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## On the Tragic-Sublime and Tragic Freedom

Thinking with Schiller and Schelling

*Sur le « sublime tragique » et les rapports entre tragédie et liberté. Penser avec Schiller et Schelling*

Katia Hay

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# On the Tragic-Sublime and Tragic Freedom

## Thinking with Schiller and Schelling

*Katia Hay\**

The parallels and connections between Schiller and Schelling are very rich and seem to traverse not only their philosophical thoughts and interests, but also their biographical backgrounds: from their medical studies, to the urge to bridge the gap left by Kant between nature and freedom, as well as their attempts to conceptualize art as the locus or medium for that very reconciliation. Schelling, like Hegel, held Schiller in high esteem, but it is unclear whether the opposite was the case—following Safranski, one is led to believe that it was not.<sup>1</sup>

The aim of this paper is to develop a comparative analysis of Schiller's and Schelling's interpretations of the sublime and the tragic, both as aesthetic and moral categories.<sup>2</sup> My claim is that examining their particular appropriations of the Kantian sublime, as well as their reception of the tragic and reading of the tragic hero, reveals important aspects of their philosophical conceptions of human freedom. Both authors present the tragic/(sublime) hero as the most perfect incarnation of the complex relation between fate and freedom. To be sure, this in itself is not particular to them; on the contrary, it was a relatively common move in late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century aesthetics. What is specific to each author, however, is the ways in which they understand this seemingly uncontroversial relation between the tragic hero, the sublime and the realization of human freedom. But the nuances of their

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1 Cf. R. SAFRANSKI, *Friedrich Schiller oder Die Erfindung des Deutschen Idealismus*, 88, 372, 481, 511.

2 On how Schiller “makes aesthetic judgment a form of *practical* reason,” see F.C. BEISER, *Schiller as Philosopher: A Re-examination*, 60f.

writings are not always so easy to see without reading them together. Sometimes their writings are so close, it almost seems as if they could be a variation of one another; there are sentences in Schiller's philosophical essays we could ascribe to Schelling and the other way round. And yet the conclusions they draw or the way in which they interpreted those very sentences are quite often surprisingly different. The aim of this paper is to identify those points of discrepancy and convergence, not only to get a better understanding of both authors, but also to learn ways of interrogating ourselves and our understanding of what it means to be free.

The paper is divided in two main sections. In the first I discuss the notion of the sublime<sup>3</sup>, in the second the notion of the tragic. For the first, and in order to highlight as much as possible the similitudes and differences between both authors, I will be comparing Schelling's *Philosophy of Art* to Schiller's essay "On the Sublime" (*Ueber das Erhabene*)<sup>4</sup>, for this is the text that Schelling himself refers to. In the second part I will mainly refer to Schiller's essay "On the Cause of the Pleasure we Derive from Tragic Objects" (*Ueber den Grund des Vergnügens an tragischen Gegenständen*) from 1792.

To be sure, one of the main problems with the comparative exercise I propose is that in both cases, we are dealing with a thinker who is constantly changing and evolving. I will not be able to do justice to all the different phases within each author's thinking. Nevertheless, I believe that this does not undermine the claims I make regarding the convergences and discrepancies between them.

### On the Sublime

Schelling's Jena lectures from 1803 on the *Philosophy of Art* are divided into two main sections: "The General Section" and "The Specific Section". While in the former, Schelling introduces his main claims regarding the nature of art and the way in which his aesthetics

3 I would like to dedicate this section to Marsha Bruinen, Una Vrodljak, Lodewijk van Eden and Joe Jaspers in appreciation of their collaboration in thinking about the sublime.

4 First published in 1801, but probably written between 1794-1796 (see NA XXI, 328f.)

relates to his philosophy, in the latter he goes on to ‘construct’ and analyse the different forms of art: from music to painting and sculpture, poetry, drama and epic. Schelling uses the notion of the sublime in both sections. In the *General Section*, Schelling explains and situates the notion of the sublime as a key category within the general system of his philosophy of art. Following this analysis one might expect it to become a central concept in his aesthetics. But, then, in the *Specific Section*, the importance of the sublime and its distinction from the beautiful seems to fade. Only when it comes to tragedy—which is, by the way, according to Schelling, the highest form of art *überhaupt*—does the notion of the sublime regain some of its centrality. And although it would make perfect sense to consider that the meaning of the sublime in Schelling’s aesthetics remains the same, I propose, at least for now, to see them as two different approaches, and I will refer to the latter as ‘the tragic sublime’.

Before we proceed with an analysis of Schelling’s thoughts on the sublime, it seems important however to have a clear understanding of what art—according to Schelling—is all about.

### *Art as Darstellung of a Process*

Schelling’s *Philosophy of Art* belongs to his so called *Identitätsphilosophie* (philosophy of identity) and the *Potenzenlehre* (or doctrine of potencies). For our purposes and regarding the latter concept it will suffice to bear in mind that what this entails is that *although* everything that exists (from nature to art, human actions and philosophy) can be seen as an expression of the absolute, they do not present it, they do not *incarnate* it in the same way or with the same intensity. And this means that one can identify different levels of intensity or perfection, depending on their ability to mirror or incarnate (*darstellen*) the absolute. This is ultimately what enables Schelling to distinguish, not only between art, nature and philosophy, but also between all the different forms or genres of art.<sup>5</sup> For Schelling, however, the main characteristic of art is that it is able to present (*darstellen*) the infinite or absolute through or within the

5 For Schelling, this is not a task of differentiating amongst what is already given; instead he thinks of his philosophy of art as a deduction or construction of the different forms of art.

finite. Schelling expresses this sometimes with the term ‘*einbilden*’ and ‘*ineinsbilden*’, which both refer to imagination (*Einbildung*), as well as to the capacity of construing or forming (*bilden*) something into something different: in this case, the infinite is informed or conformed into the finite, i.e. into finite forms of art (it later becomes more complicated as Schelling distinguishes precisely between the sublime and the beautiful).<sup>6</sup> In more concrete terms, this means that what is presented and made tangible through art is the *identity* or *indifference* between the real and the ideal, necessity and freedom. The question is, though: how could one ever determine which works of art fulfil their task of presenting the absolute better than others? What criteria could one follow?

For this, it is important to understand what Schelling means when he refers to the ‘absolute’, ‘identity/indifference’ or ‘God’. For, even though he thinks of them in terms of identity, he does not think of this identity as mere unity, but rather as a living identity; not as something given, fixed and pre-established, but instead as an activity, as something that is constantly becoming, i.e. as an identity that develops, evolves, or to highlight the paradox: a changing identity. This is important, not only to have a clearer understanding of Schelling’s aesthetics and his philosophy in general, but also to bear in mind when relating his thought to Schiller’s. Indeed: although the absolute is not a central concept in Schiller’s aesthetics, when he does refer to it, he does not envisage it as *being in constant becoming*.

To illuminate Schelling’s view of the absolute, it is useful to recall the very first paragraphs from the “General Section” of his *Philosophy of Art*:

“§ 1. *The absolute or God is that with regards to which being or reality follows IMMEDIATELY from the idea, that is, by virtue of the simple law of identity, or: God is the immediate affirmation of itself.*

[...]

To be real = to be affirmed [*Realsein = Affirmirtsein*]

[...]

