

**Aesthetics, Politics, Revolution:
Concepts of Representation in Schiller, Fichte and Büchner**

by

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the connection between aesthetic and political representation in three prominent German writers' responses to the French Revolution. Though they present conflicting judgments of the Revolution, I argue that Friedrich Schiller, Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Georg Büchner all use it as an occasion to reflect on the interpenetration of aesthetic and political processes. Each configures aesthetic and political principles differently, according to an idiosyncratic concept of representation that combines aesthetic, political, historiographic and theatrical modes. I consider each writer an aesthetic-political "type" based on how he organizes these axes and the forms of representative distance (between representative and represented) they involve. This study builds on recent discussions in political philosophy and historiography by profiling Schiller, Fichte and Büchner as influential cases of aesthetic-political fusion around 1800.

Chapters one and two read Schiller's aesthetic writings and history plays as theoretical and practical wings of a program to correct the failures of the French Revolution, understood as the collapse of representative distance. Schiller constructs a politics around the aesthetic concept of beauty in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795) after rejecting its opposed concept of sublimity, which he sees behind revolutionary violence. His "politics of the beautiful" calls for gradual political change via social education through artworks that encourage viewers to critically reflect on historical processes and their own aesthetic experience. Anthropological in

foundation, it situates modern society in the larger developmental arc of humanity. Aesthetic education corrects a malformation in internal drives that resulted in the violence of the Revolution. I argue Schiller's "classical" history plays—*Wallenstein* (1798-99); *Maria Stuart* (1800); *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* (1801)—attempt to implement this program. This systematic interpretation of Schiller's late oeuvre is new in critical literature.

Chapter three argues that Fichte's defense of the Revolution in his treatise *Contribution to Correcting the Public's Judgment of the French Revolution* (1793) is based on an aesthetic—and specifically sublime—understanding of politics. The connection between aesthetic theory and Fichte's political thought is absent in current scholarship. I argue Fichte's "sublime politics" conceives of violent upheaval as an opportunity for moral transcendence. Fichte denies that humans are historically determined and advocates the French Revolution as an unprecedented break with the past. This break must be absolute: to realize their moral potential, Fichte insists people reject all embeddedness in the political past, all pleasures they currently enjoy, and any forms of representational distance that prevent them from experiencing the immediacy of revolutionary virtue.

Chapter four details Büchner's critique of idealism as it appears in both Schiller and Fichte. In his pamphlet *The Hessian Courier* (1834) and drama *Danton's Death* (1835), Büchner rejects the notion that the French Revolution must be signified or interpreted, instead exploring the Revolution's rhetorical character and addressing its practical and discursive consequences for subsequent European politics. His innovative practice of literary citation in *Danton's Death* represents history without overly conceptualizing it. Similarly, Büchner does not idealize "the people" in the manner of Schiller, Fichte and antecedent political thought, but focuses on the concrete realities of political subjects' lives in the 1790s and 1830s. This original conception of

the polity as a “concrete multiplicity” contributes to ongoing debates regarding the status of Büchner’s materialism. Likewise, the dissertation clarifies Schiller and Fichte’s positions as “idealists” in contemporary intellectual history of the *Goethezeit*.

Introduction

“Aesthetics and politics,” a conjunction now very familiar in academic discourse, has its origins around the time of the French Revolution. Such at least is the claim of Nikolas Kompridis in his recent edited volume *The Aesthetic Turn in Political Thought* (2014). In describing the near ubiquity of aesthetics in contemporary political theory, Kompridis allows he is charting less a “turn” than a *return* to the late eighteenth century, “when one could already speak of an aesthetic turn in political thought,” and the two categories first became “overtly implicated and entangled with each other” (xv). This study is part of that return.

Like any area of sustained scholarly attention, aesthetics and politics has gravitated toward certain central figures. As concerns its beginnings in revolutionary Europe, Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant loom largest of all: Burke, of course, decried the French Revolution as an aestheticized orgy of violence, “bloody theater”¹; and Kant, though not as explicit as Burke in using aesthetic categories to frame events in France, nonetheless developed a philosophical-historical interpretation of the Revolution drawing heavily on his conception of aesthetic judgment in *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790). Kant’s position on the Revolution and its relationship to aesthetics found its most famous votary in Hannah Arendt, whose *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* (1982) attempts to integrate Kant’s concept of judgment into an overall theory of politics. A glance inside Kompridis’ *Aesthetic Turn* confirms how enormous an influence Arendt

¹ Burke quoted in Jason Frank, “Delightful Horror: Edmund Burke and the aesthetics of democratic revolution,” in *The Aesthetic Turn in Political Thought*, ed. Nikolas Kompridis (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 15.

and her reading of Kant continue to have. In fact, to the extent that contemporary discourse on aesthetics and politics draws on figures from German-speaking Europe, Kant and Arendt (or Kant via Arendt) tend to dominate. That trajectory is an important one, to be sure, but it is only one: German thought and literature, especially around 1800, is rich in unexplored (or misapprehended) territory for thinking through the connection of aesthetics and politics. My contribution on this count is to offer alternative readings of works by Friedrich Schiller, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and Georg Büchner, figures that, if approached in the right light, can deepen and enhance contemporary discussions of aesthetics and politics. Or so I hope to show.

