

On the Sublime and Schiller's Theory of Tragedy

Ritchie Robertson

Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages

University of Oxford

(United Kingdom)

The essay 'On the Sublime' forms an essential part of Schiller's theory of tragedy, which has recently been called a major philosophical contribution to the subject, ranking alongside those made by Hegel or Nietzsche.¹ Schiller's mature ideas about tragedy are set out in a number of essays written between his abandonment of the theatre (after *Don Carlos*, completed in 1787) and his resumption of dramatic writing with *Wallenstein* (written between 1797 and 1799). Of these essays, those dealing most directly and extensively with tragedy are 'On the Basis of Pleasure in Tragic Subjects' ('Über den Grund des Vergnügens an tragischen Gegenständen', written in 1791) and 'On the Pathetic' ('Über das Pathetische', written and published in 1793). 'On the Sublime' was written later than these essays, probably some time after the great treatise 'On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters' ('Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen', published 1795), since in

¹ Frederick Beiser, *Schiller as Philosopher: A Re-Examination* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), p. 238.

it Schiller describes the experience of the sublime as the culminating and final stage of aesthetic education. Since it was published only in 1801, in a collection of Schiller's shorter prose works, any more precise dating is a matter of controversy.² Some conceptual and verbal links with *Wallenstein* and Schiller's next tragedy, *Maria Stuart* (written 1799-1800, published 1801), would suggest a late date, perhaps not long before 1801, but this view goes against the current scholarly consensus. To place it in its intellectual context, and to see what questions Schiller was seeking to answer, we need to provide 'On the Sublime' with two genealogical lines. One of these will show how the theory of the sublime became a central topic in eighteenth-century aesthetics, and how Schiller gave it a distinctive moral turn and incorporated it into his theory of tragedy. The other will show how, after conceptions of the tragic hero as Stoic had long gone out of fashion, Schiller used his theory of the sublime to revive them with additional psychological and moral depth.

1. The theory of the sublime from Longinus to Kant

The sublime as a topic in aesthetics goes back to the treatise *Peri Hypsous* (literally *On the High*),

² See the discussion by Carsten Zelle in Matthias Luserke-Jaqui (ed.), *Schiller-Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Wirkung* (Stuttgart und Weimar: Metzler, 2005), pp. 479-80.

written by an unknown author in the first century AD. The single extant manuscript calls him Longinus, the name by which he is conventionally known. For him, the sublime, or the high or lofty style, is a rhetorical category. He writes about grandeur in poetry and oratory, and about the literary devices with which to achieve it, taking his examples mainly from Homer but also from the Book of Genesis:

Similarly, the lawgiver of the Jews [i.e. Moses], no ordinary man - for he understood and expressed God's power in accordance with its worth - writes at the beginning of his *Laws*: 'God said' - now what? - "Let there be light", and there was light; "Let there be earth", and there was earth.³

This reference to Genesis often led later readers to suppose that Longinus must have been a Christian, but it is most likely that he was a classically educated Jew. His treatise was rediscovered only in 1554, and began to be influential in the seventeenth century, when it was translated and discussed by Nicolas Boileau.⁴

³ 'On Sublimity', in D.A. Russell and M. Winterbottom (eds), *Ancient Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 470.

⁴ See his *Traité du sublime et merveilleux* (1672), which is discussed in Carsten Zelle, "Angenehmes Grauen": *Literaturhistorische Beiträge zur Ästhetik des Schrecklichen im achtzehnten Jahrhundert* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1987), pp. 76-80, as part of a comprehensive study of the eighteenth-century aesthetic of terror and sublimity. For a shorter, more argumentative account of the subject, see James Kirwan, *Sublimity* (London: Routledge, 2005).

The rediscovery of Longinus also meant a reinterpretation. Instead of a style of writing, the sublime was understood as a mode of experience that demanded expression in such a style. This mode was understood to be complex, even paradoxical: one well-known formulation was 'delightful horror'.⁵ Writers on aesthetics first inquired into the objects that called forth such a feeling, then into the qualities of the objects (and of their literary or visual representation), and finally into the psychological analysis of the feeling itself.

The complex experience of the sublime did not fit into conceptions of beauty. Sublime objects were discussed by Joseph Addison in his *Spectator* essay, 'The Pleasures of the Imagination'. He concentrates on 'great' objects which give pleasure, such as 'huge Heaps of Mountains, high Rocks and Precipices, or a wide Expanse of Water'.⁶ An extensive discussion of sublime objects and their qualities was developed and memorably expressed by the young Edmund Burke in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, published in 1757. Here the beautiful is a foil to the sublime. The beautiful is a source of simple pleasure. Beautiful objects are small, delicate, smooth, with mild colours and gentle variation of shapes. Flowers, birds, domestic animals can be

⁵ John Dennis, quoted in Zelle, "Angenehmes Grauen", p. 87.

⁶ *The Spectator*, ed. by Donald Bond, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 23 June 1712, vol. 3, p. 540.

beautiful, like ‘the fair sex’, thanks to their ‘delicacy’ and ‘timidity’.⁷ ‘Beautiful’, in short, virtually means ‘pretty’. By contrast, the sublime for Burke provides a complex pleasure, related to the imminence of pain and terror:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotions which the mind is capable of feeling.⁸

The sublime is evoked not only by powerful objections that threaten us with destruction, but also by objects that are immense, innumerable (like the stars), magnificent, and obscure. Thus Milton’s evocation of hell in *Paradise Lost* is powerful by virtue of its vastness and darkness. To explain why these objects cause a complex pleasure, Burke resorts to physiology. The complex sensations of the sublime work on the mind as demanding exercises do on the body; they limber up ‘those finer and more delicate organs, on which, and by which, the imagination, and perhaps the other mental powers act’.⁹

⁷ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. by Adam Phillips, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 106.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

The best-known theorist of the sublime, Kant, acknowledges his debt to Burke.¹⁰ His early essay, ‘Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime’ (‘Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen’, 1764), develops Burke’s distinction with many examples. For a far-reaching theory of the sublime, however, we have to wait until the *Critique of Judgment* (*Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 1790). According to Kant, the beautiful is found in limited objects, and the sublime in those that are limitless. The beautiful is simple, as for Burke; the sublime is complex, in that it involves a double movement, ‘das Gefühl einer augenblicklichen Hemmung der Lebenskräfte und darauf sogleich folgenden desto stärkeren Ergießung derselben’.¹¹ Our vital energies are at first suspended by sensations of terror, pain, or revulsion, then restored with additional strength. What causes this renewal of strength? The dynamically sublime – that of physically powerful objects – inspires us first with fear, then with the reflection that tempests or volcanoes are, after all, only physical objects, whereas our reason gives us a moral strength that is immeasurably superior to them. The mathematical sublime, illustrated by the innumerable stars in the Milky Way and other galaxies, overwhelms us at first with its unimaginable

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Werke*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel, 6 vols (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1964), v. 368-9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, v. 329.

quantity, then calls forth the reflection that the very idea of number is a product of our reason, and that as thinking beings we are superior to mere quantity.