§ 2. *God as the infinite affirmation of himself COMPREHENDS himself as infinitely affirming, as infinitely affirmed, and as the indifference of both, though he himself IS NONE of these in particular.*

[...]

God is nothing as a particular; rather, what he is, he is only by

6 See F.W.J. SCHELLING, *Die Philosophie der Kunst*, SW V, 377f. and 461f. The English translations are based on Douglas W. Stott’s translation.

virtue of infinite affirmation. Hence, God is understood as affirming himself, as affirmed by himself, and as indifference, only once again by means of the infinite affirmation of himself.<sup>7</sup>

The absolute or God includes within itself: 1) being (which Schelling sees already as an activity, namely as the activity of self-affirmation), 2) becoming and 3) the identity or indifference between the two opposites. Within the absolute itself, this apparent contradiction is not a contradiction: the opposition both remains and is overcome. Within the absolute, says Schelling, *freedom* and *necessity* are one, but this does not mean that the difference between them vanishes. They are one, they have become equivalent, but they still remain contrary to one another.

In other words, for Schelling, the absolute needs to be thought of as a process rather than as a given thing or Being. And here we already have what in effect becomes the main criterion when it comes to analysing different works of art and their ability to mirror the absolute. Indeed, the only way in which this kind of identity can become tangible and ‘real’ is in the form of a movement, a process that includes and needs difference, opposition (*Entgegensetzung*) or conflict (*Widerstreit*)—as well as some form of resolution to the conflict or unity. This unity however is not one that annihilates the conflict, the difference, nor does it favour one opposite over the other, but instead should be understood as a certain point of indifference (*Indifferenz*). The extent to which a concrete work of art will be able to present this kind of identity or indifference will therefore depend very much on its ability to recreate the entire process: both of conflict and indifference. For otherwise, we would just be creating or reflecting a unity that has already excluded difference and movement, and this is exactly *not* the unity that Schelling thinks the absolute is.

This is also, by the way, the thought underlying Schelling’s preference for symbolic works of art, over allegorical or metaphorical works. In the symbol the absolute appears there and then, within the work itself, and not as something external that we could refer to through an allegory or a metaphor.<sup>8</sup>

7 *Idem*, SW V, 373-374.

8 See *idem*, SW V, 406, 451f. Gadamer reproduces a similar thought when he argues that the symbol “does not refer to something other than itself,” in: H.G. GADAMER, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, p. 31.

*The (General) Sublime in Schelling and Schiller*

In the “General Section of the Philosophy of Art,” § 65, Schelling introduces and discusses the notion of the sublime in detail. In his analysis Schelling explicitly refers to Schiller’s essay *Ueber das Erhabene* (whom he interestingly tends to misquote).<sup>9</sup> But there is also undoubtedly an implicit engagement with Kant’s third *Critique*. In the first instance, however, true to his quasi Spinozistic style, Schelling defines the sublime as the configuring or in-forming (*Einbildung*) “of the infinite into the finite”<sup>10</sup>—in contrast thus with the *Einbildung* of the finite into the infinite, which is his definition of beauty. In other words, whereas the beautiful is to be understood as the result of a process in which the particular is re-configured as the infinite or “taken back” (*nimmt zurück*) to the infinite (i.e. to the infinite that it always was)<sup>11</sup>, the sublime is understood as the emergence, the irruption of the infinite *in* the finite.

Although Schelling’s formulations seem very alien to the analysis developed by Kant, it is nevertheless striking to see the extent to which they can be taken to reflect many of Kant’s insights, though retranslated or reinterpreted into his own philosophical system and vocabulary. If we take a typical Kantian example of beauty in nature, a flower<sup>12</sup>, for instance: one could say that for Kant, to contemplate it as being beautiful involves, among other things, that we see its particular form *as* being universal, or *as* belonging to a universal order: a confirming

9 The critical edition refers to these misquotations as Schelling ‘paraphrasing’ Schiller (cf. F.W.J. SCHELLING, *Historisch-Kritische Ausgabe*, AA II, Bd. 6/1, 604-605). My interpretation, however, assumes that the modifications to Schiller’s text have to do with the way in which Schelling is reappropriating his thought, and not with some form of insignificant inattentiveness towards the original text.

10 F.W.J. SCHELLING, *Die Philosophie der Kunst*, SW V, 461.

11 In § 64, Schelling had made the same distinction and called the former *Poesie* in art, the latter “art in art [*Kunst in der Kunst*]” (*idem*, SW V, 461).

12 In § 4 “Analytic of Beauty” of I. KANT, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (*Critique of Judgment*), a flower is seen as an example of something that pleases without interest. In § 8, flowers are seen as examples of a delight that is subjectively universal. In § 16, flowers are an example of ‘free beauty’, underlying the fact that in beauty the internal purposiveness of the object is irrelevant, to mention a few.



example of a perfectly ordered, meaningful and beautiful universe.<sup>13</sup> This seems to be Schelling's point too: beauty occurs when the finite *finds its meaning* in the infinite, in its belonging to the infinite (and here the infinite can *also* be understood as the ideal / universal form). For Schelling, as for Kant, beauty is only conceivable as form.

Conversely, for Schelling, in the case of the sublime what we see is the infinite in the finite itself. It is as if the infinite exploded within the finite. Schelling himself describes it in terms of an expansion (*expandiert sich*) and overflow (*ergiesst*).<sup>14</sup> For a moment the infinite is *in* the finite, for a moment the finite *is* the infinite. Only that this bursting infinite is not in any way absolute form and order, but pure overwhelming and indomitable chaos. We will come back to the notion of chaos later; for now let us see in more detail, how Schelling develops his analysis.

Schelling differentiates between the sublime in nature and the sublime reflected in someone's inner disposition or *Gesinnung*—which is exemplified by the figure of the tragic hero. Echoing Kant's distinction between the mathematically and dynamically sublime (although via Schiller), Schelling goes on to distinguish two cases of the sublime in nature: one in which we are presented with an object that surpasses our ability to apprehend (*Fassungskraft*) it, another in which “our force [*unsere Kraft*] confronts [*entgegenstellt*] a power in nature [*eine Macht der Natur*], against which it turns into nothing.”<sup>15</sup>

Here Schelling is again misquoting Schiller<sup>16</sup>, who does not talk about the sublime as the result of a *confrontation* with a power in nature, but instead talks about the “sublime object,” as one that we “*contemplate as a power* [*betrachten ihn ALS seine Macht*] against which our own vital strength [*Lebenskraft*] turns into nothing.”<sup>17</sup>

In the English translation of Schelling's *Philosophy of Art* from 1989 the translator mentions the incident(s) but avoids translating Schelling's

13 To contemplate the beauty of nature involves to contemplate it *as if* it had a purpose, although it does not (which is why he will claim that it shows a *formal purposiveness* or *purposiveness without a purpose*, I. KANT, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, § 11-15).

14 F.W.J. SCHELLING, *Die Philosophie der Kunst*, SW V, 461.

15 *Idem*, 462.

