

humanism – “the fountainhead of all later German critical theory” (Wellck) – as a program of normative discipline in Foucault’s sense of the term. Schiller’s aesthetics establishes and puts to work a number of metaphysical schemata, such as the three-stage figure of origin and return, in order to render its subjects as programmable and as subject to a knowledge that could be strategically deployed to shape and transform them. Nostalgic teleology, the promise of a recovery of nature, wholeness, and community serves to hide the violence of this project of aesthetic education. At its center stands the formation of “the Other Sex”, which is analyzed as the truly classical elaboration of a modern “regime of truth”.

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Stanford German Studies

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Nostalgic Teleology:  
Friedrich Schiller  
and the Schemata  
of Aesthetic Humanism

Peter Lang



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Constantin Behler

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## Nostalgic Teleology: Friedrich Schiller and the Schemata of Aesthetic Humanism



PETER LANG

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**Contents**

Preface	VII
Introduction	1
1. Schiller's Aesthetic-Humanist Legacy	7
Schiller in Germany	7
Marcuse and Aesthetic Reconciliation	10
Gadamer and the Subject of Aesthetic Play	23
Bürger and the Function of Aesthetic Autonomy	38
The Recent American Reception of Schiller	49
Abrams and the Circuitous Journey	51
A Nietzschean Attack	57
De Man and Aesthetic Ideology	60
Eagleton and the Ideology of the Aesthetic	71
2. The Hidden Violence of <i>Bildung</i>	79
The Need for Aesthetic Education	79
<i>A Task for More than One Century</i>	82
The Failure of Repression	89
An Aesthetic Theory of Modernity	100
The Goal of Aesthetic Education	107
A Technology of Self	112
The Formation of <i>The Other Sex</i>	123
Making Truth Productive	125
<i>The Beautiful Style</i>	135
<i>The Faithful Mirror of Art</i>	141
<i>The Work of Rule Must Become Nature</i>	151
3. Idealist Aesthetics of Effect	159
The Idealist Model	159
Kant and the Idealist Model of Aesthetic Effects	166
Affecting Nature in the Subject	175
The Theater of Sublime Cruelty	183
The Exorbitant Idealism of Aesthetic Education	205
Nostalgic Teleology as Poetic Norm	223
Bibliography	241

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## The Hidden Violence of *Bildung*

### THE NEED FOR AESTHETIC EDUCATION

Never has it been more necessary than now to shape and secure the inner forms of character, when the outer forms of circumstance and habit are threatening a general upheaval with such terrifying violence.

Wilhelm von Humboldt, 1799

It has become a critical commonplace that Schiller's assessment of the political function performed by art and aesthetic culture underwent a fundamental change, when the author articulated his theory. "Education through art," it is said, "becomes education to art" and Schiller's project thereby loses its original political orientation. The most influential endorsement of this view can be found in Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960), where Schiller's theory appears as a paradigmatic case of modern aesthetics. Schiller's theory is said to have been the first to establish the radical autonomy of the aesthetic realm by proposing a strict separation between art and "practical reality." Gadamer goes so far as to locate this so-called "turning point" in the philosophy of art within the central text of Schiller's aesthetics itself:

His great plan in the 'Letters on Aesthetic Education' changes in its execution. As we know, education through art becomes education to art. The true moral and political freedom, to which art should prepare, is replaced by the formation of an 'aesthetic state,' a cultured society [*Bildungsgesellschaft*] interested in art. (TM 83)

This opinion has been repeated in numerous recent studies, where Schiller's supposed abandonment of his earlier political ideals often stands as a paradigm for the supposed political resignation of the Romantic generation or of the entire nineteenth-century German bourgeoisie.<sup>64</sup>

Such a reading of Schiller's work is, I believe, untenable and obscures the actual historical and political status of his theoretical work. It is certainly true that Schiller's theory is groundbreaking in establishing the so-called autonomy of the aesthetic sphere.<sup>65</sup> On the basis of this very autonomy, however, he consistently assigns a most decisive political role to art and to aesthetic culture. There is absolutely no change in Schiller's orientation in this respect. The assigned task of aesthetic education is nothing less than the formation of freely self-governing subjects of an ideal state of the future. This important educational role of the aesthetic sphere stands in the service of a most ambitious and radical political ideal. Schiller's thinking is guided by the ideal of a "state" that can "serve as representative of that pure and objective humanity in the heart of each of its citizens" and by the ideal of "citizens" who have "become the state," i.e., who "have raised themselves up to the idea of the whole" (AE 21, corr.). For Schiller, the German originator of this radical political vision,<sup>66</sup> the final, however utopian and unreachable political goal of his project is the total integration, harmonization, and accomplished moral elevation of society, a condition in which "the will of the whole is executed through the nature of the individual" (AE 215):

The setting up of a moral State involves being able to count on the moral law as an effective force. [...] If we are to be able to count on man's moral behavior with as much certainty as we do

<sup>64</sup> See Marquart 1962; Janz 1973; Grimmlinger 1984; Bolten 1985.

<sup>65</sup> See Disselbeck 1987; Schmidt 1989.

<sup>66</sup> See Kain 1982; Yack 1986.

on *natural* effects, it will itself have to be nature, and he will have to be led by his very impulses [*durch seine Triebe*] to the kind of conduct which is bound to proceed from a moral character. (AE 17)

Instead of presenting Schiller's theoretical work as a paradigmatic abandonment of the political role of aesthetic culture, i.e., as a theory that drives a wedge between art and reality, politics and taste, one thus rather needs to recognize the politically overdetermined nature of his aesthetic theory, no less than the aesthetically overdetermined nature of his political ideal. Not only is the aesthetic sphere supposed to provide some of the most essential *means* of social formation (aesthetic education), but it also serves to embody and prefigure the very *goal* of the historical and political process: the beautiful work of art communicates and makes sensually manifest both the totally integrated ethical subject—the free, self-regulating citizen of the future—and the fully integrated and accomplished state. "The highest philosophy," Schiller writes in a letter in 1795, "ends in a poetic idea, just like the highest morality, the highest politics. It is the poetic spirit that prescribes the ideal to all three, the gradual approach towards which constitutes their highest perfection" (NA 28: 99). It is precisely this pronounced moral-political orientation of his thought that could allow Schiller's aesthetics to provide a model for an elaborate theory and project of modern social hegemony and at the same time inspire radical critiques of modern bourgeois society. Schiller's classical aesthetic-humanist theory (his *nostalgic teleology*) launches both a radical utopian political vision *and* a strategy for the formation of self-regulating subjects within authoritarian political conditions. Instead of downplaying the political orientation of Schiller's theory, one should rather recognize this dual dimension of his work as the inauguration of a peculiarly German, though profoundly influential, tradition of political and cultural theory—one that may very well be drawing to a close.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>67</sup> See the reflections by Ian Hunter, who argues for "the close of the era of political and cultural theory inaugurated by late eighteenth-century German criticism and philosophy. This was the period in which it seemed possible to subsume ethics, politics, and economics within a philosophical anthropology purporting to be a general theory of the making of man in 'society'" (1992, 349).