Three features of Kant's theory can be singled out as important in themselves and as fruitful for Schiller's development of it. First, sublime emotions may at first seem irrational, but Kant grounds them firmly in human reason. Earlier in the century, intense and ardent emotions, especially the enthusiastic celebration of God's power as seen in natural phenomena like storms, had found expression in the free-verse odes of Klopstock, while titanic passions were expressed in the drama of the *Sturm und Drang*. Such emotions seemed about to escape all rational bounds. Kant, however, brings them back under the dominion of reason. Second, Kant insists that it is not objects that are sublime, but our response to the objects. The sublime exists only in our own mind ('Gemüt').¹² So an inquiry into the sublime must be an inquiry into the constitution of our minds. And thirdly, Kant associates the sublime also with morality. The sublime is associated with moral qualities. Moral goodness is not beautiful but sublime, and evokes respect rather than love:

Hence it follows that the intellectual and intrinsically final (moral) good, estimated aesthetically, instead of being represented as beautiful, must rather be represented as sublime, with the result that it arouses more a feeling of respect (which disdains

¹² *Ibid.*, v. 353.

charm) than of love or of the heart being drawn towards it – for human nature does not of its own proper motion accord with the good, but only by virtue of the dominion which reason exercises over sensibility.¹³

Thus the sublime overrides the beautiful, and even involves a kind of violence towards our sensory nature. Moral goodness is at first sight repellent; only by exerting force upon our senses can we appreciate its grandeur. Hence a military commander, thanks to his courage, is a much more sublime figure than a statesman with his petty calculations, and war, if waged lawfully, is more sublime than commerce.

Although he already knew some of Kant's shorter essays, Schiller engaged with the major works, the *Critiques*, only in the 1790s.¹⁴ Recovering from an illness in spring 1791, he tackled the *Critique of Judgement* and was soon captivated. On 3 March 1791 he announced to his friend Körner that he was studying Kant, and enthused: 'His *Critique of Judgement*, of which I have obtained my own copy, captivates me by its new, illuminating, brilliant ideas, and has made me very keen to work my way gradually into his philosophy.'¹⁵ The

¹³ Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, tr. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), pp. 123-4; *Werke*, v. 362.

¹⁴ See Peter-André Alt, *Schiller: Leben – Werk – Zeit*, 2 vols (Munich: Beck, 2000), ii. 78-85.

¹⁵ 'Seine Kritik der Urtheilskraft, die ich mir selbst angeschafft habe, reißt mich hin durch ihren neuen lichtvollen geistreichen Inhalt und hat mir das große Verlangen beygebracht, mich nach und nach in sei-

following winter he read the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and in October 1792 he made a further thorough study of the *Critique of Judgement*, heavily annotating his copy. Although his enthusiasm for Kant was later to fade somewhat, his immersion in Kant's works was crucial for Schiller's development of a mature theory of tragedy.

2. Transformations of the heroic ideal

The sublime in Schiller has another genealogy which may be traced more briefly.¹⁶ The seventeenth century, which rediscovered Longinus, was also the age of heroic drama and heroic fiction. The tragedies of Corneille and Dryden centre on great souls who inspire awestruck admiration through their courage, their steadfastness, and their endurance of suffering. These virtues are passive as well as active, and as such they owe a great deal to the classical morality of Stoicism formulated by Cicero and Seneca and presented to the modern world by Justus Lipsius in his much-read *On Constancy* (*De constantia*, 1584). The neo-Stoic hero endures the blows of fate with a fortitude grounded in his rational self-control. We find such heroes in Shakespeare: Julius

ne Philosophie hinein zu arbeiten.' Quoted in Alt, ii. 83.

¹⁶ See Karl Viëtor, 'Die Idee des Erhabenen in der deutschen Literatur', in his *Geist und Form: Aufsätze zur deutschen Literaturgeschichte* (Bern: Francke, 1952), pp. 234-66.

Caesar professes to be 'constant as the Northern star'; Horatio in *Hamlet* is 'not passion's slave' and 'more an antique Roman than a Dane'.¹⁷ This steadfastness in the face of adversity meant that the hero could also be a martyr. In many Baroque tragedies the hero or heroine courageously endures torments, as the heroine of Gryphius' *Catharina von Georgien* (1657) does when threatened with martyrdom by the pagan tyrant Chach Abbas, who is also in love with her. For the seventeenth century, such stoic heroism could arouse the emotions later defined by the term 'sublime'.

In the eighteenth century, however, such heroism became suspect. The Enlightenment questioned the heroic ideal. Baroque dramas seemed antiquated and bombastic. Heroic novels such as *Die asiatische Banise*, written and read by the seventeenth-century nobility, declined into adventure stories for children. The article 'Héroïsme' in the *Encyclopédie* says that a hero, despite arousing popular admiration is often in reality 'the shame and scourge of the human race'.¹⁸ While the active hero was rejected for causing misery, the passive hero was rejected as incredible and absurd. The hero of Gottsched's *The Death of Cato* (*Der sterbende Cato*, 1732), who declares that he is far less upset by the deaths

¹⁷ See Geoffrey Miles, *Shakespeare and the Constant Romans* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

¹⁸ *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (Neuchâtel: Faulche, 1765), viii. 181.

of his sons than by the fall of the Roman Republic, soon came to inspire ridicule rather than admiration. Schiller expresses this change in taste when in 'On the Pathetic' he denounces French neoclassical tragedy for its empty rhetoric and its lack of natural emotion:

We can hardly believe that the hero of a French tragedy really suffers, because he holds forth about his emotional state with complete calm, and his continual attention to the impression he is making on others never lets him give free rein to the natural feeling in him.¹⁹

If the hero was to be restored to the stage, such a figure must be natural. His or her motivation and psychology must be intelligible and must invite the empathy of the audience. Schiller, who trained as an army doctor and was familiar with the medicine and anthropology of the late eighteenth century, maintained that both his hero and his villains in his first play, *The Robbers* (*Die Räuber*, 1781), were created with close attention to psychological plausibility. Their

¹⁹ This and other translations are mine unless otherwise stated. 'Kaum können wir es einem französischen Trauerspielhelden glauben, daß er *leidet*, denn er läßt sich über seinen Gemütszustand heraus wie der ruhigste Mensch, und die unaufhörliche Rücksicht auf den Eindruck, den er auf andere macht, erlaubt ihm nie, der Natur in sich ihre Freiheit zu lassen' (FA viii. 424). Schiller's works are quoted from Friedrich Schiller, *Werke und Briefe*, Bibliothek deutscher Klassiker, ed. by Otto Dann and others, 12 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1992-2005), and identified by FA with volume and page number.

violent passions were the expression of nature. When he returned to drama after a ten-year interval, however, the theory of the sublime gave him a new model on which to construct a dramatic hero. Such a figure must display the natural emotions which could inspire an audience's sympathy. But he or she must also have the strength of character to subdue these emotions in the name of a higher principle such as duty. An example given in 'On the Pathetic' is the Roman hero Regulus, who was taken prisoner by the Carthaginians and released so that he could undertake a diplomatic mission in Rome; he had to promise to return to Carthage, and kept his promise, although he knew that on his return he would be tortured and killed. Regulus was a favourite hero for dramatists who adhered to neo-Stoicism, such as Schiller's Austrian contemporary Heinrich von Collin with his *Regulus* (1802). Schiller himself shows an allegiance to neo-Stoicism by quoting Seneca: 'A courageous spirit, struggling with adversity, is a pleasing spectacle even for the gods.'²⁰

Sublime behaviour falls into two categories which Schiller distinguishes in 'On the Pathetic'. The conduct of Regulus in returning to Carthage illustrates the sublimity of action ('das Erhabene der Hand-

²⁰ The quotation comes from Seneca's *De providentia*, II, 9: 'ecce par deo dignum, vir fortis cum fortuna mala compositus'. On the affinities between Schiller and neo-Stoic drama, see Walther Rehm, 'Schiller und das Barockdrama', in his *Göttersille und Göttertrauer* (Bern: Francke, 1951), pp. 62-100.

lung'), while the passive stoicism which endures the blows of fate and thus rises superior to them is the sublimity of composure ('das Erhabene der Fassung', FA viii. 440). The visual arts can only depict the latter, since painting and sculpture, as Lessing showed in *Laokoön*, cannot tell a story, and the sublimity of action involves both the hero's decision and its outcome. Drama, however, as a form of narrative, is able to present both.

The theory of the sublime, then, helped Schiller to present morally admirable heroes who were also credible in their human frailty. We shall see presently how this works out in dramatic practice. First, however, the essay 'On the Sublime' demands a detailed exegesis.

3. Schiller's theory of the sublime

Schiller's theory of the sublime in tragedy is summed up in a dense paragraph from 'Über den Grund des Vergnügens an tragischen Gegenständen'. The whole of 'On the Sublime' may be understood as an extended gloss on this passage. It runs:

The feeling of the sublime consists on the one hand of the feeling of our *impotence* and limited power to embrace an object, but, on the other hand, of the feeling of our *superior power*, which fears no limits and masters *spiritually* that to which our sensory forces succumb. Thus the object of the sublime opposes our sensory faculty, and this discordance must necessarily arouse unpleasure in us. But it is simultaneously an inducement to bring to consciousness another faculty within us, superior to the

one to which the imagination succumbs. Thus a sublime object, precisely because it opposes our sensuality, accords with reason and causes delight through the higher faculty while causing pain through the lower one.²¹

Written when Schiller was still working his way through Kant, this passage retains the rather clumsy Kantian vocabulary ('Unzweckmäßigkeit', 'zweckmäßig') to express the dual structure of the sublime, in which initial unpleasure ('Unlust') leads to a different kind of pleasure. The dual structure of the sublime corresponds to the dual nature of humanity, inasmuch as the unpleasure is that of the senses, while the resulting pleasure is that of a higher faculty, the reason. The later essay, 'On the Sublime', gives a much fuller and more fine-grained account of the sublime.

Schiller begins 'On the Sublime' with a bold statement about human nature. The

²¹ 'Das Gefühl des Erhabenen besteht einerseits aus dem Gefühl unsrer *Ohnmacht* und Begrenzung, einen Gegenstand zu umfassen, andererseits aber aus dem Gefühl unsrer *Übermacht*, welche vor keinen Grenzen erschrickt und dasjenige sich *geistig* unterwirft, dem unsre sinnliche Kräfte unterliegen. Der Gegenstand des Erhabenen widerstreitet also unserm sinnlichen Vermögen, und diese Unzweckmäßigkeit muß uns notwendig Unlust erwecken. Aber sie wird zugleich eine Veranlassung, ein anderes Vermögen in uns zu unserm Bewußtsein zu bringen, welches demjenigen, woran die Einbildungskraft erliegt, überlegen ist. Ein erhabener Gegenstand ist also eben dadurch, daß er der Sinnlichkeit widerstreitet, zweckmäßig für die Vernunft und ergötzt durch das höhere Vermögen, indem er durch das niedrige schmerzet' (FA viii. 239).

distinctive feature of humanity is autonomy: being able to exercise one's will. The whole of nature is an interplay of forces; humanity is part of nature, distinguished from the rest by acting consciously and voluntarily. In Schiller's repeated definition: 'man is the being who will'.²² This assertion immediately creates a problem. For humanity is subject to all kinds of external forces. Yet insofar as we remain subject to them, and suffer their affects against our will, we are not fully human. So we have to overcome them, and can do so in two ways. First, we can resist natural and physical forces by physical means (thus we can protect ourselves against the elements by building houses, against diseases by means of medical science). But there remains at least one natural fact against which we are powerless, namely the fact of death. With luck, we can postpone death, but we cannot avert it. Since we cannot overcome death physically, we must do so in the second way that Schiller describes: not realistically ('realistisch'), but idealistically ('idealistisch'). That is, we use our intellect to step outside the order of nature and to accept death, not as an unwelcome external force, but as something to which we inwardly consent.