16 See note 9 above.

17 F. SCHILLER, *Ueber das Erhabene*, NA XXI, 42. My emphasis. All translations from Schiller's works are mine.

misquotations and instead reproduces the ‘correct’ quotes from Schiller’s text. But, as we will see, these misquotations already reveal both the esteem Schelling had for Schiller, as well as the disparities between their thoughts. In other words: Schiller’s text transcribed literally is not really compatible with Schelling’s argument. And yet, in this specific case, the difference seems insignificant. For, in the end, both authors agree that the sublime is not an experience that follows from a moment of real danger or real confrontation with life-threatening forces. Our lives are not in danger (which is a relatively common requisite for most authors writing about the sublime<sup>18</sup>). But, what this ‘safe distance’ involves, and the extent to which we may still speak metaphorically of an encounter with some form of danger is different in both. Thus, in the scenario recreated by Schiller, the subject who experiences the feeling of the sublime is never *really* ‘at a loss’ or even disturbed. In fact, this passage quoted above comes shortly after Schiller has argued that the reason why the feeling of the sublime is ambivalent (giving both pain and joy) has to do with our own divided nature. But this suggests that in or through the experience of the sublime, the intellectual, spiritual part of us is never really confronted with anything, but merely *awakened* as our sensuous nature feels helpless.

This becomes most clear when we compare Schiller’s account of the sublime experience with his account of the beautiful. For Schiller, beauty is the expression of the harmony between reason and the sensuous, between morality and nature’s drives. We experience this harmony when ‘doing the right thing’ is not at odds with our inclinations or drives. Thus, according to Schiller, the beautiful does not depend on our double nature, and would never *awaken* our most spiritual side and potencies, it “would never enable us to experience that we are destined [*bestimmt*] and are able to manifest as pure intelligences.”<sup>19</sup> Through the sublime, in contrast, we realize that “we can want what our drives abhor and we

18 E. BURKE, for instance, writes that: “When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful,” in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, book I, section VII. For a critical reconsideration of the implications of this ‘distance’, see C. FREEMAN’s book *The Feminine Sublime*.

19 F. SCHILLER, *Ueber das Erhabene*, NA XXI, 43.

can repudiate what they crave.”<sup>20</sup> This realization is, hence, all about re-discovering the spiritual, moral, rational and so on within us. But the ‘pure intelligence’ that we are or can be is not threatened in any way through the experience of the sublime. In Schelling, as we will see, the situation is a bit different.

To be sure, for Schelling, as for Kant and Schiller, nature’s (infinite) greatness and (infinite) power over and against which we feel inadequate or extremely vulnerable does not in itself constitute the sublime. The common tendency to interpret nature’s immeasurability as the infinite, says Schelling, does not lead to a feeling of the sublime, but rather to one of knockdown (*Niederschlagung*). But whereas in Schiller (and Kant), we find an opposition between the part of us that can be ‘knocked down’ by nature’s might and the part that cannot be, in Schelling we do not find this distinction. Instead, he claims that the contemplation (*Anschauung*) of the sublime takes place when the true infinite (*wahre Unendlichkeit*) appears; and this is made possible at the moment in which we take the merely sensuous infinite (*das bloß sinnliche Unendliche*) as a *symbol* for the former.<sup>21</sup> “Thus,” he writes, “the sublime is a subjugation of the finite that *pretends* to be infinite through the true infinite [*Unterjochung des Endlichen, welches Unendlichkeit lügt, durch das wahre Unendliche*].”<sup>22</sup> Later he puts it in terms of the difference between ‘relative’ and ‘absolute’ greatness (*Größe*): the relative greatness of nature becomes sublime at the moment in which it is made into a symbol of the absolute-great. This, of course, reminds us of both Kant and Schiller, who also explain the movement of the sublime as a movement in which we identify the abasing (*verderbend*) force and greatness of nature that confronted us with our immense impotence (*Ohnmacht*) and limitedness, as being only relatively powerful and relatively great.<sup>23</sup> The question is, though: *relative to what?*

20 *Ibid.*

21 F.W.J. SCHELLING, *Die Philosophie der Kunst*, SW V, 462.

22 *Ibid.*

23 Cf. I. KANT, *Kritik der Urteilkraft*, § 27: “It is, in other words, for us a law (of reason) and it belongs to our vocation, that we should esteem as small everything which for us is great in nature as an object of the senses in comparison with ideas of reason” (translation by J.C. Meredith). See also F. SCHILLER, *Ueber das Erhabene*, NA XXI, 46 and F.W.J. SCHELLING, *Die Philosophie der Kunst*, SW V, 463.

And here is, in effect, where we find fundamental differences between Schiller's and Schelling's approaches; differences that are traceable in the way in which Schelling re-appropriates a rather large passage from Schiller's *Ueber das Erhabene*. I will reproduce the most relevant part of both versions (Schiller's and Schelling's misquotation).

Just after having described the initial feelings of humiliation (*Kleinmut*) and horror (*Entsetzen*) *vis-à-vis* nature, typically felt by those who do not yet "feel the lofty daemonic freedom [*dämonische Freiheit*] in [their] breast[s]"<sup>24</sup>, Schiller writes the following:

"But as soon as free contemplation [*Betrachtung*] gives him distance from the blind assault of natural forces, and as soon as he discovers within this flood of appearances something abiding in his own being, then the wild bulks of nature around him begin to speak quite another language to his heart: and the relative grandeur outside him is the mirror in which he beholds the absolute grandeur within himself."<sup>25</sup>

Schelling, however, recalls the above passage in these words:

"But as soon as he elevates himself to an absolute contemplation [*Contemplation*], as soon as the infinity of a higher insight [*Anschauung*] descends upon him in the flood of these appearances and shows that its relation to the terrific [*Ungeheuer*] of the sensuous intuition [*sinnliche Anschauung*] is merely superficial, then the vision [*Anschauung*] of the wild bulks of nature around him changes radically, as the relative grandeur outside him is only the mirror

24 F. SCHILLER, *Ueber das Erhabene*, NA XXI, 47. In the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* we can see how 'daemonisch' came to acquire a particular meaning at the time of *Sturm und Drang*, designating "a constitutive moment of the spiritual-intellectual nature of man," which is also used as a "corrective and counterforce against the Enlightenment." Daemon / *daemonisch* came to mean something similar to 'genius'. Cf. C. AXELOS, "Dämonisch, das Dämonische."

25 *Idem*, NA XXI, 47-48: "Kaum aber macht ihm die freie Betrachtung gegen den blinden Andrang der Naturkräfte Raum, und kaum entdeckt er in dieser Flut von Erscheinungen etwas Bleibendes in seinem eigenem Wesen, so fangen die wilden Naturmassen um ihm herum an, eine ganz andere Sprache zu seinem Herzen zu reden: und das relativ Große außer ihm ist der Spiegel, worin er das absolut Große in ihm selbst erblickt."

in which he beholds the *absolute* grandeur, the infinite in and for itself.”<sup>26</sup>

Answering my previous question we can now clearly see that for Schiller, the ‘absolute grandeur’ against which the mighty power and greatness of nature become only *relative*, is our own inner grandeur: *the infinite freedom within us*; whereas for Schelling, it is the grandeur of the absolute *in and for itself*.<sup>27</sup> One could argue that the difference is not as substantial as it may seem, once we realize that, for Schelling, this absolute grandeur is ultimately also within us. My claim, however, is that the nuance is very significant and betrays important differences, not only regarding Schelling’s and Schiller’s investment in the sublime, but also concerning their understanding of nature and human freedom, as well as our ability to realize it. Moreover, looking closer at Schiller’s text we can find several passages that reveal this same emphasis on the subject, or the human, the echo of which we will not find in Schelling’s analysis, such as for instance, when Schiller writes that in the sublime we feel free because “our spirit [*Geist*] acts here as if it followed only its own laws.”<sup>28</sup>

