

Daimonia Hyperboles :
Schiller's Tale of (Post)modern Self-Generation

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ABSTRACT

This study argues that Schiller's essentially romantic essay *Naive and Sentimental Poetry* (1797) lays the groundwork for postmodernism's hyper-aestheticized concepts of self. It demonstrates the deliberately "contranatural" and "insane" character of Schiller's "sentimental" or "modern" sensibility, showing that the nonrational concept of the self that this sensibility implies corresponds closely to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's, Jacques Derrida's and other poststructuralist accounts of postmodern personal identity.

KEY WORDS

self
postmodern
sublime
romantic
reflection

demonic
madness
hyperbole
unmeaning
sentimental

I am I, and settle myself, — and if I settle
 Nothing to be, well and good — there's a nonentity formed.¹

— Schiller

Schiller's *Naive and Sentimental Poetry* is a story about begetting monsters. Like Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein, Schiller's "sentimental" or "modern" individual must rebuild her own fractured identity from all that is "unnatural."² A hyper-reflexive product of her own "speculative understanding," she cannot "remain within . . . human nature"³ but must "botally abandon" it. (*N&SP*, 165). If she is more intensely attached to nature than is the naive personality, [that attachment] is "not in her greater *accord with nature*, but quite the contrary, [in] the unnaturalness of her situation (*N&SP*, 103). The very presence of naive nature, such as the sight of a child, merely foregrounds nature's unattainability, "revealing more closely the unnatural in [her]" (*N&SP*, 86). Her attitude toward her ideal, moreover, is itself, as Coleridge nicely rephrased it, contranatural." "Since [her] subject is not drawn from nature," Schiller writes, "the feeling is therefore not purely human. It is not an illusion that . . . [she] feel[s] for [her] ideal. The feeling is true but its object is artificial and lies outside human nature" (*N&SP*, 67).

If, then, as Paul de Man has unintentionally restated Schiller's case, there "is no longer anything natural about [romanticism's] supernaturalism,"⁴ and if as Harold Bloom adds "the program of Romanticism demands something more than a natural [wo]man to carry it through,"⁵ the "sentimental" product of Schiller's program is a figure of almost programmatic lunacy. The sublime is the sentimental's metier, and as Schiller discovered in his earlier aesthetic essay "Of the Sublime,"⁶ death is the ground of sublimity, the ground of the utterly incomprehensible.⁷ In his final aesthetic essay "On the Sublime,"⁸ Schiller emphasized the inevitability of this ground: "There is a cure for everything except for death. But this single exception . . . would destroy the whole concept of humanity . . . This single terror, which he simply must do and does not will, will haunt [man] like a spectre and . . . will deliver him up to the blind terrors of the imagination."⁹ This "single exception" haunts and attracts the sentimental personality"; in the sentimental spell, "we fall back, lost in our thoughts" (*N&SP*, 156). Kant had warned of this self-reflexive "monomania" in his *Anthropology*. Not surprisingly, Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* engages the same question. In the later

work's debate between "aesthetica" and "ethics," the defender of aesthetics, reflecting the sentimental's hyper-aestheticized identity, exhibits what Schiller had already suspected was the modern character's fatal solipsism: "(S)he has not chosen [her] self," writes Kierkegaard, "like Narcissus [s] he has fallen in love with [her] self. Such a situation has certainly ended not infrequently in suicide."

Though Schiller is himself prone to morbidity,¹⁰ he warns that the uncontrolled dependency of such sentimental "fantasts" as Klopstock and the English death-poet Edward Young poses a threat to the sentimental's character's equilibrium.¹¹ "The path from experience to the ideal is long," he writes, "and in between lies fantasy with unbridled fortuitousness" (*N&SP*, 168). More than its other questionable traits, the sentimental project's "dangerous freedom," as Schiller calls it, and the "unbridled" and "lawless" imagination required to bring it off seriously imperil the poet herself (*N&SP*, 168). This lawlessness is endemic not merely to the sentimental poet's sublime metier,¹² but to the contranaturalness of her character — to the fact that her goal of an ideal identity involves the abandonment of the human. While it is "only for the ideal [that the sentimental] may . . . abandon actuality . . . [,] if she leaves nature through caprice, then she will remain without a law and is thus rendered up a prey to the fantastic. (*N&SP*, 168). A typical romantic paradox, the chief threat to the sentimental character is also the trait that produces it.