## A Task for More than One Century

Human emancipation will only be complete when the real, individual man has absorbed into himself the abstract citizen; when as the individual man, in his everyday life, in his work, and in his relationships, he has become a *species-being*; and when he has recognized and organized his own powers (*forces propres*) as social powers so that he no longer separates this social power from himself as *political* power.

Marx, "On the Jewish Question"

In contrast to the claim, therefore, that Schiller's theoretical work contains a break in his political orientation, it should be recognized that after 1793 at the latest, his published position concerning the historical or political functions of art is as clear as it remains consistent: "All improvement in the political sphere has to proceed from the ennobling of character," and "beautiful art" is the essential "tool" to accomplish this task (AE 55). Schiller maintains assiduously that "wholeness of character must be found in a people capable and worthy of exchanging the state of compulsion for a state of freedom" (AE 23). As he already puts it in the *Augustenburger Letters* (1793):

Political and bourgeois freedom will always and eternally remain the holiest of all goods, the most dignified goal of all efforts, and the great center of all culture—but one will be able to raise this glorious structure only on the basis of ennobled characters, one will have to begin to create citizens for the constitution before one can give the citizens a constitution. (AL 44)

This position is restated in all clarity in the first installment of the *Aesthetic*

*Education* (letters 1 through 9), where Schiller spells out exactly what his own "principles" and his "portrait of the present age" imply for the political order and for the immediate hopes of the future:

The present age, far from exhibiting that form of humanity which we have recognized as the necessary condition of any moral reform of the state, shows us rather the exact opposite. If then the principles I have established are correct, and if experience confirms my portrait of the present age, then we must declare any attempt at such a reform of the state as untimely, and every hope based upon it as chimerical, as long as the split within man is not healed, and his nature developed so completely that it can itself be the artificer, and can guarantee the reality of this political creation of reason. [...] The character of the age must therefore first lift itself out of its deep degradation: on the one hand, emancipate itself from the blind forces of nature; on the other, return to its simplicity, truth and fullness—a task for more than *one* century. (AE 45; corr.)

However limited and erroneous this political credo might be—it characteristically misses the institutional in favor of purely psychological conditions<sup>68</sup>—it clearly determines the political functions that Schiller assigns to the aesthetic sphere. The necessary moral transformation and "ennoblement" of "human nature" can only be accomplished by means of "beautiful art" and "aesthetic culture": "in order to solve that problem of politics in practice, one has to go through the problem of aesthetics because it is through beauty that one travels to freedom" (AE 9). As Schiller explicitly and dramatically emphasizes, this is the crucial "point" that his main theoretical work, the *Aesthetic Education* (1794/5) seeks to establish:

All improvement in the political sphere is to proceed from the ennobling of character—but how under the influence of a barbarous constitution is character ever to be ennobled? [...] I have now reached the point to which all my preceding reflections have been tending. This instrument is beautiful art; such living springs are opened up in its immortal exemplars. (AE 55)

The specific character of Schiller's political premises can be thrown

<sup>68</sup> See Disselbeck 1987, 88ff.

into relief by contrasting them with statements from other contemporary German political theorists such as Kant or Fichte, on whom Schiller otherwise draws most heavily in his thinking. Fichte, in fact, took direct issue with the political ambitions of Schiller's project of aesthetic education. In his essay "On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy" (1795), ejected by Schiller as a contribution to his journal *The Horae*, he charged Schiller's project with leading "us around in a circle":

When, on the one hand, it is not advisable to let men be free before their aesthetic sense is developed, it is, on the other hand, impossible to develop this sense before they are free; and the idea of raising mankind by means of aesthetic education to the worthiness of freedom and with it to freedom itself, leads us around in a circle, if we do not find a means beforehand to awaken the courage in individuals within the great mass, to be nobody's master [*Herrn*] and nobody's servant [*Knecht*]. (1971, 158)

In a similarly blunt disagreement, Kant insisted in his tract "Perpetual Peace" of 1795 that "a good constitution of the state is not to be expected from morality," but that rather "conversely, a good moral formation [*Bildung*] of a people is to be expected only from a good constitution of the state":

The problem of organizing a state is, as tough as this may sound, even solvable for a community of devils (as long as they are endowed with reason). [...] It does not require that we know how to attain the moral improvement of men, but only that we should know the mechanism of nature in order to use it on men, organizing the conflict of the hostile intentions present in a people in such a way that they must compel themselves to submit to coercive laws. (1963, 112; corr.)

The positive role that Kant actually grants to "unsociability" and egoism,<sup>69</sup> as long as these "natural urges" are controlled by "a society in which freedom under external laws is associated in the highest degree with irresistible power, i.e., a perfectly just civic constitution," highlights

<sup>69</sup> See also his "Idea For a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View": Thanks be to Nature, then, for the incompatibility, for heartless competitive vanity, for the insatiable desire to possess and to rule! Without them, all the excellent natural aptitudes of humanity would forever sleep, undeveloped" (1963, 16).

just how much Schiller's political ideal is based instead on a radical moral-utopian vision. In direct contrast to Kant's sole reliance on "reason" and "coercive laws," Schiller maintains that "the setting up of a moral State involves being able to count on the moral law as an effective force. [...] [man] will have to be led by his very impulses to the kind of conduct that is bound to proceed from a moral character" (AE 17).