Schiller, in fact, begins his text *On the Sublime* emphasizing freedom as the main characteristic of human existence. Immediately after this, however, he exposes all the different ways in which human freedom is *de facto* hindered and violated, to the extent that the question becomes: how can we possibly assert our freedom, given that we are surrounded by forces and powers that clearly overpower us—not to mention the fact

26 F.W.J. SCHELLING, *Die Philosophie der Kunst*, SW V, 463. I have translated this difficult passage rather freely, hoping this enables me to convey its meaning better. The German reads as follows: “Aber nicht so bald erhebt er sich zur Absoluten Contemplation, kaum steigt ihm das Unendliche einer höheren Anschauung herab in die Fluth dieser Erscheinungen und verbindet sich mit dem Ungeheuren der sinnlichen Anschauung als seiner blossen Hülle, so fangen die wilden Naturmassen um ihn her an eine ganz andere Anschauung für ihn zu werden, indem ihm das relativ Große außer ihm nur der Spiegel ist, worin er das *absolut* Grosse, das Unendliche an und für sich erblickt.”

27 Arguably, then, Schiller is closer to Kant, who writes: “Therefore the feeling of the sublime in nature is respect for *our own vocation*, which we attribute to an object of nature by a certain subreption (substitution of a respect for the object in place of one for the idea of humanity in our own self—the subject).” (I. KANT, *Kritik der Urteilkraft*, § 27, my emphasis).

28 F. SCHILLER, *Ueber das Erhabene*, NA XXI, 42.

of our own finitude?<sup>29</sup> For Schiller, any power that may threaten our own entails that we are not truly free. But, after exposing the wretched situation in which we find ourselves, torn between what we want and what we are actually capable of<sup>30</sup>, Schiller points towards culture as the answer: “Culture must [soll] set man free and help him fulfil his vocation [*Bestimmung*].”<sup>31</sup> By culture, Schiller means what he calls “physical culture” through which we are able to control nature<sup>32</sup>, and more importantly “moral culture” (*moralische Kultur*). Only the latter gives us the absolute freedom we are longing for, because it enables us, he argues, to freely accept what otherwise would be perceived of as fate: it enables us to transform what seems to be an inescapable force of nature into the result of a free choice. To stress the Kantian influence in what appears to be a revival of the stoics<sup>33</sup>: our moral disposition enables us to do, accept and will the opposite of what we *naturally* desire, and in this sense is evidence of our elevated nature.<sup>34</sup> “Only the morally cultivated man is free,”<sup>35</sup> he writes.

Now, Schiller acknowledges that this is not an easy feat: one requires an unusual clarity of thought and an unusually strong *willpower*—perhaps only to be found in fiction. In any case, what this means now is that we are back to zero and that the initial question about the possibility of asserting human dignity and freedom still remains unanswered. And here is also where the sublime comes in, namely as the solution to this

29 “There is a cure for everything except for death, says the proverb. But this single exception [...] would abolish [*aufheben*] the entire concept of humanity. Man can no longer be the being that wills if there is even *one* single case in which he simply must do what he does not will. [...] his lauded freedom is absolutely nothing if he is bound in even a single point.” (F. SCHILLER, *Ueber das Erhabene*, NA XXI, 38-39)

30 Schiller calls it the sad contradiction (*Widerspruch*) between ‘Trieb’ and ‘Vermögen’ (*idem*, 38).

31 *Idem*, 39. Undoubtedly, Schiller’s essay can be interpreted as a very unorthodox but at the same time precise *Auseinandersetzung* with Kant’s analytic of the sublime.

32 We exercise control over nature, claims Schiller, by either using it to fulfil our will or avoiding the effects we cannot dominate. Cf. *idem*, 39.

33 Cf. R. ROBERTSON, “On the Sublime and Schiller’s Theory of Tragedy.”

34 This text shows very clearly how much Schiller follows the Kantian insight according to which, if there were not that disharmony, we would never know that we are capable of a moral action.

35 F. SCHILLER, *Ueber das Erhabene*, NA XXI, 39.

aporia. For, as we have already seen, Schiller will present the aesthetic experience of the sublime as a means whereby we are *reminded* of our infinite dignity (*Würde*) and superiority over and against nature's might. The experience of the sublime, he argues, enables us to *detach* ourselves from our most nature-like being and become *independent* from nature (considered as might, *Macht*).<sup>36</sup> The *value* of the sublime according to Schiller lies thus in the fact that it is a means whereby we are able to experience—on a sensuous level—something within us that is so difficult to access directly, namely our true freedom and infinite superiority over the merely physical and sensuous reality of life.<sup>37</sup>

This understanding of the sublime stresses the point made earlier about the way in which in Schiller's account regarding the sublime—in contrast to Schelling's—everything is geared towards realizing man's highest freedom and grandeur. But there are other points of divergence in their analyses of the sublime, which have to do with the role they ascribe to art, chaos and nature.

As noted above, Schiller begins his essay on the sublime with a reflection on human freedom and not as a treatise on aesthetics. Moreover, although his text is dedicated to the sublime in art, in the end, it really is about showing how sublime works of art can help us become better, i.e. freer, human beings. In other words, as Ritchie Robertson notes, Schiller's essay "On the Sublime," can be seen as the culmination to the project developed in his letters *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* from 1794, where art and beauty are presented as a necessary

36 *Idem*, 40, the idea of nature as might (*Macht*) is of course the underlying thought in Kant's analytic of the *dynamically* sublime (see § 28 in *Kritik der Urteilskraft* with the title: "Nature as Might").

37 Schiller is using the sublime to bring together two separate aspects from Kant's philosophy: the moral and aesthetic. In other words, he uses the sublime (which awakens our moral superiority and vocation as rational human beings) to 'solve' the difficulty opened up by Kant's morality according to which it is conceivable that we have never really experienced a true moral (i.e. free) act. What Schiller is perhaps less open to, however, is that no-one may have ever experienced the beautiful or the sublime either, which in the end also follows from Kant's aesthetics, since he is always moving within the realm of the transcendental: what are the conditions of possibility for experiencing the beautiful?, etc.

means towards a successful and complete education of human-kind.<sup>38</sup> And the reason for this lies in the fact that, according to Schiller *now*, it is the experience of the sublime that enables us to realize something about ourselves that beauty, understood as the harmony between the sensuous and the moral cannot. Thus, he writes: “Without the beautiful, there would be perpetual conflict between our natural and our rational determinations. [...] Without the sublime, beauty would make us forget our dignity.”<sup>39</sup> Through the sublime we are able to identify (and arguably also satisfy) a human need that goes beyond the basic needs of “living and being well,” and a human vocation (*Bestimmung*) that goes beyond merely comprehending “the phenomena that surround us.”<sup>40</sup> More importantly: being frequently exposed to the experience of the sublime through art, he argues, will train us to experience the world and most especially the sources of suffering differently, namely in such a way that we may be able to “dissolve actual suffering into sublime emotion.”<sup>41</sup> As all too imperfect humans, thus, we have a strong interest in promoting the experience of the sublime through art, which is for Schiller, and contrary to Kant, the best means to convey this experience.