I begin with Schiller and Fichte, contemporaries who respond directly to the French Revolution and are writing as it unfolds. Schiller's aesthetic-political work, though famous and widely discussed since the 1790s, has fallen largely into cliché. The familiar reproach of escapist aestheticism has dogged Schiller's revolutionary writing—especially *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen* (1795; hereafter *Ästhetische Erziehung*) and the late history plays—at least since Lukács.² In this portrayal, Schiller's sensitive idealism, though initially stoked by the French Revolution, is so grievously injured by the Reign of Terror (1793-94) that Schiller constructs an alternative vision of politics governed by aesthetic principles—it is “aesthetic education” versus political reality. Everything he writes after 1795 is part of that contentedly disengaged world of *Erziehung*, or so the story goes. Fichte, for his part, is conspicuously the only major German Idealist philosopher *not* to devote a treatise to aesthetics, and his theoretical enterprise has steadily developed a reputation as *anti*-aesthetic, as

² The relevant text is Lukács's “Zur Ästhetik Schillers” (1954). Lesley Sharpe: “After an early period of revolutionary fervor, Schiller, in Lukács's view, turned away in horror from the degeneration into barbarism he saw in Revolutionary France. His solution in the *Ästhetische Briefe* is the construction of a utopia, which in theory makes revolution superfluous, yet one to which Schiller is unable to give stable conceptual shape because of his inadequate grasp of the economic conditions determining his world.” *Schiller's Aesthetic Essays: Two Centuries of Criticism* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1995), 87.

though the integrity of his system precludes it.³ Though Fichte published political works, these are generally considered minor in his oeuvre, and when it comes to discussion of aesthetics and politics, his name is nowhere in sight.

My goal here is twofold: (1) to argue Schiller's aesthetic politics need to be re-appraised; (2) to argue Fichte *has* an aesthetic politics. In both cases, the French Revolution is the empirical impetus, the catalytic agent driving the respective fusions of aesthetic and political theory. Similarly, 40 years later, the second French Revolution—the so-called July Revolution of 1830—is an occasion for young playwright Georg Büchner's proletarian call-to-arms in his 1834 pamphlet *Der hessische Landbote*. The next year he writes *Dantons Tod*, the first major history play treating the revolutionary Terror. The two texts together comprise an aesthetic politics that, though distinct in important ways from the analytical systems developed by Schiller and Fichte, nonetheless places 1789—and its shadow in 1793—at the center. In their aesthetic-political responses to the French Revolution, I argue there is a tendency uniting Schiller, Fichte and Büchner: they judge the Revolution from the standpoint of an idiosyncratic, multifaceted concept of representation. Each figure's assessment of the Revolution—whether favorable, critical or otherwise—is inseparable from a representative model that includes aesthetic, political, historiographic and theatrical understandings of what it means to represent.

I describe this idea in more conceptual detail in the next section. For the moment I want to reinforce the basic elements of what I am proposing. First, Schiller, Fichte and Büchner *judge* the French Revolution, by which I mean they produce texts that variously evaluate, process, condemn, justify, contextualize, and otherwise respond to it. But these are unconventional

³ See Paul Gordon, *Art as the Absolute: Art's Relation to Metaphysics in Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and Schopenhauer* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), discussed in detail in chapter three below.

judgments. Schiller, Fichte and Büchner do not simply state their opinions on the Revolution as private citizens; nor do they call upon established intellectual traditions or conventions to defend their positions. Instead, each figure's judgment of the Revolution emerges and is inseparable from a specific and (for the time) unusual concept of representation. Where this term is usually understood differentially in terms of disciplinary context—e.g. political *or* artistic representation—Schiller, Fichte and Büchner *combine* various discourses in which representation is an important category. This project focuses on four of these fields: politics, aesthetics, historiography and theater. It is easy to picture what representation means in each of these areas respectively, but the “representative judgments” I profile engage them all.

The remainder of this introduction is divided into four sections. The first discusses the significance of the French Revolution for both the history and theory of modern politics. In order to indicate the breadth of the Revolution's impact on contemporary discourse, I touch briefly on several thinkers: Pierre Rosanvallon, Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, François Furet, Claude Lefort, Frank Ankersmit and Jacques Rancière. The second section focuses on the concept of representative judgment I just introduced, tracing the overall form it takes in Schiller, Fichte and Büchner back to Kant's analysis of the French Revolution. The third section introduces the role of theater, both as a venue for representing political history and a tool for enacting a political program in the present. Of special interest here are the historical dramas composed by Schiller and Büchner, the project's two playwrights. I conclude with a section that positions the dissertation in a larger intellectual-historical context: I introduce the category “aesthetic-political idealism” to describe Schiller and Fichte, who are conventionally understood simply as “idealists,” and highlight the ways Büchner's work combats not just textbook philosophical and literary idealism, but especially this aesthetic-political form.