Often, Schiller observes, the poet who would be the "portrayer" of her times becomes its grotesque "creature and its caricature" (*N&SP*, 163) and her "unbridled" productions will either border on madness or succumb to it. To Schiller, Schlegel epitomizes such sentimental caricature: "A few hours after reading Schlegel's *Lucinde*," he writes To Goethe, "my head felt so giddy, that I still feel the effects of it. You must read the work if only for the sake of the astonishment you will feel . . . Here also we have things everlastingly formless and fragmentary" (*Ich habe mir vor einigen Stunden durch Schleadels Lucinde den Kopf so taumelig gemacht, dass es mir noch nachgeht. Sie müssen dieses Product wundershalber doch ansehen . . . Auch hier ist das ewia Formlose und fragmentarische*).¹³ Yet, it is not only the formless and fragmentary that astonishes Schiller, but the tendency to the grotesque, and thus the fact that "the idealist will reconcile herself even with the extravagant and the monstrous if it only testifies to a great potentiality" (*N&SP*, 184). Indeed, though reluctant to admit it, Schiller frequently ascends to the monstrous in his own work. In a note to his play

Don Carlos on the character of Philip, the cruel and insane father of Carlos, Schiller writes: "I do not know what kind of monster one expects when Philip is mentioned. My drama collapses when such a monster is found in it."¹⁴ Yet when Coleridge explained that "Schiller has the material sublime" — probably coining the term to describe Schiller's "tremendous sublimity" — he meant that in Schiller's plays, "mothers and babes alike [are] thrown into the flames."¹⁵ Far from collapsing Schiller's works, such monstrosity lends them power.

Schiller's own slide into the lawlessness of which he warns demonstrates the problem underlying the sublime character of sentimental representation. On the one hand, the only way to present the abstractions of sublimity is to completely release the imagination. As Lyotard accurately observes: "What is required of the imagination, for this abstract presentation which presents nothingness, is that it should 'unlimit' itself . . . It is even a dementia, a *Wahnsinn*, in which the imagination is 'unleashed'" (Lyotard, "Philosophy," 17). In order to reach the her sublime ideal, in other words, the sentimental character must take a few steps into the lawless and the inhuman. On the other hand, say Schiller, in order to maintain some sanity amidst these peregrinations into the "other" she must also cling to the "ideal." The difficulty and perhaps even the impossibility of such a check, as Schiller becomes increasingly aware, is the ability to distinguish the ideal. As he writes: "Because the genuine sentimental impulse must . . . pass beyond the limits of actual nature, the inauthentic goes beyond every limit . . . and persuades himself that mere wild play of imagination is all that makes for poetic inspiration. To the true poetic genius, who abandons actuality only for the sake of the idea, this can never happen, or *only in those moments in which she has lost herself; yet she, on the other hand can be seduced by her own nature into an exaggerated mode of perception*" (*N&SP*, 168, my italics). Even the "true" sentimental or modern genius can be seduced, wrenched out of the *Wahnwitz* or "acceptable" freedom of sublime imagination and hurled into complete insanity, or *Wahnwitz*.

Lyotard's discussion of Kant's similar fear is instructive here. The *Wahnsinn* or *dementia* which normally attends the imagination confronted with sublimity is nevertheless "preferable to the *Schwarmerei*, to the tumult of exaltation, which is a *Wahnwitz*, an insanitas, a 'disorder' of the imagination, an 'illness deep-rooted in the soul,' . . . The *Schwarmerei* gives rise to an illusion, to 'seeing something beyond all limits of sensibility', i.e., to thinking that there is a presentation when there is not. It makes a non-

critical transition which is comparable to the transcendental illusion (the illusion of knowing something beyond all the limits of knowledge)" (Lyotard, "Philosophy," 17). Like the potential *Schwärmerei* or *insanitas* of the sublime, the Sentimental's "as if" representations "seduce" and even "possess" her, as Coleridge would later describe it.