Now, Schelling’s analysis of the sublime is of a totally different kind, in the sense that it is embedded within a systematic analysis of the meaning of art and its different forms. As he puts it in the introduction to the *Philosophy of Art*, the aim is to “to penetrate the organism of art, which produces the highest unity and necessity [*Gesetzmässigkeit*] out of absolute freedom,”<sup>42</sup> and not to explore the ways in which art can make us better human beings. (Indeed, the somewhat controversial underlying assumption here is that to understand the essence of art we first need to be philosophers.) For Schelling, as we have seen, although the essence of art is to present the absolute, not all forms of art do this in the same

38 ROBERTSON, *op. cit.*, 194, and also see Schiller: the sublime must complement the beautiful in order to make aesthetic education into a complete whole and to enlarge the perceptive capacity of the human heart to the full extent of our vocation (806-807).

39 F. SCHILLER, *Ueber das Erhabene*, NA XXI, 53. See also: “the sublime gives us a way out of the sensuous world, in which beauty would so much like to keep us trapped” (*idem*, 45).

40 *Idem*, 48.

41 *Idem*, 51.

42 F.W.J. SCHELLING, *Die Philosophie der Kunst*, SW V, 357.



way. Thus, given that for Schelling the very notion of the sublime also expresses a certain degree of superiority *vis-à-vis* the beautiful, when he analyzes the sublime he does so in the light of the following question: *In which (special) way does the sublime present, express, manifest the absolute?* From this point of view, and despite the similarities, it is clear that the projects in Schiller and Schelling are very different—almost incomparable. However, looking further into their analyses of the sublime will enable us to identify even more fundamental (and less obvious) differences within their philosophical standpoints.

We have seen how Schelling explains the differences between the beautiful and the sublime in terms of the *way* in which they present (*darstellen*) the absolute. We have seen that what characterises the sublime is that it is like an explosion, an outburst: the absolute ‘explodes’ within the finite, we saw. And we also saw that, for us to experience the sublime in nature, according to Schelling, the greatness and overwhelming power of nature must become a *symbol* of the “true infinite”. But what does all this mean? And how should we interpret the passage quoted earlier where Schelling (misquoting Schiller) says that the sublime is like a symbol or a “mirror of the absolute”?<sup>43</sup>

One thing is clear: if, as Schelling writes in the first pages of his lectures on art, the absolute cannot be understood as a fixed identity, but rather as one that is in process of becoming etc., then it would be wrong to interpret the ‘absolute’ in the quote above as some form of deity or entity containing the same characteristics as – say – the “absolute grandeur within ourselves” or the “highest [*höchste*] freedom”<sup>44</sup> that Schiller refers us to. Indeed, in Schiller’s account, this “holy [*heilige*] freedom” is presented as a goal in itself: a fixed horizon where we can flee to (*flüchten*),<sup>45</sup> which is therefore stable, identifiable, unchanging and remains perfectly unthreatened. In Schelling’s text, by contrast, we find that what the sublime reflects by mirroring the absolute is not quite as reassuring as one might have assumed (and if it is, it is so in a different way than we find in Schiller). Indeed, according to Schelling, nature becomes a symbol of the infinite or the absolute *only to the extent* that we see nature as *chaos*: what we see when we experience the

43 *Idem*, 463.

44 F. SCHILLER, *Ueber das Erhabene*, NA XXI, 40.

45 *Idem*, 51.

sublime is the profound chaos underlying everything. Thus he writes: “the fundamental intuition [*Grundanschauung*] of the sublime is *chaos*,” and later adds: “the fundamental intuition of chaos itself lies within the intuition of the absolute” and more clearly: “The inner essence of the absolute, that in which all resides as one and one as all, is primal chaos itself.<sup>46</sup> In other words, the way in which the sublime according to Schelling presents the absolute is by presenting its fundamental non-stability (non-identity),<sup>47</sup> disorder, disharmony, pure potentiality... *chaos*. To see nature as sublime is not to see the overwhelming power of *this* concrete volcano or the ungraspable immensity of the ocean, but rather to see the chaotic and invisible forces of nature underlying nature itself. Or, to use a formulation from his *Freedom Essay*: to see nature as sublime is to see the non-ground underlying everything that exists. And this, moreover, this chaos is presented by Schelling as the true essence of the absolute itself. But perhaps the most important consequence of Schelling’s position here is that the realization of freedom itself will inevitably become something much more precarious and unclear than what we see in Schiller. Freedom is not a pristine goal, but a possibility that is only such to the extent that the absolute opposite is also possible, as he will write in his essay from 1809: “The real and vital concept [of freedom] is that freedom is the capacity for good and evil”<sup>48</sup> (and evil, for Schelling is indeed, among others, lack of freedom).

To be sure, the connection between the experience of the sublime and chaos is not in any way new. Kant, for instance, writes that “it is rather in its chaos, or in its wildest and most irregular disorder [...] that nature mainly excites the ideas of the sublime.”<sup>49</sup> But in Schelling’s case,

46 F.W.J. SCHELLING, *Die Philosophie der Kunst*, SW V, 465.

47 Schelling will not put it in this way, though. For him, the more accurate expression would be that the notion of chaos involves that everything is “comprehended as unity in absolute identity.” But this “absolute identity” must be understood in the sense that, within it, nothing particular can be thought of as being separate from it, and this means that all particularities must express or be the absolute itself. There are no particulars in the absolute—at least not in the sense of being separate entities within it. This thought however, works much better with chaos: chaos does not allow for anything particular to be anything other than chaos.

48 F.W.J. SCHELLING, *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit*, SW VII, 352.

49 I. KANT, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, § 23.

the notion of chaos acquires a new meaning and recurs, though rather inconspicuously, throughout his *Philosophy of Art* and beyond. Schelling uses the notion of chaos, for instance, to explain how the colour *flesh* is the “absolute colour” in the sense that it contains all colours and it reflects the most perfect unity or identity between light and matter.<sup>50</sup> Later, explaining the relation between language (as a totality) and the poetic work of art, which is both particular (a particular speech) and absolute (since it refers to or mirrors that very totality), he will write that “[l]anguage in itself is the chaos from which poesy is to construct the bodies of its ideas.”<sup>51</sup> Of interest for us now, though, is that when Schelling introduces the notion of chaos in his section on the sublime, he refers once again to Schiller’s text *Ueber das Erhabene*. Nature, writes Schelling, is also sublime in its chaos “or as Schiller puts it, in the confusion of its appearances.”<sup>52</sup> However, by now it will not be surprising to see that both authors have quite a different reading of this *chaos*.

In his essay on the sublime, and following Kant’s analysis, Schiller argues that as we give up our desire to bring the “lawless chaos of appearances under a unity of knowledge,” we realize our independence from (and hence superiority over) nature. And hence, he explains that *what we lose in understanding we gain in reason*.<sup>53</sup> Schiller also claims that the stronger the chaos or the stronger we sense this total lack of purposiveness in nature, the more it becomes an image (*Sinnbild*) for (our) pure reason.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the idea that the chaos of nature, or as he also puts it, “nature’s wild unrelatedness [*die wilde [...] Ungebundenheit der Natur*]”<sup>55</sup> can reflect our truest independence from (or our own unrelatedness to) nature might resonate with the move we saw earlier in Schelling whereby nature’s greatness becomes a symbol of the true infinite or absolute. But the difference here between the two could hardly be more profound. For, in Schelling, the idea is that the absolute

50 “Flesh is the true chaos of all colours and for just that reason resembles none in particular, but is rather the most indissoluble and beautiful admixture of them all.” (F.W.J. SCHELLING, *Die Philosophie der Kunst*, SW V, 540).

