the rest is nothing more for the poet.

I have sent the ballad in its altered form to Böttiger in order to hear from him whether there is anything in it that is opposed to the customs of the ancient Greeks. . . .

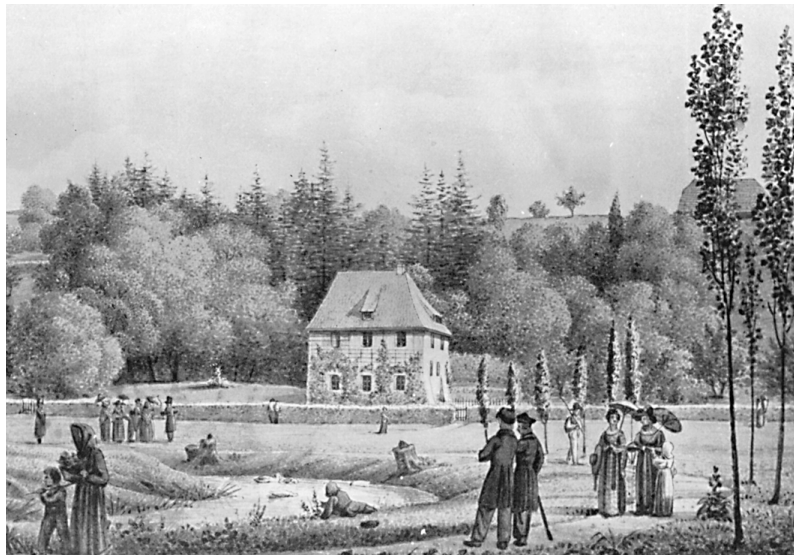
Karl August Böttiger was the principal of the Gymnasium, the secondary school in Weimar, and himself a distinguished classical philologist. Goethe had already asked him in July for further information about the myth of the Greek singer Ibycus. Böttiger answers at once:

To Schiller. Weimar, September 8, 1797.

The cranes of Ibycus, which herewith fly back to their master and lord, have only now become very respectable, god-sanctified

birds. I gladly confess that it seemed for a long time somehow puzzling to me, how, out of this basically not very worthwhile material, a good ballad could be made. But, by your fortunate introduction of the dreaded chorus of the Eumenides, and the imitation of Aeschylus' song of revenge, which strides forth in Aeschylean sublimity, the demand of the supernatural has been satisfied completely, and the incomprehensible light-dark quality, which has such a charming effect in the ballad, has been achieved splendidly.

You are calling upon me to tell you if this scene, transposed to Corinth, has everywhere the taste of their time and their century, and I can only answer that rarely in the reading of the ancients themselves have I had such a pure impression of the surroundings of antiquity as in this poem. From the spruce grove of Poseidon, to the circling chorus and the steps of the theater, everything is as genuine, as true, as if you had seen all of it in a magic mirror.



Goethe's house in Weimar.

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The Cranes of Ibycus

(Schiller)

Unto the songs and chariot fighting,
Which all the strains of Greece are joining,
On Corinth's isthmus festive gay,
Made Ibycus, gods' friend, his way.
The gift of song Apollo offered,
To him the sweetened voice of song,
Thus on a light staff forth he wandered,
From Rhegium, with god along.

Now beckons high on mountain ridges
Acrocorinth to the wand'rer's glances,
And then doth he, with pious dread,
Into Poseidon's spruce grove tread.
Naught stirs about him, just a swarming
Of cranes which join him on his way,
Which towards the distant southern warming
Are flying forth in squadrons grey.

"Receive my greetings, squads befriended,
Which o'er the sea have me escorted!
I take you as a goodly sign,
Your lot, it doth resemble mine:
From distant lands we are arriving
And pray for a warm dwelling place.
Be the hospitable good willing,
Who wards the stranger from disgrace!"

And merrily he strides on further
And finds himself i'th' forest's center—
Abruptly, on the narrow way,
Two murderers upon him prey.
He must himself for battle ready,
Yet soon his wearied hand sinks low,
It had the lyre's strings drawn so gently,
Yet ne'er the power of the bow.

He calls on men, and on the godly,
No savior answers his entreaty,
However wide his voice he sends,
No living thing him here attends.
"So must I here foresaken perish,
On foreign soil, unwept-for be,
Through evil scoundrels' hands thus vanish,
Where no avenger I do see!"

And gravely struck he sinketh under,
The feathers of the cranes then thunder,
He hears, though he can see no more,
Their nearing voices dreadful roar.

"From you, ye cranes that are up yonder,
If not another voice doth rise,
Be raised indictments for my murder!"
He calls it out, and then he dies.

The naked body is discovered,
And soon, though 'tis from wounds disfigured,
The host in Corinth doth discern
Those traits, which are his dear concern.
"And must I thee so rediscover
And I had hoped with wreath of pine
To crown the temples of the singer,
Which from his glow of fame do shine!"