Schiller is interested in the strength of character which can enable one to confront not only death, but one's fear of death. Somebody who was not afraid of death in

²² 'der Mensch ist das Wesen, welches will' (FA viii. 822).

the first place would not fit Schiller's argument. The strength of character that Schiller wants is illustrated in the following parable:

There are two spirits given us by Nature to accompany us through life. The one, companionable and gracious, shortens our laborious journey by his cheerful play, makes it easy to bear the chains of necessity, and leads us with joy and mirth to the dangerous points where we must act as purely spiritual beings and discard all that is physical – to the recognition of truth and the exercise of duty. Here he abandons us, for his domain is the sensory world alone, and his earthly wing cannot carry him beyond it. But now the other comes, grave and silent, and with his strong arm he carries us across the yawning abyss.²³

Schiller elucidates his own parable by explaining that the first spirit, who accompanies us to the brink of the abyss and then abandons us, is that of beauty. The second spirit, who enables us to cross the abyss, is that of sublimity. His definition of the sublime broadly follows Burke and Kant in

²³ 'Zwei Genien sind es, die uns die Natur zu Begleitern durchs Leben gab. Der eine, gesellig und hold, verkürzt uns durch sein munteres Spiel die mühevollen Reise, macht uns die Fesseln der Notwendigkeit leicht und führt uns unter Freude und Scherz bis an die gefährlichen Stellen, wo wir als reine Geister handeln und alles Körperliche ablegen müssen, bis zur Erkenntnis der Wahrheit und der Ausübung der Pflicht. Hier verläßt er uns, denn nur die Sinnenwelt ist sein Gebiet, über diese hinaus kann ihn sein irdischer Flügel nicht tragen. Aber jetzt tritt der andere hinzu, ernst und schweigend, und mit starkem Arm trägt er uns über die schwindlichte Tiefe' (FA viii. 826).

understanding it as a mixed emotion, composed, however, not of pain and pleasure, but of sorrow and rejoicing. Thus Schiller immediately gives a psychological and above all a moral turn to the sublime. He explains further that the presence of these two feelings demonstrates our moral independence. For since the same object cannot relate to us in two different ways, we ourselves, conversely, must relate to it in two different ways, because we have within us two different natures, each of which relates to the object in a different way. The mixed emotion of the sublime reminds us that we are sensory beings who can be distressed by sensory events, but also that have another, independent principle within us which enables us to rise above the world of the senses.

To underpin this argument, Schiller briefly recurs, without using the terms, to Kant's concepts of the mathematically sublime and the dynamically sublime. Objects which surpass the powers of our imagination, and objects which threaten to annihilate us, nevertheless cause pleasure. This shows that we respond to them with more than just our physical nature. Behind our merely physical response, of bafflement or terror, there is another response which discloses our own inner greatness.²⁴ And, by the cunning of nature, it is through our external senses, which perceive the innumerable stars or the power of an erupting vol-

²⁴ 'das absolut Große in uns' (FA viii. 827).

cano, that we are directed to something that lies beyond the sensory world.

Schiller then pursues the moral implications of this discovery. In the experience of beauty, there is a harmony between our natures and the sensory world around us. In the experience of beauty, our rational nature breaks free of the sensory world. To show how this distinction might play itself out in human life, Schiller gives us a hypothetical narrative. He asks us to imagine a good-natured, kindly, popular person who leads a pleasant life until confronted by misfortune such as illness, disgrace, impoverishment, or indeed the imminent prospect of death. Abandoned by his fair-weather friends, he has to face the new and frightening challenge with the aid of his own moral resources.

The distinction here is familiar; it was already adumbrated by Kant in his early essay 'On the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime': 'A person governed by the former feelings [compassion and agreeableness] is said to have a *good heart*, and such a person is *good-natured*; whereas somebody who is virtuous on principle is rightly credited with a *noble heart* and is described as *upright*.'²⁵ Or, in simple language, we may call it the difference between being

²⁵ 'Man nennet ein Gemüt, in welchem die erstere Empfindungen [d.h. 'Mitleiden und Gefälligkeit'] regieren, ein *gutes Herz*, und den Menschen von solcher Art *gutherzig*; dagegen man mit Recht dem Tugendhaften aus Grundsätzen ein *edles Herz* beilegt, ihn selber aber einen *rechtschaffenen* nennt.' Kant, *Werke*, i. 837.

nice and being good. Goodness is not always kindness: it may require one to be harsh towards others and towards oneself.

In order to attain the sublime, to show the strength of character demanded by severe challenges, one must become what Schiller calls a person of moral cultivation.²⁶ Only such a person, Schiller says, can truly claim to be free, because he is not dependent on the attractions of the sensory world. Telemachus, the son of Ulysses, was not free so long as he led a pleasant life with the goddess Calypso; but when his tutor Mentor summoned him to his princely duty, he embarked on the path leading to the sublime.²⁷

At this point in his essay Schiller fulfils a promise which he had made earlier, to show how aesthetic experience itself can lead one towards sublimity. Early in the essay he had written: 'Fortunately, however, not only does his rational nature contain a moral disposition which can be developed by the intellect, but even in his sensually rational nature, i.e. in his human nature, there is an aesthetic tendency in the same direction, which can be aroused by certain sensory objects and by purifying his feelings can be cultivated to produce this

²⁶ 'Der moralisch gebildete Mensch' (FA viii. 824).

²⁷ This example does not come from the *Odyssey*, but from Fénelon's didactic novel *Télémaque* (1699), which in Schiller's day was still a popular book and was considered suitable reading especially for children.

idealistic flight of the mind.²⁸ Schiller then proceeded to evoke the strength of character required for sublimity, but did not say how such strength was obtained. Now he returns to the subject.