51 *Idem*, 635.

52 *Idem*, 465.

53 F. SCHILLER, *Ueber das Erhabene*, NA XXI, 48.

54 *Ibid.*

55 *Ibid.*

itself is chaos. So, if anything, one would have to say that for Schelling, in or through the sublime, nature's wild unrelatedness becomes an image / symbol of the true chaos underlying it all.

Moreover, for Schiller, the fact that "what is ungraspable for the understanding, *confusion* [*Verwirrung*]" should "serve as a presentation of the suprasensuous" can only be the case *if*, as he puts it: "*it advances to greatness and announces itself as a work of nature*" (my italics).<sup>56</sup> Anything else, he writes in a somewhat Kantian fashion, would be "contemptible."<sup>57</sup> In effect, for Schiller (nature's) chaos only becomes an image of the sublime to the extent that it falls back on (nature's) reason. Or to put it differently: Schiller's text does not rest on the Schellingian insight that nature is essentially chaos. Instead, the underlying assumption is that by enabling us to experience the sublime, nature *ensures* that we awaken to our true essence and vocation. For Schiller then, and as much as this may contradict the pathos depicted at many points of his analysis,<sup>58</sup> the fundamental characteristic of nature is its *reasonableness*: "all nature proceeds rationally [*Vernünftig handelt die ganze Natur*]."<sup>59</sup> It is nature that *through nature*, so to say, teaches us that we are more than merely sensuous, and that "we are destined and able to manifest ourselves as pure intelligences."<sup>60</sup> In a rather touching passage, Schiller even speculates that it is perhaps our encounter with the sublime in nature that has made certain ideas, thoughts or heroic decisions possible... ideas that would have never been born in "the prison-study [*Studienkerker*]" of the man of science or social gatherings.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, this teleological (to say the least) reading of nature means that ultimately, in Schiller's case—and quite opposite to what we find in Schelling—the ground of

56 *Idem*, 47.

57 *Ibid.* The original German is: "[...] auch das Unfassbare für den Verstand, die *Verwirrung*, kann sobald sie ins Große geht und sich als Werk der Natur ankündigt (denn sonst ist sie verächtlich), zu einer Darstellung der Übersinnlichen dienen."

58 For instance, here: Schiller criticizes those who cannot accept the thought that all is governed ultimately by chance and thus "try to dissolve all nature's disorder into harmony" (*idem*, p. 48).

59 *Idem*, 38.

60 *Idem*, 43.

61 *Idem*, 47.

reason, morality and freedom, is never chaos but rather reason, morality and freedom.

There is still, however, one aspect that we have only touched upon tangentially and which is nevertheless fundamental to understand both Schelling's and Schiller's appropriations of the sublime. This element has to do with the way in which they think of it in moral terms, as a moral category, and how they both find it exemplified in the deeds and disposition of the tragic or the pathetic hero.

### Tragedy and the Tragic-Sublime

One of the consequences of Schelling's processual conception of the absolute, is that, for the work of art to truly mirror it, the identity of the opposites needs to *occur, it needs to happen*, within the work itself. This is one of the reasons why Schelling claims that drama is superior to poetry or epic narratives, namely because the identity that is being presented through the play is one that is actually taking place while it is being presented.<sup>62</sup> Likewise, he will argue that although they all (poetry, epic and drama) present the identity of the finite and the infinite, the object and the subject, necessity and freedom, there are important differences that have to do with the fact that in poetry there is an *Übergewicht* or prevalence of subjectivity and freedom and in the epic narrative there is a prevalence of objectivity and necessity (the necessity that comes from narrating the past), whereas in tragedy we find an absolute *Gleichgewicht* or *Indifferenz* between freedom and necessity. More importantly, the indifference that emerges between freedom and necessity in drama is one that does not exclude conflict and real opposition. In fact:

“The essence of *tragedy* is an actual and objective conflict [*objektiver Streit*] between freedom in the subject on the one hand, and necessity on the other, a conflict that does not end such that one or the other succumbs, but rather such that both are manifested in perfect indifference as simultaneously victorious and vanquished. [*zugleich als siegend und als besiegt*].”<sup>63</sup>

This situation of initial conflict and final indifference between the opposites is the reason why, according to Schelling, tragedy represents

62 We find a similar thought in A.W. Schlegel's lectures on art.

63 F.W.J. SCHELLING, *Die Philosophie der Kunst*, SW V, 693.

the highest form of art and is the most sublime form of art (*die erhabenste Erscheinung der Kunst*). The fact that Schelling uses the term *erhaben* or *erhabenste* to characterize dramatic poetry, however, becomes more significant when we see that, like for Schiller, the underlying question that is motivating his analysis of tragedy is: *How can it be that we find pleasure in something that should distress us?* “Aren’t these contradictions not simply devastating, and where is the ground of the beauty that Greek tragedies nevertheless achieved?”<sup>64</sup>

In what follows, I will compare the ways in which both Schelling, in the section “On Tragedy” from his *Philosophy of Art*, and Schiller, in his essay “On the Cause of the Pleasure we derive from Tragic Objects [*Ueber den Grund des Vergnügens an tragischen Gegenständen*],” address this question. I will focus my analysis on two key concepts for understanding the similarities and differences in their responses: *innere Notwendigkeit* (*inner necessity*) for Schelling and *Reue* (*regret*) in Schiller’s case.

### *Schelling’s Response*

In addressing this question (about the possibility of finding pleasure in the tragic), Schelling is resuming a line of thought that he had introduced already in his *Philosophical Letters* from 1795. And similarly, to what he had done there, Schelling will answer the question, “how were the Greeks able to endure the terrible contradictions [*schreckliche Widersprüche*] inherent in their tragedies?,” by claiming that the question itself is based on a misinterpretation of what is actually taking place in tragedy. In this sense, Schelling’s entire analysis of the tragic is an attempt to show that, although it might *seem* that Greek Tragedy suppresses human freedom in favour of fate, what we have instead of this, as we saw earlier, is a situation of indifference between freedom and necessity. This indifference, says Schelling, consists in the fact that human freedom as well as fate or necessity are *both* affirmed and negated, they are both vanquished and victorious:

“both, necessity and freedom, emerge from this struggle [i.e. the struggle or conflict represented in tragedy] simultaneously as victorious and vanquished, and accordingly equal in every respect

64 *Idem*, 696.