Having specified the political role of "beautiful art" to be the "ennoblement" of the "character" of future free citizens, Schiller later by no means alters or abandons his political premises or his views on the moral-political function of aesthetic culture. Instead, in the second installment of the *Aesthetic Education* (letters 10 through 16), he decisively turns his efforts to the establishment of the conditions for the possibility of such a world-historical role of art and aesthetic culture. "How," he asks at the opening of letter 10, "can we reasonably expect it to effect anything so great as the education [*Ausbildung*] of humanity?" (AE 63; corr.) While the second part of the *Aesthetic Education* mainly focuses on the so-called "transcendental" conditions of aesthetic education, the third and concluding installment (letters 17 to 27) turns its attention to the empirical and historical effects of "beauty" and "aesthetic culture." The very last letter—usually the preferred evidence for Schiller's supposed abandonment of the political ideal—in fact presents some of his most explicit statements regarding the educational and socializing (i.e., political) role of art and aesthetic culture:

The dynamic state can merely make society possible, by taming [*bezähmt*] one nature by means of another; the ethical state can merely make it morally necessary, by subjecting [*unterwirft*] the individual will to the general; the aesthetic state alone can make society a reality because it realizes the will of the whole through the nature of the individual [*den Willen des Ganzen durch die Natur des Individuums vollzieht*]. (AE 215; corr.)

Schiller summarizes here exactly which political function aesthetic culture is to perform. Instead of merely "taming" individuals by means of external laws, and instead of merely "subjecting the individual will to the general," as the ethical discipline of Kant's *categorical imperative* attempts to do, the aesthetic sphere is to bring the very "nature of the individual" into line with "the will of the whole": "Though it may be his needs which

drive man into society, and reason which implants within him principles of social behavior, beauty alone can confer upon him a *social character*" (AE 215).

The notion that perhaps in his next major theoretical study, *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry* (1795/6), Schiller may have altered his political premises or turned his back on the political significance and role of art is equally untenable and misleading.<sup>70</sup> In strict accordance with his moral-pedagogical, and *therefore* political determinations regarding the function of aesthetic culture, the literary sphere is here pressed entirely into the service of his project of an aesthetic emblement of character. The profoundly influential theory of literature developed in *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry* performs a critical streamlining and functionalization of the German literary system of his day—a "judgement Day for the greater part of German poets"<sup>71</sup>—that is a direct application of Schiller's moral-pedagogical (and *therefore* political) theory of aesthetic education.<sup>72</sup> This determined effort to functionalize the so-called autonomous aesthetic sphere in the service of his moral-political project is revealed most clearly, however, in Schiller's elaborate theories of tragedy, which span his entire period of philosophizing.<sup>73</sup> Himself the foremost tragic dramatist of the German language, he conceives of tragic theater as a direct means of activating and energizing the moral dispositions of individuals and, accordingly, develops elaborate strategies to exploit and intensify this "tragic effect"—a theoretical effort that has rightly been described as "singular in the history of poetics" (Borchmeyer 1973, 226).

The point of insisting on the strong moral-political orientation of Schiller's theory is simply to establish that aesthetic education is indeed a *program* in Foucault's sense of the term, namely, the invention of a strategy

<sup>70</sup> See Odo Marquard's influential essay, "Kant and the Turn towards Aesthetics," where he claims that Schiller's text reflects "the desperations of the philosophy of history": "*aesthetics becomes the substitute for philosophy of history*," and it now "determines the role of the artist and of art no longer in relation to the state, but in relation to nature. [...] Art and beauty [...] become in the later Schiller the temperate repetitions of the ahistorical-asocial reality of distant nature. With that the romantic position is basically reached. *The romantic aesthetic detaches itself from the framework of the political problem and determines itself through the relation to 'distant nature'*" (1962, 372f.).

<sup>71</sup> See the Letter to Goethe, S/G B I: 124f.; NA 21: 284.

<sup>72</sup> See below: 226ff.

<sup>73</sup> See below: 183ff.

and a technology of productive power and discipline: "We are dealing with sets of calculated, reasoned prescriptions in terms of which institutions are meant to be reorganized, spaces arranged, behaviors regulated" (Foucault 1985, 109). The program of aesthetic education is explicitly designed to realize what Foucault calls "the great fantasy [...] of a social body constituted by the universality of wills" (1980, 55). Schiller is indeed the key initiator and true founder of this Rousseauian fantasy in the post-Kantian German intellectual tradition—a fantasy that has decisively shaped that country's influential educational and cultural institutions and one that has to a certain extent dominated Western interpretations of modernity.<sup>74</sup> As Schiller writes in one of the most famous passages from the *Aesthetic Education*, one that draws on Fichte's and is later prominently quoted by Hegel:<sup>75</sup>

Every individual human being, one may say, carries within him, as a potential and as a decree [*der Anlage und der Bestimmung nach*], a pure ideal human being, and it is the great task of his life to be, through all his changing manifestations, in harmony with his unchanging unity. This pure human being, which is to be discerned more or less clearly in every individual, is represented by the *State*, the objective and, as it were, canonical form in which the diversity of subjects strive to unite. (AE 17ff.; corr.)

This understanding of "the State" as "serving as the representative of that pure and objective humanity in the heart of each of its citizens" implies, according to Schiller, that "the State [...] can only become a reality inasmuch as the parts have raised themselves up [*sich hinauf gestimmt*] to the idea of the whole" (AE 21; corr.)—a task that is to be accomplished through the program of aesthetic education. Not surprisingly, Schiller's theoretical texts thus also strongly affirm Foucault's basic point that "the

<sup>74</sup> See Buck 1984, 156; Yack 1986, 118ff.; Lambropoulos 1993, 49ff.

<sup>75</sup> See Schiller's footnote in reference to the first sentence of the quote: "I refer to a recent publication of my friend Fichte, *Lectures on the Vocation of a Scholar*, where one finds a very luminous deduction of this proposition that has never before been attempted in this way" (AE 17; corr.).

<sup>76</sup> "In these *Letters* the chief point from which Schiller starts is that every individual man bears within himself the capacity for ideal manhood. This genuine man, he holds, is represented by the State which he takes to be the objective, universal, and as it were canonical, form in which the diversity of individual persons aims at collecting and combining itself into a unity" (1975, 62).



phenomenon of the social body is the effect not of a consensus but of the materiality of power operating on the very bodies of individuals" (1980, 55):

The bourgeoisie is perfectly well aware that a new constitution or legislature will not suffice to assure its hegemony; it realizes that it has to invent a new technology ensuring the irrigation by effects of power of the whole down to its smallest particles. (1980, 156)

Nowhere perhaps does this realization (of the need for such a technology) become more obvious than in Schiller's outspoken rationale for the historical urgency of his project.