Both sublimity and beauty, Schiller says, are copiously present throughout nature. Beauty appeals to children and helps in their education. Fortunately, however, one cannot fully appreciate beauty until one is mature and has cultivated one's aesthetic taste. For if one could have a complete aesthetic education at an early age, one would never want to do anything else. One would reject sublime spectacles, such as the starry sky, with mere incomprehension, and run away in terror from anything dangerous. As it is, the slow process of maturation gives one time to acquire a set of intellectual concepts and moral principles, and to develop an appreciation of the sublime.²⁹

Schiller now waxes eloquent about how magnificent natural settings enlarge the minds and hearts of the people who inhabit them. Even by going on a walk amid natu-

²⁸ 'Glücklicherweise aber ist nicht bloß in seiner rationalen Natur eine moralische Anlage, welche durch den Verstand entwickelt werden kann, sondern selbst in seiner sinnlich vernünftigen d.h. menschlichen Natur eine *ästhetische* Tendenz dazu vorhanden, welche durch gewisse sinnliche Gegenstände geweckt und durch Läuterung seiner Gefühle zu diesem idealistischen Schwung des Gemüts kultiviert werden kann' (FA viii. 824).

²⁹ 'die Empfindungsfähigkeit für das Große und Erhabene' (FA viii. 831).

ral surroundings one is more likely to develop original ideas or take heroic decisions than if one stays in one's study or in frequents the rooms where high society gathers. City-dwellers, confined in narrow spaces, acquire equally narrow minds, whereas nomads, always aware of the broad sky above them, are equally open and free in their character. Great human qualities, the sublime virtues, are likely to flourish all the more amid wild nature. The volcanic landscape of Sicily, the mountains and waterfalls of the Scottish Highlands, are more inspiring than the dull regularity of Holland:

Who would not sooner marvel at the wondrous struggle between fertility and destruction in the fields of Sicily, or feast his eyes on the wild cataracts and mist-shrouded mountains of Scotland, the grand natural world of Ossian, than admire in tidy Holland the painful victory gained by patience over the most recalcitrant of elements?³⁰

Schiller here shares the fascination of the pre-Romantic generation with wild and magnificent landscapes but also the belief that such landscapes would produce noble, courageous, and freedom-loving characters. One of the most popular British

³⁰ 'Wer bestaunt nicht lieber den wunderbaren Kampf zwischen Fruchtbarkeit und Zerstörung in Siziliens Fluren, weidet sein Auge nicht lieber an Schottlands wilden Katarakten und Nebelgebirgen, Ossians großer Natur, als daß er in dem schnurge-rechten Holland den sauren Sieg der Geduld über das trotzigste der Elemente bewundert?' (FA viii. 833).

poems of the time was James Beattie's *The Minstrel* (1771-4), which tells how a young man brought up in the rugged Highlands develops a sensibility filled with 'Romantic visions', and celebrates virtue as 'the child of liberty' in contrast to the corruption of courts.³¹ In Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell* it is the Swiss, brought up among the Alps, who are lovers of liberty, and especially Tell himself, who as a hunter spends more time than the others among awe-inspiring landscapes. Even Maria Stuart, whom one might not have imagined as an outdoor type, is an enthusiast for the Scottish Highlands: when released into the park at Fotheringhay, the sound of the horn makes her recall hunting there:

Noch mehr! O die bekannte Stimme,
Schmerzlich süßer Erinnerung voll.
Oft vernahm sie mein Ohr mit Freuden,
Auf des Hochlands bergigten Heiden,
Wenn die tobende Jagd erscholl. (FA iii. 79)

Often I heard that voice on the mountains,
Bitter and sweet to remember today;
O how joyously we would gather,
Gallop across the purple heather,
While the noisy hounds would bay!³²

In this part of the essay Schiller gives expression to a range of cultural anxieties. If he joins so enthusiastically in the contem-

³¹ James Beattie, *The Minstrel, in two books, with some other poems* (London: Charles Dilly, 1784), pp. 39, 50.

³² *Mary Stuart, in Five German Tragedies*, tr. by F.J. Lamport (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 255.

porary taste for wild landscapes, it is in part because he fears that modern life is becoming too orderly and too comfortable. Heroism, greatness, enthusiasm seem under threat. But a comfortable, well-regulated life, Schiller insists, is not the highest goal of human existence:

Die Freiheit in allen ihren moralischen Widersprüchen und physischen Übeln ist für edle Gemüter ein unendlich interessanteres Schauspiel als Wohlstand und Ordnung ohne Freiheit, wo die Schafe geduldig dem Hirten folgen und der selbstherrschende Wille sich zum dienstbaren Glied eines Uhrwerks herabsetzt (FA viii. 835).

Freedom from the constraints, but also from the allures, of the sensory world is the central theme of Schiller's essay. That freedom can be at risk, not only from a purely aesthetic education which fails to inculcate courage and ambition, but also from a way of life too exclusively regulated by the intellect ('Verstand') which satisfies humanity's lower needs at the expense of the higher ones that belong to the reason ('Vernunft'). When he expresses a preference for wild landscapes like that of Sicily over domesticated landscapes like that of Holland, Schiller acknowledges that the latter is a much more comfortable place to live, but insists that humanity was made for freedom rather than comfort:

Nobody will deny that humanity's physical well-being is better provided for in Batavia's [Holland's] meadows than beneath the untrustworthy crater of Vesuvius, and that the intellect, which seeks to understand and order, is much better suited in a regular market-garden than in a wild natural land-

scape. But humanity needs more than life and well-being, and has another destiny than merely to understand the phenomena around him.³³

In this anxiety about the development of civilization, which satisfies humanity's physical needs while allowing our moral and spiritual needs to atrophy, Schiller touches on a major and enduring theme in German cultural criticism. We may think of the 'last humans' in Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*, who have no conception of love, creation, or yearning, who have abolished pain, exertion, and danger, lead lives dominated by comfort, equality, and unanimity, and are convinced that only they know what happiness is – "We have invented happiness" – say the last humans and they blink –'.³⁴

However, Schiller certainly does not think that history is leading towards such a future utopia (or dystopia). A remarkable feature of 'On the Sublime' is that it includes some remarks on history that run directly counter to the historical optimism

³³ 'Niemand wird leugnen, daß in Bataviens Triften für den physischen Menschen besser gesorgt ist als unter dem tückischen Krater des Vesuv, und daß der Verstand, der begreifen und ordnen will, bei einem regulären Wirtschaftsgarten weit mehr als bei einer wilden Naturlandschaft seine Rechnung findet. Aber der Mensch hat doch ein Bedürfnis mehr als zu leben und sich wohl sein zu lassen, und auch noch eine andere Bestimmung, als die Erscheinungen um ihn herum zu begreifen' (FA viii. 833).

³⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, tr. by Graham Parkes, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 16.

which Schiller had expressed a few years earlier in his inaugural lecture as professor of history at Jena, ‘What is universal history and why does one study it?’ (‘Was heißt und zu welchem Ende studiert man Universalgeschichte?’, 1789). After evoking a gruesome image of pre-civilized existence, Schiller describes man’s conquest of Nature, the abolition of serfdom, the spread of useful commodities through international trade, and the preservation of the peace of Europe through a balance of power among equally well-armed states. That was in May 1789. A few weeks later, on 14 July, the fall of the Bastille initiated a series of revolutionary events which Schiller initially welcomed but which he rejected when they culminated in the execution of Louis XIV and Marie Antoinette and in the Reign of Terror.

Schiller’s disillusionment not only with the French Revolution, but with any attempt to discern necessary progress in history, is apparent when he turns abruptly from his warning against dystopia to a pithy account of the nature of history.³⁵ History has no inbuilt plan. It is nothing but a continual conflict of natural forces:

The world as a historical object is basically nothing but the conflict of natural forces with one another

³⁵ On this aspect of the essay, see Wolfgang Riedel, ‘“Weltgeschichte ein erhabenes Object”. Zur Modernität von Schillers Geschichtsdenken’, in *Prägnanter Moment: Festschrift für Hans-Jürgen Schings*, ed. by Peter-André Alt et al. (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2002), pp. 193–214.

and with humanity’s freedom, and the outcome of this struggle is what history tells us.³⁶

By natural forces Schiller does not mean only, or mainly, the physical conditions which frame human life. He means the emotions and passions which motivate people’s actions throughout history – first of all the mere need to survive, then greed, ambition, fear, hatred, and vengefulness. Very few people have emancipated themselves from these forces so far as to act with moral freedom: Schiller instances the famously upright Cato, the Athenian Aristides who was nicknamed ‘the Just’, and the Athenian general Phocion who was likewise famous for his sense of justice.³⁷ There is no intelligible plan in history, Schiller continues, contradicting (without mentioning it) Kant’s essay ‘Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose’ (‘Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht’, 1784). In contrast to Schiller, Kant persisted in believing in the possibility of human progress even after the débâcle of the Revolution. He based his argument, however, not so much on the Revolution itself,

³⁶ ‘Die Welt, als historischer Gegenstand, ist im Grunde nichts anders als der Konflikt der Naturkräfte untereinander selbst und mit der Freiheit des Menschen, und den Erfolg dieses Kampfs berichtet uns die Geschichte’ (FA viii. 835).

³⁷ All three are the subjects of biographies by Plutarch, whom Schiller, like Karl Moor in *Die Räuber* (FA ii. 30), read enthusiastically. See Alt, *Schiller*, i. 96.

as in the enthusiastic response to the Revolution, which acknowledged the principle of right.³⁸ Although Schiller would suggest a more hopeful view of revolution in *Wilhelm Tell* (1804), his view of history in 'On the Sublime' is relentlessly negative. Individual historical events can be explained, but there is no plan underlying the whole. History is simply the antagonist against which humanity can, and on rare occasions does, assert its freedom. A similar view of history is present in *Wallenstein* (1799), in which the forces of history cannot be mastered either by Wallenstein's or by Octavio's plotting, and the characters invoke various versions of fate ('Schicksal', 'Verhängnis') as a makeshift explanation for the incalculable events in which they are caught up.³⁹

Approaching the end of his essay, Schiller picks up the threads scattered in the early pages. Much as humanity would like to live in harmony with nature, this is rarely possible, and neither strength nor skill can secure one against the malice of destiny ('Tücke der Verhängnisse' (FA viii. 836), a phrase recalling the language of *Wallenstein*). The only way to retain one's freedom in the face of overwhelming physical forces is to accept them, to sever oneself from the sensory world, and thus to

³⁸ See *Der Streit der Fakultäten* (1798), in Kant, *Werke*, vi. 361.

³⁹ On the vocabulary of fate in *Wallenstein*, see Ritchie Robertson, 'Wallenstein', in Paul Kerry (ed.), *Friedrich Schiller: Playwright, Poet, Philosopher, Historian* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 251-72.

commit moral suicide ('sich moralisch zu entleiben').

What this strange phrase means is indicated when Schiller turns from real-life misfortunes to the artificial ones expressed in tragic drama. Tragedy often involves the pathetic, as when we see characters undergoing undeserved suffering. In real life, misfortune often descends on people who are unable to cope with it. In drama, however, the spectacle of suffering strengthens us by appealing to the principle of autonomy which is revealed by the sublime. The suffering of characters on the stage is itself sublime. By awakening our inner moral strength, it deprives fate of its overwhelming power. It obliges us to muster our inner resources by confronting us with 'the grave countenance of necessity'.⁴⁰ Tragedy, therefore, is not for the weak. It compels us to face suffering, reminds us that suffering happens constantly, but makes suffering bearable.