[zugleich als siegend und als besiegt, und demnach in jeder Rücksicht gleich hervorgehen].<sup>65</sup>

What is perhaps more difficult to understand is that this outcome is also interpreted by Schelling as the celebration or *triumph of (human) freedom*. But it is an important moment in his analysis, because it gives us the answer to question regarding the pleasure we get from something that should shock and terrify us: Tragedies give us pleasure because they are a celebration of human freedom. Schelling uses Sophocles' tragedy of *King Oedipus* to explain how the indifference between freedom and necessity is to be understood as the triumph of freedom in the following passage:

“The fact that this guilty person who had succumbed to the superior power of fate was nevertheless punished, was necessary precisely *in order* to show the triumph of freedom. It was a recognition of freedom and the *honour* due it. The hero had to struggle against fate; otherwise there would have been no struggle at all, no expression of freedom whatsoever. He had to succumb within that which is subject to necessity. Yet in order to avoid necessity from prevailing, without simultaneously overcoming it, the hero also had to atone voluntarily for the guilt that was imposed by fate itself. This is the greatest [*grösste*] idea and the highest [*höchste*] victory of freedom: to voluntarily bear the punishment for an unavoidable transgression in order to prove [*beweisen*] his freedom precisely in the loss of that very same freedom, and to perish amid a declaration of free will.”<sup>66</sup>

If we read carefully we will find that there are different meanings of freedom and necessity at play here. There is in effect, what might be called a transformation and internalization of fate<sup>67</sup>: The fate that first seems impossible to combat, imposed by some external, overwhelming power, against which the hero could do nothing, is internalized and transformed by the hero himself into a fate that he can fight, that he can overcome. And he does so, by interpreting it as an act of free will (i.e. in order to accept the guilt, Oedipus has to see his offense as a result of his own free will). The emergence of indifference or identity between freedom and necessity that we find at the end is, thus, made possible at the moment in which the tragic hero voluntarily accepts the guilt for an act that he

65 *Idem*, 690.

66 *Idem*, 696-697.

67 Cf. K. HAY, *Die Notwendigkeit des Scheiterns. Das Tragische als Bestimmung der Philosophie bei Schelling*.

did not want to do, i.e. an act that he experiences in the first instance as having been imposed on him by virtue of some overwhelming necessity that he could not have foreseen, let alone combatted. But for this act of acceptance to be possible the hero has to reinterpret that externally imposed and overwhelming fate as a result of his own free will, or to put it differently: as an internal fate, an internal necessity.

Although this process may resonate with what Schiller had said in his essay about the sublime (namely, that the sublime helps us understand that sometimes the only way we have to destroy a force to which we must succumb is by submitting to it voluntarily) there are again significant differences. These differences have to do precisely with what I am calling a movement of internalization and transformation of the notion of fate. It is in effect not by chance that Schelling will emphasize at several points that true tragic fate, tragic necessity, must be an internal necessity, an *innere Notwendigkeit*. Any other type of necessity or fate, one for instance that could not be incorporated or reinterpreted in this way by the hero (such as an overwhelming fate only to be overcome by another kind of overwhelming power<sup>68</sup>) would never lead to the true realization of the identity between freedom and necessity.

### *Schiller's Response*

In Schiller's "On the Cause of the Pleasure we Derive from Tragic Objects," the presence of the Kantian analytic of the sublime is much stronger than in Schelling's analysis of tragedy, where it is hardly recognizable. In other words, the reasons why the tragic should be representative of the sublime become much clearer in Schiller's text. In this sense, Schiller can be read as the (missing) link between Kant and Schelling, for it really is Schiller who makes the first step in reinterpreting the sublime as tragic.

In this text published in 1792 (a few years before writing his text *On the Sublime*), Schiller first addresses the question concerning the sources

68 See also F.W.J. SCHELLING, *Die Philosophie der Kunst*, SW V, 703: "The kind of evil that [only] gods can remedy [...] is in and for itself not a genuinely tragic evil. On the contrary: where such a [tragic] evil is present, the gods can do nothing and if they are nonetheless called upon in such a situation, this is what one calls the *deus ex machina*, something generally considered aversive for the essence of tragedy."



of pleasure provided by tragedies as a broad interrogation of the source of pleasure in art. Later, considering the tragic in specific, Schiller argues that what characterizes the pleasure we obtain from tragic art is that it comes from displeasure (*Unlust*). As he writes almost paraphrasing Kant's analytic of the sublime:

“The object of the sublime thwarts [*widerstreitet*] our sensuous faculties and this contrariety or absence of purpose [*Unzweckmässigkeit*] must necessarily excite a displeasure in us. But it is, at the same time, an occasion to recall to our conscience another faculty within us that is superior to the objects before which our imagination succumbs.”<sup>69</sup>

As we can see, the line of thought here is very similar to what he will later write on the sublime. But what becomes clear here is that for Schiller this means that the stronger the opposition, the stronger the contradiction and the stronger the (physical) pain or contrariety, the stronger the (moral) pleasure that will result from it. Thus he claims, now in clear relation to the tragic:

“The more dreadful the adversary, the more glorious the victory; resistance alone can make the force visible. It follows from this, that the highest degree of moral consciousness can only be attained in a violent way, in conflict, and that the highest moral pleasure is always accompanied by pain.”<sup>70</sup>

Schiller immediately adds that this is exactly what takes place in tragedy, and he then proceeds to explain his claims by analysing different examples.

Now, from a Schellingian perspective we could say that Schiller has made the opposition too strong. That is to say, too strong for a true identity or indifference between freedom and necessity to emerge (which also means, as we have seen, for freedom to triumph). And this is because the “adversary” (such as Schiller sees it) cannot be fought and cannot be overcome *on its own ground* (which is another way of saying that

69 F. SCHILLER, *Ueber das Vergnügen an tragischen Gegenständen*, NA XX, 137f.

70 *Idem*, 139. I will transcribe here the original too: “Je furchtbarer die Gegner, desto glorreicher der Sieg; der Widerstand allein kann die Kraft sichtbar machen. Aus diesem folgt, daß das höchste Bewußtsein unsrer moralischen Natur nur in einem gewaltsamen Zustande, im Kampfe, erhalten werden kann, und daß das höchste moralische Vergnügen jederzeit von Schmerz begleitet sein wird.”

such an adversary or evil fate cannot be internalized). In effect, what we find in Schiller's analysis of the tragic-sublime and tragedies in general is that the opposites *remain* opposites. There is no transformation. The overwhelming power (*Macht*) (as he will refer to it in his later essay) remains eternally opposed to our freedom and moral vocation. As we saw earlier, in the sublime (like in tragedy) the sensuous and moral realms remain eternally opposed.<sup>71</sup>

This also explains why, when Schiller analyses a tragic hero who, like Sophocles' King Oedipus, takes on the guilt for a deed that (at the time it was committed) did not seem to be wrong, he focuses on remorse, i.e. on the wish that the deed had not taken place. And Schiller interprets this remorse as a sign that the true unchangeable moral law has prevailed.

“Remorse and despair [*Reue und Verzweiflung*] over a past crime show us the power of the moral law [*die Macht des Sittengesetzes*] with delay, but not in a weaker way. They are images [*Gemälde*] of the most sublime morality, even if they have been drafted under violent conditions.”<sup>72</sup>

For this reason, Schiller even considers remorse to be morally sublime:

“Remorse, self-condemnation, even in their highest degree, in despair, are morally sublime because they could never be felt if an incorruptible feeling for right and wrong did not await [*wachte*] in the criminal's heart and validated his sentences against the fieriest interests of self-love.”<sup>73</sup>

As we can see here, in Schiller's analysis, the tragic hero defines himself against his deed, i.e. in opposition to the crime committed in the past. It is in the negation of what one did (and what one was) that the true essence of what one really is (or wants to be) shines through.