### The Failure of Repression

The smaller the relationship between the particular wills and the general will, that is, between the people's morals and the law, the more repressive force will have to be employed.

Rousseau, *The Social Contract*

In the initial proposition of his project of aesthetic education, Schiller sets out to critically distance his own from two rival solutions to the pressing political issue of his time, described as "the construction of true political freedom" (AE 7). According to Schiller's interpretation of the revolutionary events in France, the one approach believes that by actually "setting the law upon the throne [...], true freedom could be made into the basis of political association" (AE 25). The other, German solution, Schiller describes as aiming at a moral transformation of the individual future free citizens through the establishment of a philosophical, or rational form of moral self-regulation. While clearly rejecting the French attempt as untimely—"far from believing in the beginning of a political regeneration, the contemporary events have rather taken from me all hope thereto for centuries," he writes in July of 1793—, Schiller conceives of his own theory and project as a corrective and supplement to the German moral-philosophical project. While agreeing with what he construes as its overall goal of individual moral perfection, he now calls for the determined implementation of a productive model of ethical formation:

Reason has accomplished all that it can by discovering the law and establishing it. Its execution demands a resolute will and ardour of feeling. [...] The development of man's capacity for feeling is, therefore, the more urgent need of our time. (AE 49ff; corr.)

In arguing for the urgency of his own project of aesthetic education, Schiller tries to demonstrate that the alternative answers to the political question of his time must inevitably fail, and that they, in fact, contribute to the "negative direction of the character of the age" (AE 39; corr.) which would inevitably derail any political reform. By means of a sustained parallelism between the socio-political and the psychological sphere,<sup>77</sup> Schiller tries to show that both the French and the German projects wrongfully rely on *repressive* methods of political and moral formation, against which he proposes his own *productive* model:

One can think of two different ways in which man existing in time can coincide with man as idea, and, in consequence, just as many ways in which the State can assert itself in individuals: either by the ideal man suppressing [unterdrückt] empirical man, by the State annulling individuals; or else by the individual *becoming* the State, by man in time *ennobling* himself to the stature of man as idea. (AE 19; corr.)

It is safe to say that Schiller's entire theoretical work is built on this crucial contrast between repressive forms of moral formation and political organization and those that are said to be based on freedom, ennoblement, and voluntary consent. Key moments in the argument of *all* of Schiller's major theoretical texts hinge on this crucial contrast between repressive versus productive theories and practices of moral and political formation<sup>78</sup>—an emphatically pronounced distinction that may be a key reason why the disciplinary character of Schiller's project has for the most part gone unrecognized. But as Foucault so forcefully reminds us:

Power would be a fragile thing if its only function were to repress, if it worked only through the mode of censorship, exclusion, blockage and repression, in the manner of a great Super-ego, exercising itself only in a negative way. If, on the contrary, power is strong this is because, as we are beginning to realize, it produces effects at the level of desire. (1980, 59)

<sup>77</sup> See Abrams who refers to the *Aesthetic Education* as the paradigm for a "sustained equivocal on political states and states of the human mind. Many other writings of the period, literary as well as philosophical, manifest a similar metaphorical duality, in a procedure that differs from Schiller's *Aesthetic Letters* in degree rather than in kind" (NS 357).

<sup>78</sup> See KB 31; 36; GD 280; 284; AE 18; 90; NSD 424ff..

Schiller's project of aesthetic education lays out a veritable blueprint for the production of such "effects at the level of desire." As Schiller puts it with characteristic candor: "He must apply the law of his will already to his inclinations; [...] he must learn to desire *more nobly*, so that he may not need to *will sublimely*. This is accomplished through aesthetic culture" (AE 167ff; corr.). It is safe to assume that the historical influence and status of his theoretical work may have much to do with the decisive and "classical" deployment of such a productive model of normative discipline at the end of the eighteenth century.

Schiller believes that the events in France have sufficiently demonstrated that a revolutionary attempt to impose a rational and just political union inevitably fails in the absence of the necessary moral preconditions.<sup>79</sup> Schiller interprets the revolution as an "attempt on the part of a people grown to maturity to transform its natural state into a moral one" (AE 13). But while there may have been an external opportunity for replacing the "State of compulsion" [Notstaat] with one based on principles of "reason," the inner psychological conditions are said to be lacking and this, in Schiller's eyes, doomed the revolution from the start:

The fabric of the natural state is tottering, its rotting foundations giving way, and there seems to be a *physical* possibility of setting the law on the throne, of honouring man at last as an end in himself, and of making true freedom the basis of political association. Vain hope! The *moral* possibility is lacking, and the generous moment finds a people unprepared to receive it. (AE 25)

In diagnosing the moral failure of the French people, Schiller draws a basic character typology which reappears throughout the *Aesthetic Education*: "Man portrays himself in his actions. And what a figure he cuts in the drama of the present time! On the one hand savagery, on the other complete lethargy: the two extremes of human corruption, and both united in a *single epoch*" (AE 25). Schiller conceives of two basic ways in which "man" can be morally "at odds with himself": "either as a savage, when feeling predominates over principle; or as barbarian, when principle

<sup>79</sup> For a comparison of Schiller's position with Burke's, see Borchmeyer 1983.

destroys feeling" (AE 21). In the diagnosis of the events in France, he directly associates these types of moral aberration with the behavior of two basic classes of society:

Among the lower and more numerous classes we are confronted with crude, lawless instincts, unleashed with the loosening of the bonds of civil order, and hastening with ungovernable fury to their animal satisfactions. [...] The cultured classes, on the other hand, offer the even more repugnant spectacle of lethargy, and of a deprivation of character which offends the more because culture is itself the source. (AE 27)

If the "savage" behavior of the lower classes is said to fully legitimate the repressive authority of the state—"its dissolution contains its justification (AE 25f; corr.)—the supposed moral depravity of the upper classes unleashes Schiller's entire Rousseauian anger:

That enlightenment of mind, which is the not altogether groundless boast of our refined classes, has had on the whole so little of an ennobling influence on feeling and character that it has tended rather to bolster up depravity by providing it with the support of precepts. [...] Proud self-sufficiency contracts the heart of the man of the world, a heart which in natural man still often beats with sympathy; and as from a city in flames each man seeks only to save from the general destruction his own wretched belongings. (AE 27)

The upshot of Schiller's interpretation of the revolution is that in the absence of the necessary moral preconditions for "making true freedom the basis of political association," any such attempt at radical political change will at best result in an externally imposed morality and a repressive tyranny of reason. Schiller's characterization here seems to focus entirely on the more radical phase of the revolution associated with the terror, to the exclusion of the earlier, more liberal phase, represented by the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* of 1789.<sup>80</sup> The premature political project of transforming the "State of compulsion" into "a moral one" (AE 13) is thus said to end with "the State" literally "annihilating multiplicity" and "depopulating the sensible realm of appearance" (AE 19):

<sup>80</sup> See Disselbeck 1989, 50ff.