Schiller seems to intend this account of the morally strengthening experience of the sublime as a supplement to the programme of aesthetic education set out in the 'Aesthetic Letters'. There the emphasis was all on the harmony which humanity could attain through art, by reconciling the formal drive ('Formtrieb') and the material drive ('Stofftrieb') in the urge to play ('Spieltrieb'). Art, as the highest form of

⁴⁰ 'das ernste Angesicht der Notwendigkeit' (FA viii. 837). Cf. *Wallenstein*: 'Ernst ist der Anblick der Notwendigkeit' (FA iv. 161).

play, thus countered the one-sided development of human faculties resulting from the specialization which modern civilized life makes unavoidable. So the over-intellectual person with a highly developed 'Formtrieb' could regain contact with his more sensual side, while the person largely confined to physical tasks or practical considerations (the province of the 'Stofftrieb') could be taken out of himself and introduced to a wider world. 'On the Sublime' does not contradict this conception of human harmony, but addresses a different issue. After all, however well-balanced one may be, one will still have to rise to the occasion when confronted by sudden disasters such as foreign invasion or revolutionary turmoil. In such a desperate situation, harmony is not enough. One will have to leave beauty behind and advance to the sublime:

The beautiful is of benefit only to *humanity*, the sublime to the pure spirit within him; and because it is our destiny to follow the laws of pure spirits even within the constraints of the sensory world, the sublime must supplement the beautiful in order to make our aesthetic education into a complete whole and to extend the human heart's emotional capacity in full keeping with our destiny, which means taking it beyond the sensory world.⁴¹

⁴¹ 'Das Schöne macht sich bloß verdient um den *Menschen*, das Erhabene um den *reinen Dämon* in ihm; und weil es einmal unsre Bestimmung ist, auch bei allen sinnlichen Schranken uns nach dem Gesetzbuch reiner Geister zu richten, so muß das Erhabene zu dem Schönen hinzukommen, um die *ästhetische Erziehung* zu einem vollständigen Ganzen zu machen und die Empfindungsfähigkeit des

What are we to make of this as a theory of tragedy? We may be repelled by the hortatory tone that Schiller adopts towards the end of the essay. But his theory does avoid some of the perennial problems of tragic theory. Above all, it sidesteps the question of poetic justice. Many people expect tragedy to show, if not the triumph of the good, then at least the downfall of the bad. Tragedies which deny the spectator such satisfaction are particularly hard to accept: the notorious example is *King Lear*, which so affronted the optimistic outlook of the Enlightenment that Nahum Tate rewrote it with a happy ending. Yet plays in which characters are allocated their just deserts risk being implausibly remote from the way things actually happen in the world. Schiller addresses this problem head on. In the historical world, as Schiller conceives it in this essay, there is no underlying plan, and therefore no moral order. Critics of tragedy often complain that it shows us the morally abhorrent spectacle of undeserved suffering; Schiller is impatient with squeamish and feeble people who complain because they do not find their moral ideals realized in the world (FA viii. 825), who confuse beauty with morality (FA viii. 829-30), or who cannot face the inevitable (FA viii. 837). For him, it is obvious that trag-

menschlichen Herzens nach dem ganzen Umfang unsrer Bestimmung, und also auch über die Sinnenwelt hinaus, zu erweitern' (FA viii. 838). On the implications of Schiller's word 'Dämon', see FA viii. 1384.

edy shows undeserved suffering, since that is what life consists of. The point of tragedy is that it shows the possibility of heroic people rising above suffering and asserting their inner freedom.

In this respect, tragedy can have a didactic function: not in the sense that it shows how things should be, but in that it shows us examples of heroic fortitude. Hence tragedy is morally fortifying:

The more often the spirit renews this autonomous action, the easier it becomes with practice, and he wins a greater advantage over the sensory urge, so that even when an imaginary and artificial misfortune turns into a real one, he can treat it as though it were artificial, and – highest flight of human nature! – dissolve real suffering into sublime emotion.⁴²

Just as the experience of the sublime, for Burke, served to limber up our mental capacities, so for Schiller the tragic theatre is thus a kind of moral gymnasium. By observing the hero's sublime reaction to suffering, we are enabled to behave in a similar way when confronted with real, not fictional misfortune. But how plausible is this? Schiller may seem to be falling back into

⁴² 'Je öfter nun der Geist diesen Akt von Selbsttätigkeit erneuert, desto mehr wird ihm derselbe zur Fertigkeit, einen desto größern Vorsprung gewinnt er vor dem sinnlichen Trieb, daß er endlich auch dann, wenn aus dem eingebildeten und künstlichen Unglück ein ernsthaftes wird, imstande ist, es als ein künstliches zu behandeln und, der höchste Schwung der Menschennatur! das wirkliche Leiden in eine erhabene Rührung aufzulösen' (FA viii. 837).

the view of the theatre as a source of moral and psychological instruction which he put forward in the speech he delivered at Mannheim, 'What can a good theatre actually accomplish?' ('Was kann eine gute stehende Schaubühne eigentlich wirken?' (1784) (FA viii. 194). In 'Über den Grund des Vergnügens an tragischen Gegenständen' Schiller insists that art has its effect through arousing our pleasure, not through direct didacticism (FA viii. 234-5). In the *Ästhetische Briefe*, he formulates a subtle account of how art affects us by restoring balance and harmony among our emotions. Such an explanation will not serve for his theory of the sublime, however, because the sublime requires us to move beyond the harmony of beauty and even exercise a kind of violence on our aesthetic sense. In 'On the Sublime' Schiller seems to take the answer for granted, but in 'Über das Pathetische' he spells it out. What matters is not the accidental circumstances in which a tragic hero fulfils his duty. Since we can reasonably expect never to be entrusted with a diplomatic mission from Carthage to Rome, the example of Regulus is not one we can literally follow. By contemplating such a fate in tragedy, however, and by taking a complex pleasure in the spectacle, our potential for moral behaviour is strengthened, and it is that potential, or faculty ('Vermögen'), not the external circumstances, that we share with the tragic hero:

What we share with him is merely the *potential* for a similar obedience, and by perceiving in his poten-

tial our own as well, we feel our spiritual strength increased.⁴³

The moral effect of tragedy therefore depends on the complex pleasure of the sublime and on sympathy with the hero. By exercising our moral powers vicariously, it increases our potential to exercise them in reality.

4. Sublimity in practice: *Maria Stuart*

The theory of tragedy discussed here will not fit every play, or every protagonist, even among the plays written after Schiller's return to the stage in the late 1790s. In the heroine of *Die Jungfrau von Orleans*, who after a long course of suffering is miraculously freed from imprisonment and plunges into the battle to liberate her country, we can see the sublimity of action. Wallenstein's daughter Thekla, who listens with enforced calm to the narrative of her lover's death, illustrates the sublimity of composure. But it would be unwise to try to relate all Schiller's late plays, diverse as they are, to the conception of tragedy outlined in his essays of the 1790s.