And all the guests hear it lamenting,
While at Poseidon's fest assembling,
The whole of Greece with pain doth toss,
Each heart doth suffer from his loss;
The people crowd to the Prytanis
Astorm, his rage they supplicate
To vengeance of the slain man's tresses,
With murd'ers' blood to expiate.

Yet where's the clue, that from the crowding,
Of people streaming forth and thronging,
Enchanted by the pomp of sport,
The blackened culprit doth report?
Is't robbers, who him slew unbravely?
Was't envy of a secret foe?
That Helios can answer only,
Who on each earthly thing doth glow.

Perhaps with bold steps doth he saunter
Just now across the Grecian center,
While vengeance trails him in pursuit,
He savors his transgression's fruit;
Upon their very temple's op'ning
He spites perhaps the gods, and blends
Thus boldly in each human swelling,
Which towards the theater ascends.

For crowded bench to bench they're sitting,
The stage's pillars are near breaking,
Assembled from afar and near,
The folk of Greece are waiting here;
Just like the ocean waves' dull roaring,
With humans teeming, swells the place
In archéd curves forever wid'ning
Unto the heaven's azure space.

Who names the names, who counts the people
Who gathered here together cordial?
From Theseus' town, from Aulis' strand

From Phocis, from the Spartan's land,
And from the distant Asian region,
From every island did they hie
And from the stage they pay attention
To th' *chorus's* dread melody,

Which, stern and grave, i'th' custom aged,
With footsteps lingering and gaugéd
Comes forward from the hinterground,
The theater thus strolling round.
Thus strideth forth no earthly woman,
They are no mortal progeny!
The giant size of each one's person
Transcends by far what's humanly.

Their loins a mantle black is striking,
Within their fleshless hands they're swinging
The torch's gloomy reddish glow,
Within their cheeks no blood doth flow;
And where the locks do lovely flutter,
And friendly wave o'er human brow,
There sees one snakes and here the adder
Whose bellies swell with poison now.

And in the circle ghastly twisted
The melody o'th' hymn they sounded,
Which through the heart so rending drives,
The fetters round the villain ties.
Reflection robbing, heart deluding
The song of Erinyes doth sound,
It sounds, the hearer's marrow eating,
And suffers not the lyre to sound.

"He's blest, who free from guilt and failing
The child's pure spirit is preserving!
We may not near him vengingly,
He wanders on life's pathway free.
Yet woeful, woeful him, who hidden
Hath done the deed of murder base!
Upon his very soles we fasten,
The black of night's most dreadful race.

"And hopes he to escape by fleeing,
On wings we're there, our nets ensnaring
Around his flying feet we throw,
That he is to the ground brought low.
So tiring never, him we follow,
Repentance ne'er can us appease,
Him on and on unto the Shadow
And give him even there no ease."

So singing are they roundly dancing,
And silence like the hush of dying

Lies o'er the whole house heavily,
As if had neared the deity.
And solemnly, i'th' custom aged,
The theater thus strolling round,
With footsteps lingering and gaugéd
They vanish in the hinterground.

And 'twixt deceit and truth still hovers
Each hesitating breast, and quivers
And homage pays to that dread might,
That judging watches hid from sight,
Inscrutably, and fathomlessly,
The darksome coil of fate entwines,
Proclaims what's in the heart so deeply,
Yet runs from where the sunlight shines.

Then hears one from the highest footing
A voice which suddenly is crying:
"See there! See there, Timotheus,
Behold the cranes of Ibycus!"—
And suddenly the sky is dark'ning,
And o'er the theater away,
One sees, within a blackish swarming,
A host of cranes pass on its way.

"Of Ibycus!"—That name beloved
Each breast with new grief hath affected,
As waves on waves in oceans rise,
From mouth to mouth it quickly flies:
"Of Ibycus, whom we are mourning,
Whom by a murd'rer's hand was slain!
What is't with him? What is his meaning?
And what is't with this flock of crane?"

And louder still the question's growing,
With lightning strikes it flies foreboding
Through every heart: " 'Tis clear as light,
'Tis the Eumenides' great might!
The poet's vengeance is now granted,
The murderer hath self-confessed!
Be him, who spoke the word, arrested,
And him, to whom it was addressed!

But scarce the word had him departed,
Fain had he in his breast it guarded;
In vain! The mouth with horror white
Brings consciousness of guilt to light.
And 'fore the judge they're apprehended,
The scene becomes the justice hall,
And guilty have the villains pleaded,
Struck by the vengeance beam they fall.

—translated by William F. Wertz, Jr.

Humboldt, who felt quite at home in the world of Greek antiquity, was also excited by the Cranes. Körner, on the other hand, thought that they were too dry and he had a fierce debate with Humboldt about it.