If [...] in the character of a whole people, subjective man still stands in such contradiction to objective man that only the suppression [*Unterdrückung*] of the former can ensure the victory of the latter, then the State too will have to adopt towards its citizens the strict earnestness of the law and ruthlessly trample under foot such a hostile individuality, in order not to fall victim to it. (AE 21; corr.)<sup>81</sup>

According to Schiller, the only alternative to this failure of "repression" is the gradual education and "ennoblement" of individuals "in the direction of objective humanity": "because the state [...] can only become a reality inasmuch as its parts have raised themselves up to the idea of the whole" (AE 19ff.).

This is in essence what Schiller believes the German project of Enlightenment wants to achieve—a moral transformation of individuals into mature future citizens through the institution of a philosophical agency of self-governance. In his characterization of the German project, which for him is represented in its final and pure form by Kant's and Fichte's moral philosophy,<sup>82</sup> Schiller focuses exclusively on its individual ethical, or pedagogical ambitions, to the nearly complete exclusion of the dimension of institutional and legal reform referred to above. In Schiller's eyes, the German philosophical project simply aims at establishing the law of reason as sovereign within the individuals, making them ready to become self-regulating subjects in a free, rational, and moral state of the future. But while Schiller declares himself to be in basic agreement with the goal of this project, he is critical of both its anthropological presuppositions and its practical means of implementation. According to Schiller, the project of philosophical or rational self-governance cannot achieve the historically necessary moral transformation because it

<sup>81</sup> See also the harsh criticism of the French Revolution in "On the Necessary Limits in the Use of Beautiful Forms" of 1795 (NA 21: 26).

<sup>82</sup> That Schiller is writing entirely on the basis of "Kantian principles" is explicitly stated by him in the first letter of the *Aesthetic Education*: "True, I shall not attempt to hide from you that it is for the most part Kantian principles on which the following thesis will be based. [...] Concerning those ideas which prevail in the practical part of the Kantian system only the philosophers are at variance; the rest of mankind, I believe I can prove, have always been agreed. Once divested of their technical form, they stand revealed as the immemorial pronouncements of common reason" (AE 5; corr.). Schiller's endorsement of Fichte's reformulation of Kant's moral imperative is found in Letter 4 of the *Aesthetic Education*.

misconceives of, and thus fails to integrate the sensual and emotive dimensions of the personality, i.e., what Schiller calls the "totality of our nature" (AE 43). In his sustained criticism of a purely rational form of subject formation and self-regulation, Schiller thus tries to show that in direct analogy to the political dilemma, the philosophical project also gets caught up in a vicious circle of repression and revolt.

According to Schiller's interpretation, Kant's and Fichte's moral philosophies seek to institute an agency of self-government that determines "laws for each will" by subjecting each individual to the rule of non-contradiction.<sup>83</sup> This project centers on the idea of placing each individual under what Schiller calls the "law of unity" (AE 136): "To remain perpetually himself throughout all change, [...] to transform all his modes of existence in time into a law for all times: this is the injunction laid upon him by his rational nature" (AE 74). Philosophical self-reference, in other words, wishes to institute what Schiller calls the "formal drive" as the governing "law" of the personality. This drive, which, in distinction from the "sensual drive," issues from "the absolute existence of man, or from his rational nature," is intent on bringing "harmony into the diversity of his manifestations":

That drive which insists on affirming the personality can never demand anything but that which is binding upon it to all eternity; hence it decides for ever as it decides for this moment, and commands for this moment what it commands for ever. [...] It wants the real to be necessary and eternal, and the eternal and necessary to be real. (AE 80)

In its one-sidedly rational orientation, however, the philosophical project inevitably fails to take into account the "totality of our nature" (AE 43). Whereas "reason may be satisfied as long as its law obtains unconditionally," Schiller articulates what he calls "the complete

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<sup>83</sup> Schiller is here drawing on Fichte's interpretation of Kant's moral philosophy, proposed in his lectures "The Vocation of the Scholar" of 1794: "Man should always be at one with himself, he should never contradict himself. [...] I may here, in passing, and for the sake of illustration merely, express the fundamental principle of morality in the following formula: Act in such a way that you could conceive of the maxim of your will as an eternal law for yourself.—The ultimate vocation of every finite, rational being is thus absolute unity, constant identity, perfect coincidence with oneself" (GA I, 3: 30f.).

anthropological view," for which "content counts no less than form" and "living feeling too has a voice" (AE 19). As he puts it categorically in the *Aesthetic Education*: "reason does indeed demand unity; but nature demands multiplicity, and both legislations make their claim upon man" (AE 19). By focusing solely on the agency of reason, the project of rational self-regulation is said to go about "maintaining unity in man by unconditionally *subordinating* the sensual drive to the rational" (AE 85). As a consequence, the "sensual" dimension of the personality remains in a permanent state of antagonism and rebellion: "a firm will triumphantly resists its demands; but suppressed nature [*unterdrückte Natur*] soon resumes its rights" (AE 81; corr.). Because of its one-sidedness, the philosophical form of self-reference thus all too easily turns into an outright repressive form of moral formation:

Because it is difficult to remain true to one's principles when feeling is easily stirred, one takes the easier way out and tries to make the character secure by blunting feeling; for it is, of course, infinitely easier to have peace and quiet from an adversary you have disarmed than to master a spirited and active foe. And this, for the most part, is the operation that is meant when people speak of *forming a human being* [*leihen Menschen formieren*]; and that, even in the best sense of the word, where it implies the cultivation of the inner, and not merely the outer, man. (AE 91; corr.)