It is, however, a commonplace of Schiller interpretation that the action of *Maria*

⁴³ 'Es ist bloß das *Vermögen* zu einer ähnlichen Pflichtmäßigkeit, was wir mit ihm teilen, und indem wir in seinem Vermögen auch das unsrige wahrnehmen, fühlen wir unsere geistige Kraft erhöht' (FA viii. 447).

Stuart bears a particularly close relationship to the tragic scheme indicated in 'On the Sublime'. I quote a neat formulation of this view from a perhaps unexpected source, Terry Eagleton's study of tragedy – incidentally, the most stimulating exploration of the subject to have appeared in recent years:

Maria Stuart, a powerful, fast-paced drama which displays a fine economy of structure, is also formally tragic in its conclusion, as Maria is sent to her death by Queen Elizabeth; but she dies with monumental dignity, outfacing her own guilt as a murderer, forgiving her enemies and thus outflanking in magnificence of soul the great (and feminist-minded) Elizabeth herself. The play thus demonstrates Schiller's belief, argued in his essay on tragedy, that there is an inner freedom which resists all mere earthly defeat, and which, like the Kantian sublime, knows that its infinite sovereignty is more than a match for whatever might threaten it.⁴⁴

Within this overall scheme, there are of course interpretative problems. Critics disagree on whether Maria undergoes a gradual process of purification throughout the play – with a distressing relapse when she denounces Elisabeth in Act III – or whether she makes a sudden transforma-

⁴⁴ Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 83-4. The relation between the play and the essay is briefly but usefully sketched by Klaus Köhnke, 'Schillers *Maria Stuart* – philosophische Theorie und dramatische Praxis', in Hans-Jörg Knobloch and Helmut Koopmann (eds), *Schiller heute* (Tübingen: Francke, 1996), pp. 99-113 (pp. 105-11).

tion.⁴⁵ Those who uphold the former view point out that in Act I Maria speaks remorsefully of her past crimes and that her nurse Hanna Kennedy testifies to her moral ascent: 'I know that you have never sinned again'⁴⁶ ('Ich bin ein Zeuge Eurer Besserung', FA v. 22). Against that, we may note that Maria, far from being resigned to her captivity, is constantly plotting to escape, and that even after Mortimer has frightened her by his sexual advances, she still hopes for his help. It is only when she hears the scaffold being erected for her execution that she resigns herself to the inevitable, as Kennedy affirms:

We cannot ease ourselves away from life!
But in a moment, swiftly, we must make
The change between this life below and life
Eternal; and my lady was vouchsafed
By God to cast all earthly hopes away
With fortitude, and in this moment set
Her faith in Heaven with a courageous soul.⁴⁷

Man lös't sich nicht allmählig von dem Leben!
Mit einem Mal, schnell augenblicklich muß
Der Tausch geschehen zwischen Zeitlichem
Und Ewigem, und Gott gewährte meiner Lady
In diesem Augenblick, der Erde Hoffnung
Zurück zu stoßen mit entschloßner Seele

⁴⁵ For the former view, see E.L. Stahl, *Friedrich Schiller's Drama: Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), pp. 106-14; for counter-arguments, Karl S. Guthke, *Schillers Dramen: Idealismus und Skepsis* (Tübingen: Francke, 1994), pp. 220-33.

⁴⁶ *Mary Stuart*, p. 203.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

Und glaubenvoll den Himmel zu ergreifen (FA v. 125).

Similarly, in 'On the Sublime', we are told that the ascent to the sublime is not a gradual process. It is a sudden step, in which someone caught in a crisis reveals true strength of character by abruptly rejecting the sensory world:

It is not gradually (for there is no transition from dependency to freedom) but by a sudden shock that autonomous spirit tears itself free from the toils in which refined sensuality has entangled it, and that bind all the more tightly, the more transparent their texture is.⁴⁸

It is by a sudden resolution, which Schiller does not present on the stage but reports at second hand, that Maria, after her life of luxury, sex, and crime, shows what she is really made of and faces her execution.

This, however, gives rise to further critical disputes. Some object that the truly penitent Maria is too good to be true, that she is a plaster saint rather than a dramatic character. Other complain that she is not saintly enough, retaining marked traces of her former self. Elisabeth has, with refined sadism, ordered Leicester, whom she suspects to have been in love with Maria, to

⁴⁸ Nicht allmählich (denn es gibt von der Abhängigkeit keinen Übergang zur Freiheit), sondern plötzlich und durch eine Erschütterung reißt es den selbständigen Geist aus dem Netze los, womit die verfeinerte Sinnlichkeit ihn umstrickte, und das um so fester bindet, je durchsichtiger es gesponnen ist (FA viii. 830).

superintend the latter's execution. Maria has certainly been in love with Leicester, for on seeing him she almost faints. On recovering herself, she gives him a steady gaze which he cannot face, and remarks gently that she had once hoped to enjoy his love, and now, on the verge of immortality, does not mind admitting it. Some commentators think that a heroic martyr should no longer have such feelings, and that by introducing them Schiller has undermined her sublimity.⁴⁹ We should remember, however, how Schiller denounced French classical theatre for presenting heroes who showed no natural feelings. Maria is above all a warm and natural person; her passionate outburst in Act III is far more humanly attractive than the cold-blooded haughtiness of Elisabeth; and this further evidence of her human feelings makes the sublimity of her martyrdom all the more convincing. Moral strength, Schiller had written in 1791, is most impressive when it triumphs not only over external obstacles but over one's own emotions: 'feelings, urges, emotions, passions, just as much as physical necessity and fate. The more terrible the opponent, the more glorious the victory.'⁵⁰

The sublime is thus an essential component in Schiller's theory of tragedy. But it is a modern sublime, based not only on Schiller's studies in medicine and anthropology, but also on his desire, while preserving the dignity and distancing of art, to represent heroism in a plausible and engaging way and thus to uplift his audience without resorting to didacticism.

⁴⁹ See Nikolas Immer, *Der inszenierte Held: Schillers dramenpoetische Anthropologie* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2008), pp. 364-5.

⁵⁰ 'also Empfindungen, Triebe, Affekte, Leidenschaften so gut als die physische Notwendigkeit und das Schicksal. Je furchtbarer der Gegner, desto glorreicher der Sieg' (FA viii. 241).