71 In his essay “On the Sublime,” SCHILLER writes: “in the sublime [...] reason and sensuousness do not accord, and precisely in this contradiction between the two lies the magic with which it captures our minds. The physical and the moral individual are here most sharply separated from one another [*voneinander geschieden*]; for it is precisely in the presence of objects that make the former feel its limitations that the latter becomes aware of its power [*Kraft*] and is infinitely exalted by the very same object that crushes the other to the ground” (F. SCHILLER, *Ueber das Erhabene*, NA XXI, 43).

72 F. SCHILLER, *Ueber das Vergnügen an tragischen Gegenständen*, NA XX, 143.

73 *Idem*, 142.

In this negation, the crime (the evil) remains radically alien to the true nature of the protagonist.

This contrasts sharply with what we saw in Schelling, whose tragic hero is presented as affirming his past crime and making it his own by taking on the guilt in an extraordinary act of free will (by stabbing his own eyes). But for this, as we already saw, the hero (and the philosopher) also had to reinterpret the nature of that deed as an inevitable part of himself, and internalize it as an inevitable part of what it means to be free. Both freedom and necessity, good and evil needed to be transformed, reconceptualized.<sup>74</sup>

Through repentance, remorse and self-condemnation, Schiller's tragic hero does not change the meaning of his fate, the meaning of necessity and evil. These do not become one with his freedom, with himself, they do not become part of him, but are to remain forever alien, external: the eternal other. We do not have the creation of something new, a new understanding of freedom and necessity and their interrelation, but if anything a reinforcement of their opposition.

Thus, in spite of Schiller's ideal, such as he expresses it in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, regarding the importance of understanding humankind as a whole and understanding that human freedom can only be truly fulfilled by *not* in excluding the sensible (*man is a complete being only when both his fundamental drives are fully developed*<sup>75</sup>), in spite of this, in his analysis both of the tragic and the sublime the two opposite realms, the physical and the moral, necessity and freedom remain in absolute opposition. No mediation seems to be possible, except for the one given by the work of art itself. The final harmony, the source of pleasure we get from the sublime is *in spite* of the pain. There is no real interaction between the two realms, as we saw in Schelling.<sup>76</sup> On the contrary, as Beiser has argued:

74 In *Die Notwendigkeit des Scheiterns*, I have argued that the theoretical explanation of freedom that underlies Schelling's interpretation of King Oedipus in his *Philosophy of Art* does not become explicit until his philosophy until *Freedom Essay* from 1809.

75 F. SCHILLER, *Ueber die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen*, NA XX, 374 (Letter XX).

76 In this sense, perhaps one would be forced to argue that Schiller remained a dualist and in the end was not able to achieve the unity that he was longing (Cf. F.C. BEISER, *op. cit.* 24f).

“The feeling of the sublime actually requires that our physical nature be vanquished [...] It [...] demands that we do not have power over nature, that on the contrary it has power over us.”<sup>77</sup>

To put it differently: the misdeed, the violation of the moral law is not incorporated as having become internally necessary, as having become the condition of possibility of the realization of freedom, but remains external to it.<sup>78</sup>

### Concluding remarks

In Schelling’s interpretation of Greek Tragedy, and *King Oedipus* in particular, the tragic hero becomes a symbol of the realization of human freedom. In this interpretation, however, and although Schelling considers tragedy to be the highest and most sublime form of art, the sublime itself has arguably been replaced by the tragic. In fact, if we compare the way in which Schelling had thematized the sublime in his general section, to how he refers to the sublime in the section on tragedy, it becomes difficult to argue that he is referring to the same thing. Something has changed, which has to do with the way in which he is engaging with what is being represented in the play. This also means that the characteristic of the realization of human’s freedom is not that it is sublime, but that it is tragic.

Schiller, on the other hand, presents tragedy as an example of the sublime and there is a perfect continuity between his analysis of tragedy and his analysis on the sublime. But, in a certain way, the weight of the tragic itself is missing. For, in Schiller’s account the tragic hero does something extraordinary the aim of which is to remind us of our superiority over nature, our dignity. The tragic hero shows us how human freedom can be realized in the face of an overwhelming power. But, for Schiller, this very specific way of expressing and realizing human freedom (in direct conflict with the other of freedom and reason) does not represent the only possible way to conceive of a free, moral action. It does not represent, like in Schelling, the ‘tragedy’ of freedom. The tragic

<sup>77</sup> Cf. F.C. BEISER, *op. cit.*, 260.

<sup>78</sup> In his *Freedom Essay*, Schelling will introduce the idea that freedom is only truly possible to the extent that evil is possible too. The possibility of evil is the condition of possibility for real freedom.

conflict is not a condition of possibility for the realization of human freedom. If anything, it constitutes a “limit case”<sup>79</sup> as Safranski put it. For it nevertheless still remains true that in some cases the harmony between our senses and our reason, pleasure and duty is a given. This is precisely what characterizes beauty and grace, the beautiful soul that does naturally what is right, as he had argued in his essay from 1793, “On Grace and Dignity.”<sup>80</sup> According to Schiller it is possible to act freely without there being a conflict, and this, I argue, makes all the difference and ultimately influences his interpretation of the tragic hero as one who is (or should be) filled with sorrow, self-contempt and remorse.

To put it differently, in Schiller’s analysis, the fact that the tragic hero *Oedipus* only realized afterwards, *après coup*, that he had committed the crime he was so desperately trying to avoid is a mere detail. There is nothing to it, and there is no special meaning to be given to that detail in the story. What is important according to Schiller is that the hero eventually realizes the wrong committed and feels remorse. This is what makes the fact that he accepts his guilt *sublime*. But the idea that he necessarily (and not contingently) committed a fatal mistake, and that this ultimately constitutes the condition of possibility for him to truly realize his freedom, the idea that freedom is perhaps only really to be realized *après coup* and that this reflects something about the complex structure of human freedom is absent in Schiller. And this means that for Schiller the sublime, and tragedy itself, is not strictly speaking *tragic*. For the sublime, I would argue, becomes tragic *if* and *when* it represents the only possible form in which human freedom and morality can be realized; that is to say: only if we identify completely with the tragic hero and see him or her as the true and unique symbol of human action, can we say it is tragic. This is what Scott Fitzgerald called having “a sad attitude towards sadness, a melancholy attitude toward melancholy and

79 Cf. R. SAFRANSKI, *op. cit.*, p. 370.

80 In this essay Schiller had also emphasized that both poles (grace, where morality is in harmony with our passions, and dignity, which presupposes a conflict between the two) must complement each other. “The beautiful soul shows that it possesses genuine moral virtue, and not only a good heart or temperamental virtue, only when, in cases of tragedy, it has the power to act with dignity. [...] Conversely, a noble mind can prove its dignity only if, in less tragic circumstances, it can act with grace.” (F.C. BEISER, *op. cit.*, p. 115).

a tragic attitude toward tragedy.”<sup>81</sup> And this is, I argue, what Schelling does in his analysis of Greek tragedy of 1803.

From the perspective of his later writings, the tragic-sublime will be for Schelling a mere step towards a better understanding of the essence of human existence. Which is also perhaps why Schelling abandons the themes of the sublime, Greek tragedy and art in general, but he does not abandon the insight that the realization of freedom is based on a process through which we internalize and accept an obscure power and put it at the core of everything that exists, namely the infamous *ground of existence*.

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81 S. Fitzgerlad, *The Crack-Up*, 80f.

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