While Schiller is intent on maintaining that such a repressive approach to moral formation does not, in fact, lie in the "spirit of the Kantian system," he nevertheless makes it clear that "it may well be found in the letter of it" (AE 87):

In a transcendental method of philosophizing, where everything depends on clearing form of content and obtaining the necessary in its pure state, free of all admixture with the contingent, one easily falls into thinking of material things as nothing but an obstacle, and of imagining that our sensuous nature, just because it happens to be a hindrance in *this* operation, must of necessity be in conflict with reason. (AE 89)

The final result of Schiller's criticism of the philosophical project is that it cannot succeed, because, with its one-sidedly rational form of self-

reference, it actually reproduces and reinforces a division between reason and sensuality within the subject. What philosophy construes as a necessary and ultimately irreconcilable opposition between "nature" and "reason," between "sensuality" and the "moral law," is the result of its own conceptual and pedagogical limitations. Schiller had first formulated this criticism of Kant, which was groundbreaking and paradigmatic for later German idealism,<sup>84</sup> in *Grace and Dignity* (1793), where he stated that "human nature is a more unified whole in reality than the philosopher is able to make it appear" (GD 286): "If in morality nature were always only the repressed and never the contributive party, how could it yield that entire ardour of feeling to a triumph that is celebrated against it?" (GD 286). Kant's insistently dualistic and, in Schiller's eyes, wrongfully pessimistic anthropology,<sup>85</sup> thus appears as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, and the German project of Enlightenment appears trapped in a self-created vicious circle. Rather than healing and reconciling, the philosophical project of rational self-regulation only appears to intensify the "antagonism" within the self.

Parallel to the analysis of the political sphere, the challenge of individual moral formation is described as two-fold. On the one hand, the savage tendencies of "natural man," the "conflict of blind impulse," first have to be "appeased" before "we may encourage diversity" (AE 44). On the other hand, the so-called barbarian tendencies of "civilized man" have to be "replaced by a proper sense of freedom" before "the diversity within him can be subjected to an ideal unity" (AE 44):

As long as natural man still makes a lawless misuse of his license, one can scarcely run the risk of letting him glimpse his liberty; and as long as civilized man as yet makes so little use of his liberty, one can hardly deprive him of his license. (AE 44)

<sup>84</sup> See Hegel 1975, 61; Taylor 1975, 37f.; Henrich 1982, 42ff.

<sup>85</sup> See Schiller's comments to Goethe in 1798: "I very much desire to read Kant's 'Anthropology.' The pathological side which he always highlights in the human being and which may be appropriate in an anthropology, is persistently present in almost everything that he writes and it is what gives his practical philosophy such a gloomy appearance. It is astonishing and lamentable that this happy and jovial spirit has not been able to free his wings from the soil of life, has not completely overcome certain dark impressions of youth etc. There still is something in him that reminds one, as with Luther, of a monk who may have opened up his cloister, but who has not been able to completely eradicate the traces of it" (G/S B II: 182). On the diagnosis the philosophical doctor Schiller is giving here, see Schings, 1977, 12.

Translated into political metaphors, Schiller is suggesting that individuals must first be brought to experience their own sovereignty, i.e., their legislative and executive authority as absolutist rulers *over themselves*—they must first learn to say: *l'état (de moi), c'est moi*—before this "arbitrary" form of self-government is to be subjected to the higher authority of reason and the moral law. If such a sense of freedom as self-determination has not first been established, individuals will not come to identify with the "voice of reason," but will regard the "moral law" as merely another external form of compulsion:

He merely feels the fetters which reason lays upon him, not the infinite liberation which it is capable of affording him. Without suspecting the dignity of the lawgiver within, he merely experiences its coercive force and feels the impotent resistance of a powerless subject. (AE 178)

In this manner, Schiller's critique of the philosophical project ends by drawing a clear parallel to the premature political attempt to enforce reason and morality by means of external repression:

The law of identity turns into tyranny vis-à-vis the individual when it is allied with an already prevailing weakness and physical limitation, and so extinguishes the last glimmering spark of independence and individuality. (AE 46; corr.)

In a final twist to his argument, Schiller even envisions a future in which the vicious circles of the premature political and the flawed philosophical projects join up with each other: "the old principles will remain, but they will wear the dress of the century, and philosophy now lend its name to a repression formerly authorized by the church" (AE 47; corr.).

Schiller's theory of aesthetic humanism and his project of aesthetic education are explicitly conceived of as the solution and cure for the diagnosis of an apparently world-historical impasse. While supporting what he sees as the German philosophical project's focus on moral subject formation, Schiller tries to redefine and reorient this project both theoretically and practically. His main philosophical ambitions center on the development of a holistic anthropology that emphatically "sublates"

[*Aufheben*]<sup>86</sup> the residual dualism of the philosophical tradition,<sup>87</sup> something that has earned him the recognition of having played a groundbreaking role in the development of German idealism. Schiller's philosophical anthropology explicitly sets out to oppose and destroy the idea of an "original" or "necessary antagonism" between "reason" and "nature," between the "rational" and the "sensual drive":

They are, therefore, not by nature opposed to each other, and when they nevertheless appear to be so, it is because they have become opposed through a wanton transgression of nature. [...] Once you postulate an original, and therefore necessary antagonism between these two drives, there is, of course, no other means of maintaining unity in man than by unconditionally *subordinating* the sensuous drive to the rational. From this, however, only uniformity can result, never harmony, and man goes on for ever being divided. (AE 85)

Schiller's three-stage philosophical anthropology instead posits an original and to-be-recovered "unity of human nature" (AE 84), which, in turn, is meant to give "transcendental" legitimation to aesthetic education as a viable supplement to the project of rational self-regulation: "philosophy itself, which first turned us into her traitors, is now in loud and urgent tones calling us back to the bosom of nature" (AE 49ff; corr.).

Above all, however, the practical side of Schiller's project is to lead out of the failure and dead end of repression through the determined implementation of a productive model of moral formation:

Reason has accomplished all that it can by discovering the law and establishing it. Its execution demands a resolute will and ardour of feeling. [...] If truth has hitherto displayed so little of its conquering power, this was due not to the intellect which was powerless to unveil it, but to the heart which closed itself off against it and to the drive which refused to act on its behalf. (AE 49ff; corr.)

The "ennobled character" that is needed for the establishment of the ideal state of the future has to be formed pedagogically through an active

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<sup>86</sup> See AE 123ff. On Schiller's anticipation of Hegel's sense of sublation [*Aufhebung*] see the commentary by Wilkinson/Willoughby AE 304f.