Schiller frequently skims the problem of the sentimental idealist's seeing something beyond all limits of sensibility: her "withdrawal from life," he writes, "will not only remove from her vision the accidental limitations of mankind — it will often remove the necessary and unsurmountable limitations, and in seeking the pure form she stands in danger of losing the entire meaning (*N&SP*, 174). The seductiveness that Schiller discerns in the sentimental project lies beyond the control of reason or the ideal, indeed, beyond meaning altogether: "Wanting to be what we are not," Nietzsche writes, "we come to believe ourselves something else than we really are, and this is how we become mad." The sentimental poet's quest is precisely the desire to become something other, as well as the very likely possibility that she might come to believe it. As Schiller writes ominously at the conclusion of *Naive and Sentimental Poetry*: "If . . . true idealism is insecure and often dangerous in its effects, false idealism is appalling in its effects . . . the fantast . . . is completely lawless, hence nothing in herself and fit for nothing. But for the very reason that her phantasmagoria is not a deviation from nature but from freedom, and this develops out of a capacity in itself estimable and infinitely perfectible, it leads likewise to an infinite fall into a bottomless abyss and can only terminate in complete destruction" (*N&SP*, 121). The peril of the sentimental character's quest for identity lies in the fact that the ideal self she desires must ground itself on her own empty play of representation, and thus on the "as if" representation of the negative sublime. She is simultaneously heir to and victim of the phantom self noted by Hölderlin in "Mnemosyne": "Ein Zeichen sind wir — Deutungslos" — such as a sign are we — meaningless.

What Schiller approaches with this dilemma is the fundamentally "insane" basis of thought itself. Grown increasingly tentative from the concessions he had made to Kant's materialist rigor, Schiller writes: "Be not afraid of the confusion around you, only of the confusion within you" (*N&SP*, 101). His caveat attempts to come to terms with an issue that has become prevalent in our own time. For the sentimental as for the "postmodern" sensibility, to reach for absolute meaning is to risk abandoning meaning itself: "the evil," Schiller writes, "is that [the sentimental] can scarcely elevate herself to the true ideal of human ennoblement without in any case

taking a few steps beyond it" (*N&SP*, 173). But a few steps beyond the human leads also to a "bottomless abyss" or perhaps more accurately, to an abyssal awareness that the utterly incomprehensible is the sole origin of meaning itself. It is from this incomprehensible ground, in other words, that "we" begin to weave "our" fictions of identity and comprehension "in the first place." "Evil," perhaps, from a conventional or linear perspective, the sentimental's acknowledgement of this ground is also "a capacity in itself estimable and infinitely perfectible" (*N&SP*, 190). The madness produced by this acknowledgement is the source not only of insanity but of wisdom. Schiller writes: "Thus the very same produces the fanatic that was solely able to engender the sage, and the advantage of the latter may perhaps subsist less in that she did not become the former than that she did not remain so" (*N&SP*, 174).

The sage and the madwoman, in other words, are one. Both rise out of the abyss. Their only distinction, and a fine one at that, is that the sage can, for a time, forget her origin. With this remark, an insight possible only to the sentimental or "modern" mind, Schiller acknowledges the ground of modern philosophy, the *Abgrund* of the negative sublime. Stated differently, Schiller's insight prefigures what Lacoue-Labarthe has recently called philosophy's predestination to madness: "Might philosophy not move more towards its end," he asks, "if, pushed to its limit, exhausted, unsettled . . . it were forced . . . to bear witness to the hypothesis that there is . . . some philosophical predetermination of madness?"¹⁶

To call a sage an amnesiac lunatic as Schiller does, reflects the same "hyperbolic audacity," the same confrontation of the abyss that Derrida discerns in the self-generation of the Cartesian *Cogito*, and with the same implications for the postmodernity of the sentimental character. Derrida writes:

The hyperbolic audacity of the Cartesian Cogito, its mad audacity . . . would consist in the return to an original point which no longer belongs either to a determined reason or a determined unreason . . . It is the point at which the thinking of this totality by escaping it: i.e., by exceeding the totality, is possible only in the direction of infinity or nothingness; . . . This is why . . . this project is mad, and acknowledges madness as a liberty and its very possibility. This is why it is not human, in the sense of anthropological factuality, but is rather metaphysical and demonic: it first awakens itself in its war with the demon, the

evil genius of non-meaning, by . . . resisting [her] through reduction of the natural [wo]man within itself . . . The project of exceeding the totality of the world, as the totality of what I can think in general, . . . plants in us the light of a hidden sun which is *spekeina tes ousias*. And Glaucon was not mistaken when he cried out: 'Lord! what demonic hyperbole? *daimonia hyperboles*'¹⁷

Though tentative, Schiller's hyperbolic project of a contranatural self that would encompass and, indeed, exceed the totality of the conventionally thinkable strikingly reflects the postmodern resistance to unmeaning through a "reduction of the natural woman." To reach an infinite point of knowledge, Schiller argues, sentimental or modern woman must take a few steps into the hyperbolically meaningless; she must become monstrously other, or demonic, if only to return to "humanity" with her "knowledge" authenticated by an awareness of its fictive character. And when this knowledge has itself deadened, falsified into rationalistic belief as it had in Schiller's era, the sentimental mind must return again to the "insanity" of the negative sublime. The "leap"; that produces the lunatic also produces the sage, Schiller writes. The sage's only advantage is not that she does not become a lunatic — by her sentimental or modern character, says Schiller, she has already become one — but to some extent, and for a limited period of forgetfulness, she does not remain so.

