

TRANSLATION

# The Pledge

(1798)

Friedrich Schiller

“THE PLEDGE” IS ONE of Friedrich Schiller’s (1759-1805) finest ballads—a form which uniquely unites narrative, lyric, and dramatic elements of poetry. Schiller and his fellow German Classical poet, Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832), took such undiluted pleasure, as Goethe put it, “in romping about in the world of the ballads,” that they called 1797, when Schiller wrote six major ballads, and Goethe five—including “The Cranes of Ibykus” (Schiller) and “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice” (Goethe)—the “year of the ballad.” “The Pledge” came one year later.

In composing these works, the poets sought to develop popular metaphors centered on anti-feudal, republican themes, with an eye to the failure of the French Revolution, and the need to elevate the minds of the European population, in order to make a successful, American-style revolution against oligarchism. As with all great poems, however, “The Pledge” places the reader in a dialogue with the great minds of human civilization, on issues crucial to its continuation and improvement, that transcends centuries. In this case, Schiller was, in fact, completing a project—the transformation into a “philosopher-king” of the Syracusan tyrant Dionysius—which Plato, as he recounts in the Seventh Letter, had attempted, but failed.

In “The Pledge,” Schiller draws on the Christian teaching that there is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for a friend, to transform Dionysius from a tyrant, into a friend of liberty—thus demonstrating the power of love, or *agapē*, to drive forward the process of revolutionary change.

To DIONYSIUS, the tyrant, would sneak  
Damon, concealing a dagger;  
He’s slapped by the guards in a fetter.  
“What would you do with that dagger, speak!”  
Demands the despot, his visage bleak.  
“I would free the state from a tyrant!”  
“For that, on the cross be repentant.”

“I am,” he replies, “ready to die  
And do not beseech you to spare me,  
But if you would show me mercy,  
I ask you to let three days go by,  
’Til my sister her marriage bonds may tie,  
I’ll leave you my friend, in bondage,  
If I flee, his life is hostage.”

The King then smiles with malice in his face,  
And speaks after thinking just briefly:  
“Three days I’ll give for your journey.  
But beware! If you’ve used up your days of grace,  
Before you’ve returned to me from that place,  
Then he must to death be committed,  
But your sentence will be remitted.”

And he comes to his friend: “The King bids, that I  
Must pay by crucifixion

For my wrongful act of passion,  
But he will let three days go by,  
’Til my sister her marriage bonds may tie,  
So stay as my pledge, ’til I hasten  
Back to you, your bonds to unfasten.”

And the true friend embraces him silently  
And goes to the tyrant in submission,  
The other goes hence on his mission.  
And before the sun rises upon the third day,  
He quickly gives his sister in marriage away,  
Hurries home, with anxious spirit,  
That he stay not beyond the time limit.

Then the rain comes pouring down endlessly,  
From the mountains the springs are rushing,  
And the brooks and the streams are gushing.  
To the bank with his wanderer’s staff comes he,  
As the whirlpool is tearing the bridge away,  
And the waves now break with a thunder  
The arch of the vault asunder.

And hopeless he wanders the shore’s dark sand,  
As widely as he scouts and gazes  
And as loud as the cries he raises,  
Here no boat puts out from safety’s strand,

Which brings him across to the wished-for land,  
No skipper mans his station,  
And the wild stream swells to an ocean.

Then he sinks on the shore and prays and cries,  
His hands up to Zeus extended:  
“O let the storm’s wrath be ended!  
The hours are hastening, at midday lies  
The sun, and if it leaves the skies,  
And I cannot reach the city,  
Then my friend must die without pity.”

But renewed, the rage of the storm does grow,  
And wave upon wave goes racing,  
And hour after hour is chasing.  
His courage he seizes, his fear makes him go  
And headlong he dives in the thundering flow  
And cleaves, in a powerful fashion,  
The flood, and a god has compassion.

And he wins the bank and runs from the flood  
And thanks to the god he expresses,  
When a band of robbers then presses  
From out a nocturnal spot in the wood,  
His pathway blocking, and snorts for his blood  
And holds up the wanderer’s speeding  
With threatening cudgels impeding.

“What do you want?” he cries, pale with fear,  
“I’ve naught but my life to render,  
Which I to the king must surrender!”  
And he grabs the club from the one most near:  
“For the sake of my friend be merciful here!”  
And three, with a powerful beating  
He slays, the others retreating.

And the sun glows hot as a burning brand,  
And from all of the pains of his mission  
He sinks to his knees in exhaustion.  
“O you’ve saved me with mercy from robbers’ hand,  
From out of the stream to the sacred land,  
And shall I here languishing perish,  
And my friend die for me, whom I cherish!”

And hark! there it purls silver-clear,  
Quite close, like a rippling it rushes,  
And to listen, he halts and hushes,  
And see, from the rock ledge, now babbling near,  
An ebullient fountain springs murmuring here,  
And he joyfully kneels down and washes  
And his burning limbs refreshes.

And the sunlight slants through the verdant trees  
And paints on the glistening meadows  
The forest’s gigantic shadows;

And two wanderers walking the road he sees,  
He would hasten along as past them he flees,  
Then he hears the words they are saying:  
“Now him on the cross they are slaying.”

And now fear gives wings to his hastening gait,  
Pangs of grief are him pursuing,  
And i’th’ shimmering red o’th’ evening,  
Distant Syracuse’ towers await,  
And here Philostratus comes from its gate,  
The household’s honest keeper,  
Who with horror perceives his master:

“Go back! It’s too late to save your friend,  
So save your own life, for the future!  
Even now to death does he suffer.  
Your return he awaited for hours on end,  
To you his hopeful soul did bend,  
With a faith too strong and valiant  
To be robbed by the scorn of the tyrant.”

“And is it too late, and can I not lend  
Him the hand of a welcome savior,  
Then in death I’ll join him forever.  
Let the bloody tyrant’s boasting end,  
That the friend has broken his word to his friend,  
Let him slaughter us two together  
And believe in love and honor.”

And the sun now descends, by the gate he stands nigh  
And sees the cross elevated,  
Which the gaping crowd has awaited,  
On the rope already his friend’s lifted high,  
Through the thick of the throng he goes charging by:  
“Me, hangman! Kill me!” he’s crying,  
“I’m the one, for whom he is dying!”

And amazement seizes the people all round,  
The two friends give each other embraces,  
Tears of sorrow and joy wet their faces.  
No eye without tears is there to be found,  
And the wonderful tale to the king is then bound,  
Humanely his feelings are shaken,  
To his throne are they quickly then taken.

And long he regards them with wondering eye,  
Then he speaks: “You have prospered,  
My heart you now have conquered,  
And true faith, ’tis no empty vanity,  
So into your friendship’s bond take me,  
I would, if allowed my intention,  
Become the third in your union.”

—translated by Marianna Wertz  
and Paul Gallagher