<sup>87</sup> Perhaps the best presentation of this philosophical attempt by Schiller is found in Janke 1977, 210ff. See also Henrich 1957; Pott 1980.

transformation of the very "nature" of human being. As Schiller explains, "the setting up of a moral state involves being able to count on the moral law as an effective force" (AE 17):

Only the predominance of such a character among a people makes it safe to undertake the transformation of a state in accordance with moral principles. And only such a character can guarantee that this transformation will endure. (AE 17)

Schiller conceives of aesthetic education as the principle "tool" for such a task because only "through the aesthetic modulation of the psyche" can the "nature" of "sensual man" actually be "transformed" (AE 163). Schiller thus calls for the strategic selection of "the heart," "feeling," and "the drives" as the explicit targets of an aesthetic formation of "character": "the way to the head must be opened through the heart" (AE 51):

In order to lead aesthetic man to understanding and lofty sentiments, one need do no more than provide him with motives of sufficient weight. To obtain the same results from sensuous man we must first alter his very nature. [...] It is, therefore, one of the most important tasks of culture [*Kultur*] to subject [*unterwerfen*] man to form already in his purely physical life, and to make him aesthetic in every domain over which beauty is capable of extending her sway. (AE 165)

## An Aesthetic Theory of Modernity

The essay on the aesthetic education of the human race is a masterpiece.

Hegel to Schelling, April 16, 1795

The failure of political and philosophical repression, however, is only one leg of the argument that Schiller develops in order to delineate the urgency of his project. His call for the implementation of a productive model of ethical and social formation also bases itself on a second line of argumentation, which focuses attention on another world-historical dilemma. Parallel to the elaboration of the vicious circles of repression, Schiller's theory also develops what can be regarded as the classic German crisis theory of modernity.<sup>88</sup> Nostalgically looking back to an idealized "Greece" as the "maximum of excellence" that humanity could achieve on a lower level of development, Schiller constructs a dialectical and teleological model of world history that presents the "civilization" of "newer humanity" (AE 33) as caught in a highly dynamic, but dangerous period of crisis and transition. According to Schiller, the "direction of the character of the age" (AE 39) tends towards ever greater specialization and fragmentation of human life—a development seen as detrimental and disastrous to the "wholeness of character" that Schiller believes to be necessary for political reform:

State and church, laws and customs, were now torn asunder; enjoyment was divorced from labour, the means from the end, the effort from the reward. Everlastingly chained to a single little fragment of the whole, man himself develops into nothing but a fragment; everlastingly in his ear the monotonous sound of his wheel that he turns, he never develops the harmony of his being, and instead of putting the stamp of humanity upon his own nature, he becomes nothing more than the imprint of his

<sup>88</sup> See Abrams 1971; Yack 1986; Lacoue-Labarthe 1990; Lambropoulos 1993.

occupation or of his specialized knowledge. (AE 33ff.)

Schiller's theory of modern fragmentation and alienation, perhaps the most famous part of his entire theoretical work, describes a world-historical process of functional differentiation that leads to an extraordinary development of human "powers," but simultaneously has disastrous effects on the individuals "suffering under the curse of this cosmic purpose" (AE 43):

If the manifold potentialities in man were ever to be developed, there was no other way but to pit them against each other. [...] However much the world as a whole may benefit by this fragmentary specialization of human powers, it cannot be denied that the individuals affected by it suffer under the curse of this cosmic purpose. (AE 41ff.)

Key to Schiller's influential theory of modernity is the aesthetic vision on which it is based. Schiller consistently employs an aesthetically derived part/whole schema, in order to contrast an ideally integrated "organic" order with its apparently debased modern equivalent.<sup>89</sup> As in the analysis of the failure of repression, Schiller's theory of modernity in this way again develops a sustained parallel between the social and the psychological spheres. He describes a "twofold violence" that presses upon "humanity," both "from within and from without" (AE 37). On the one hand, the specialization of human powers destroys "the inner unity of human nature," even though it leads the individual faculty "by artificial means, far beyond the limits which nature seems to have assigned to it" (AE 41):

We see not merely individuals, but whole classes of men, developing but one part of their potentialities, while of the rest, as in stunted growths, only vestigial traces remain. (AE 33)

Schiller sketches here a process of rationalization and increasing specialization, "a more rigorous separation of ranks and occupations" (AE

<sup>89</sup> See especially Letters 4 and 6 in the *Aesthetic Education*: "It is only inasmuch as the whole serves the parts that the parts are in any way bound to submit to the whole" (AE 21); "Instead of rising to a higher form of organic social existence it degenerated into a crude and clumsy mechanism" (AE 35).

33), confining the individual human life to "a particular sphere" and to the performance of a narrow and limited function: "in one of its citizens [the common weal] prizes nothing but memory, in the other, a mere tabularizing intelligence, in a third, only mechanical skill" (AE 35). On the other hand, this inner, psychological corruption is said to have been "made complete and universal by the new spirit of government" (AE 35): "little by little the concrete life of the individual is destroyed in order that the abstract idea of the whole may drag out its sorry existence" (AE 37). For society as a whole the negative effect of this process of rationalization is the emergence of an abstract, mechanical system that lacks a vital, unifying center: "an ingenious clock-work, in which, out of the piecing together of innumerable but lifeless parts, a mechanical kind of collective life ensues" (AE 35). Whereas "state" and "society" are ideally conceived of by Schiller as an organically related whole, the "positive society" of "most European states" is said to have already "disintegrated into a moral state of nature in which the public authority has become but one party more" (AE 37). And whereas "the state" is to "represent that pure and objective humanity which exists in the heart of each of its citizens" (AE 21), it has actually become an abstract and alien force, "forever a stranger to its citizens, since at no point does it ever make contact with their feeling" (AE 37). If specialization and the division of labor prevent the individuals from developing their full humanity, then the fragmentation and "mechanical" coordination of the various spheres of social life further prevent these same individuals from acquiring a sense for and an interest in the whole of society:

But even the meager, fragmentary participation by which individual members of the state are still linked to the whole, does not depend on forms which they spontaneously prescribe for themselves [...]; it is dictated to them with meticulous exactitude by means of a formula which inhibits all freedom of thought. (AE 35)

Just as "the state" fails to represent "that pure humanity" within "every individual," these individuals are, in turn, not able to place themselves "into the center of the whole" or raise their "individuality to the species" (AE 9). In Schiller's eyes, modern life thus necessarily degenerates into a state of primitive egoism and materialism:

At the present time, material needs reign supreme and bend a degraded humanity beneath their tyrannical yoke. *Utility* is the great idol of the age, to which all powers are in thrall and to which all talent must pay homage. (AE 7)

Especially in light of Schiller's political premise that "wholeness of character [...] must be found in a people capable and worthy of exchanging a state of compulsion for a state of freedom" (AE 23), modern fragmentation and alienation appears as a direct contradiction and violation of "the highest final end decreed by reason" (AE 13). And even though Schiller remains characteristically silent about a possible future alternative, modern functional differentiation is clearly meant to be superseded and overcome: "This antagonism of faculties and functions is the great instrument of culture [*Kultur*], but it is only the instrument; for as long as it persists, we are only on the way to culture" (AE 41; corr.):

It must, therefore, be wrong that the cultivation of individual powers involves the sacrifice of wholeness. Or rather, however much the law of nature tends in that direction, it must be open to us to restore by means of a higher Art the totality of our nature which the arts themselves have destroyed. (AE 43)

In this manner, Schiller presents "beautiful art" and "aesthetic culture" as the urgently needed "tools" for overcoming or healing the wounds of modernity, both on an individual and on a societal level.<sup>90</sup> By means of "aesthetic cultivation [...], the freedom to be what he ought to be is completely restored to man" (AE 145). Accordingly, aesthetic

<sup>90</sup> When actually developing a more concrete image of an alternative, post-differentiated social order, Schiller inevitably falls back on an image of upper-class interaction in a stratified society—"circles where conduct is governed by beauty [*im Kreise des schönen Umgangs*]" where individuals confront each other as "object[s] of free play" (AE 215; corr.). On this point, see the extensive system-theoretical argument in Düsselbeck 1987. No less important for Schiller's vision of an alternative social order, however, is his idealized image of gender relations and of "love." As he writes in the last letter of the *Aesthetic Education*: "Even as beauty resolves the conflict between opposing natures in this simplest and clearest paradigm, the eternal antagonism of the sexes, so too does it resolve it—or at least aims at resolving it—in the complex whole of society, endeavoring to reconcile the gentle with the violent in the moral world after the pattern of the free union it there contrives between the strength of man and the gentleness of woman" (AE 213). On the centrality of the philosophy of gender to Schiller's theory, see below: 123ff.



communication alone is said to be able to re-integrate the fragmented whole of society:

All other forms of communication divide society because they relate exclusively either to the private receptivity or to the private proficiency of its individual members, hence to that which distinguishes man from man; only the aesthetic mode of communication unites society because it relates to that which is common to all. (AE 215)

At the very moment, on might say, as the sphere of aesthetic communication theorizes its status as an autonomous sub-system of society, it paradoxically proclaims its leadership role in the effort to overcome modern functional differentiation.<sup>91</sup> Schiller's aesthetic theory is able to do this by allying itself with and drawing upon another functionally differentiated sub-system of society, namely "science" [*Wissenschaft*], and more specifically, post-Kantian academic philosophy.<sup>92</sup> Schiller's theory of modernity articulates and bases itself on a philosophical discourse of a "truth" that has finally been revealed and now only needs to be made effective:

One-sidedness in the exercise of his powers must, it is true, inevitably lead the individual into error; but the species as a whole to truth. [...] Our age is enlightened; that is to say, such knowledge has been discovered and publicly disseminated as would suffice to correct at least our practical principles. [...] Reason has purged itself of both the illusions of the senses and the delusions of sophistry, and philosophy itself, which first made us into her traitors, is now in loud and urgent tones calling us back to the bosom of nature. (AE 41; 49ff.; corr.)

Schiller's three-stage aesthetic humanism, his discourse of *nostalgic*

<sup>91</sup> See Schmidt: "This elite group of 'Classics' and 'Romantics' assigns to literary communication—in contrast to the members of the late Enlightenment and to the Jacobins—a function, which—from a system-theoretical perspective—has actually turned out to be, historically seen, up to today the meaningfully postulated function of the social system of literature for society as a whole. [...] This function can be summarized as the attempted overcoming of functional differentiation and of its ensuing damage for the subject and for 'bourgeois society'" (1989, 418).

<sup>92</sup> On "science" as a functionally differentiated sub-system of society in the eighteenth century, see Schmidt 1989, 219ff. On the mutually supportive relationship between "poetry" and the post-Kantian philosophy of "Spirit," see Kittler 1990, 148ff.

teleology, is itself, of course, this urgent voice of "reason" and "philosophy" [...] calling us back to the bosom of nature," and the aesthetic theory of modern alienation is one of its central messages. Aesthetic humanism speaks emphatically in the name of a whole human subject that is being stilled and torn apart by the functional differentiation of modern society.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, it is here that Schiller's aesthetic critique of modernity and his critique of Kant and the failure of repression strategically join together. What philosophy formerly (and still in the *letter* of Kant, though no longer in his *spirit*) wrongfully construed as a necessary and original division and disharmony of "human nature" is now revealed by Schiller as the very "wound" that modern civilization has inflicted on humanity:

It was civilization itself which inflicted this wound upon modern man [*der neueren Menschheit*]. Once the increase of empirical knowledge and more exact modes of thought made sharper divisions between the sciences inevitable, and once the increasingly complex machinery of state necessitated a more rigorous separation of ranks and occupations, then the inner unity of human nature was severed too, and a disastrous conflict set its harmonious powers at variance. (AE 33)

Once this has been recognized—and Schiller's paradigmatic crisis-theory of modernity constitutes this very recognition—then philosophy must become practical, and the damage wreaked by modern functional differentiation must be corrected and healed by an effective counterforce, i.e., by a productive theory and practice of human formation:

If [truth] has up to now displayed too little of its conquering power, this was due, not to the intellect which was powerless to unveil it, but to the heart which closed itself against it, and to the drive which did not act on its behalf. (AE 49; corr.)

Schiller's three-stage humanist discourse, his *nostalgic teleology*, is thus able to present aesthetic education and the productive model of formation as a way to re-constitute human nature, as a liberation of the truly human.

<sup>93</sup> See Luhmann: "There is, after all, a hidden relation between the functional differentiation of the societal system and the individual's self-proclamation as subject. [...] I interpret this extramundane position of the transcendental subject as a symbol for the new position of the empirical individual in relation to a system of functional subsystems. He does not belong to any one of them in particular, but relies on their interdependence" (1986b, 317ff.).