*Humboldt to Schiller. Paris,
December 7, 1797. Thursday*

There is a greatness and a sublimity [in the Cranes], which is again completely their own. Especially from the moment the theater is mentioned, the depiction is godly. The painting of the amphitheater and the congregation is lively, great and clear, already the names of the peoples transpose one to such happier times, that I know of scarcely anything more magnificent for the fantasy. And then the chorus of the Eumenides, as it appears in its frightful greatness, wanders around the theater, and finally disappears, horrible even then. Here the language is at once so uniquely yours, and so appropriate for the task, that I can not deny that I felt, in the chorus, something greater and something even higher than in the Greek of Aeschylus, as closely as you have followed him. Already this language, this verse-style, even the rhyme scheme make that which is otherwise

unique to modern works unite with antiquity. The sublimity for fantasy and heart, which is so unique to Greek expression, achieves here, I believe, an increased greatness for the mind. . . .

The Ibycus has . . . an extraordinary substance; it moves deeply; it shakes one; it fascinates, and one must come back to it again and again. Surprisingly beautiful are the transitions, and you succeeded very well in the difficult narration of the development.

*Körner to Schiller. Dresden,
March 26, 1798. Monday*

With regards to the Cranes of Ibycus, I have been embroiled in a war with Humboldt. My reproach of dryness I can not take back; but it was never meant for the treatment, but the material itself. But I accuse Humboldt outright: He is not impartial with regards to this subject matter; such a description of Greek festivities puts him in seventh heaven. . . . Exactly because the congregation of the Greek peoples and the tragic chorus appear so lively before our eye, we completely forget poor Ibycus, when his cranes come flying by. He is not a known name, whose mere utterance evokes an interesting picture. We have learned little of him; because as soon as he appeared he was murdered. We wish his murderers to be found and punished; but this interest does not rouse a very anxious expectation. And this expectation disappears altogether through the depiction, which captivates our attention so completely, that we forget everything else. A narrative poem—this is what I contend—requires a main character, and for him the strongest illumination. I miss this here and in *The Ring of Polycrates*. In both poems the effect of the whole is weakened by this. Fate can never be the hero of a poem, but indeed a man who fights his fate. . . .

The debate was intense and vehement. Goethe, Humboldt, and Körner were not only in close contact with Schiller, but also with each other. The waves would calm, and Humboldt and Körner remained close friends long after the early death of Schiller. Schiller followed these arguments, amused, but at the same time he took Körner's objections quite seriously.



EIRNS/Christopher Lewis

Musical interlude, Dichterpflänzchen poetry recital, September 1997.

Schiller to Körner. Jena, April 27, 1798.

Your critique of the Almanac has given Goethe great pleasure, he was preoccupied with it for a long time. However, in what you say about the Ibycus and Polycrates, which I don't think is unfounded, he is not of your opinion, and has defended both poems emphatically against you and me. He considers your concept, from which you judge and criticize them, too narrow, and wants these poems to be seen as a new class, which expands poetry. The depiction of ideas, as they are treated here, are not foreign to poetry, according to him, and he wishes that such poems not be confounded with those which symbolize abstract ideas, etc. Be that as it may, while the type may be admissible, it definitely is not capable of the highest poetical effect, and it seems that it therefore must be assisted by something extraneous to poetry, to make up for that which is lacking.

In the meantime, the *Muses' Almanac* had been finished. It contained, among other works, all the new ballads of Schiller and Goethe, and created "quite a sensation." While the almanac was already at the printer, Schiller completed another great ballad, "The Walk to the Iron Foundry." Beautiful and sublime is the theme, but light and ironic, and decidedly humorous, in its treatment; it is, in a manner of speaking, the reprise of the Year of the Ballad.

This is the last ballad which was created



Dichterpflänzchen—"budding poets"—group assembles after poetry recital, September 1997.

in the year 1797. Even though two hundred years have passed since then, these poems speak to us very directly, and move us, genuinely and deeply. And if, in the hopefully not-too-distant future, there are again great poets, they will reach back to these works, as Schiller and Goethe reached back to classics of ancient Greece.

—translated by
Gabriele and Peter Chaitkin

1. Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832), poet, naturalist, and minister with changing scope of duties in the Duchy of Weimar.
2. In a letter to Goethe on Sept. 22, 1797: "Further this is, in fact, the year of the ballad . . ."
3. Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), philologist, classical scholar, and Prussian statesman. He was the purest representative of the idea of classical humanism in the sense of the Weimar Classic. He became Minister of the Interior of Prussia in 1809. He introduced the legendary Humboldt education system, and founded the University of Berlin.
4. Christian Gottfried Körner (1756-1831), jurist and cameralist. He granted Schiller shelter in his home from 1785 to 1787, and helped his trusted friend repeatedly out of financial difficulties. Schiller composed the play *Don Carlos*, among other works,

while living in Körner's country house in Loschwitz, near Dresden. Schiller thought of these two years with Körner as among the happiest of his life.

5. "*im Balladenwesen und Unwesen herumtreiben*" is an untranslatable play on German words.
6. Goethe held different public offices at the court in Weimar throughout his activities. From 1779 on, he was a member of the cabinet, and over the years he held posts as finance minister, minister of mining, and minister for roads. He led the War Commission, supervised the University of Jena, was minister for Church and school matters, minister of construction, and for several decades, the director of the government-sponsored theater in Weimar.
7. Now the eighteenth verse, for Schiller followed most of Goethe's suggestions.