Schiller's equation of lunatic and philosopher in the sentimental's autobiographical project had already outlined, in 1797, the audacious province of modern thought. "The higher a man is," Goethe remarked to Eckermann, "the more he lives under the influence of demons, and he must be careful not to let the guiding will be led astray. In my acquaintance with Schiller, something demonic was clearly at work."¹⁸ To "stray" from the Goethean "naive," however, to think the totality by exceeding it, by escaping into sublime infinity or nothingness, is precisely Schiller's sentimental "direction," the movement toward the "demonic" or "other." By acknowledging the "madness" of the sentimental poet's autobiographical quest, Schiller marks the beginnings of the modern sensibility, in which the absence of meaning is born the "sublime" crisis of the postmodern endeavor and its possibility.

Notes

1. Schiller, "The Philosophers," 1, 143.
2. Because Schiller shared the romantic belief in, if not the successful enactment of female equality, I've replaced his use of "his" with "her."
3. Friedrich von Schiller, *Naive and Sentimental Poetry in Friedrich von Schiller: Naive and Sentimental Poetry and "On the Sublime"*, trans. Julius A. Elias (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1986), pp. 83-190; 164. Hereafter *N&SP*.
4. Paul de Man, "Ludwig Binswanger and the Sublimation of the Self," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 36-50; 43. Hereafter, "Sublimation."
5. Harold Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 271.
6. Schiller, "Vom Erhabenen," in *Werke*, XX, 170-195. Hereafter, "Of the Sublime."
7. Cf. Linda M. Brooks, "Sublime Suicide: The End of Schiller's Aesthetics," in *Friedrich von Schiller and the Drama of Human Existence*, ed. A. Ugrinsky (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 91-103; 94-95.
8. Schiller, "Über das Erhabenen."
9. Schiller, "On the Sublime" ("Über das Erhabenen"), in *Naive and Sentimental Poetry and "On the Sublime"*, trans. Julius A. Elias (New York: Frederick Unger Publishing Co., 1966), 191-213, trans. Julius A. Elias (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1966), 193-4. Hereafter, "On the Sublime."
10. Cf. Schiller's statement: "The world is a tomb," in "The Poetry of Life," 1. 152.
11. While Schiller laments the fact that the sentimental characteristically "disaffects us for actual life," it is Klopstock (along with the English death-poet Edward Young), "who always leads us only away from life" (*N&SP*, 135).
12. With the sublime, Jean-François Lyotard writes, "what is regulated is the fact that there is no rule," the fact that its only "rule" is a "rule of non-regulation," "J.-F. Lyotard, "The Philosophy of Phrases," trans. Geoff Bennington, n.d., n.p., 17. Hereafter, Lyotard, "Philosophy."
13. Schiller, letter to Goethe, July 19, 1799, in *Schiller's Briefs*, hrsg. Erwin Streitfeld und Viktor Zmegac (Frankfurt: Athenäum, 1983), 376.
14. Schiller, *Don Carlos*, in *The Classic Theater: Five German Plays*, ed. Eric Bentley (2 vols. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1959), II, 94.
15. Coleridge, *Table Talk (TT)*, 2 vols., ed. Carl Woodring, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), II, Dec. 29, 1823, p. 26. Hereafter, *TT*. In a letter written after reading Schiller's play *The Robbers*, Coleridge exclaimed: "My God! Southey! Who is this Schiller?! This convulser of the Heart. Did he write his Tragedy amid the yelling of Fiends?" *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Grieggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-), I, 122.
16. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Typography," trans. Eduardo Cadava, in *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. C. Fynske, ed. cons. Linda M. Brooks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 43-132; p. 45. I use Cadava's original translation as closer to Lacoue-Labarthe's meaning than Fynsk's later revision.
17. Jacques Derrida, "Cogito and the History of Madness," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 31-64; 56-7.
18. Goethe, *Conversations with Eckermann*, March 24, 1829.

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