Modern Politics and the French Revolution

The French Revolution makes unavoidable the idea—and challenge—that politics should be representative. Pierre Rosanvallon, a contemporary political theorist and historian at the Collège de France, frames the issue this way: once the notion that politicians should represent the will of the people is accepted as a premise of government, it becomes urgent to figure out how that representation will work, at which point the conceptual tangle of political representation emerges in its full opacity—“paradoxically, it is when representative governments are put into place that the meaning of representation is obscured.”⁴ According to Rosanvallon, the French Revolution introduces the full scope of this problematic into modern political history, and we have debated its vagaries for over 200 years, largely because *they are still current*. The pretense of democracy and popular representation structures most present-day governments, and the attendant (conceptual, to say nothing of practical) difficulties are ubiquitous.

One overarching problem is whether democracy and representative government really amount to the same thing. This involves the distinction between representative and direct models of democracy: should government *stand for* and steward the popular will, or *incarnate* this will and serve as its living enactment? Direct democracy removes the mediating element of representation integral to the other paradigm, and one point of value in continuing to study the French Revolution is that *both* models are on display in the same event: from 1789 to early 1793, the nascent French Republic was framed as a representative democracy, while under the Jacobin government (1793-1794), “representation” was high among the political evils understood to manipulate and deceive the will of the people. The Jacobins were the first modern government to take the premise of “popular” sovereignty literally, insofar as they rejected as dilutions of the

⁴ Pierre Rosanvallon, “Revolutionary Democracy,” *Democracy Past and Future*, ed. Samuel Moyn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 85.

popular will those representative bodies—the Constituent Assembly, Legislative Assembly, and National Convention—advanced between 1789 and 1792 as organs of the sovereign French nation. Of course, popular sovereignty is hardly a detailed blueprint for governance, and rather than “the people” making decisions under the Jacobins, political representation was replaced with a series of centralizing equivalences that ultimately placed power, not with the French citizens, but the Jacobins themselves.⁵

But the contrast between representative and Jacobin phases of the Revolution goes far beyond a simply empirical or period interest: it has become emblematic, almost metonymic in contemporary theoretical disputes. Of particular concern here is the debate, internal to the left, between what we could call “moderate” and “radical” approaches to political change.

Robespierre and the Jacobins have come to represent a given strain of radical political thought advanced by leftist philosophers like Slavoj Žižek—who contributes a hagiographic introduction to the 2007 English edition of Robespierre’s collected speeches⁶—and Alain Badiou, who praises the “great patriots” of Jacobinism as paragons of whatever-it-takes commitment to political principle.⁷ The common enemy for Žižek and Badiou is historian François Furet, whose 1989 edited *Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution* remains a pillar of historiography on the Revolution. For Furet, not only is the Jacobin period a stain on modern political history, it may also call into question the legitimacy of the Revolution itself, even the very idea of

⁵ Patrice Gueniffey: “The people, it was assumed, now wanted what the Convention wanted, and the Convention wanted what Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety dictated. Between the autumn of 1793 and the spring of 1794 Robespierre left his stamp on the unfinished process of restoring the state: the Convention was muzzled, the organization of the popular movement was dismantled, the clubs were transformed into cogs in the bureaucratic machinery, and local autonomy was destroyed. All that had originated at the base and periphery was transferred to the summit and center.” “Robespierre,” *Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 307.

⁶ The marquee-like full title of the book is *Slavoj Žižek presents Robespierre: Virtue and Terror*, trans. John Howe (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2007).

⁷ See Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2005), 129; 133.

democracy.⁸ Though he is not quite a conservative—meaning he does not *prima facie* reject the Revolution—Furet has come to embody what Žižek calls “1789 without 1793,” a position that defends the Revolution’s stated principles but decries the violent means “needed to really defend and assert” those principles, a “decaffeinated revolution.”⁹

In advancing general arguments about democracy and political change, Žižek, Badiou and Furet not only return to the French Revolution, they select particular phases of it as decisive illustrations of their claims. Within this specific dispute between moderate and radical paradigms, the Reign of Terror emerges as a dispositive element, almost an ideological cipher: you are radical if, like Žižek and Badiou, you defend the Terror as a courageous and necessary means of securing revolutionary democracy, no matter the collateral cost; you are moderate if you condemn it—and maybe any sort of political violence—outright as a perversion, as Furet does.

This is a general and imperfect distinction; its function here is mostly heuristic: the relationship between 1789 and 1793 is just as significant for Schiller, Fichte and Büchner as it is for Žižek, Badiou and Furet, and in many of the same ways. It involves one’s position on the ideological spectrum of the left. Schiller, Fichte and Büchner all fall on this spectrum, so it is no surprise that each of them, in his own way, applauds the events of 1789. But 1793 introduces the differences: Schiller repudiates the Revolution and regards it as a missed opportunity; Fichte, conversely, finds himself *more* enthusiastic, and publishes the pro-revolutionary treatise *Beitrag zur Berichtigung der Utreile des Publicums über die französische Revolution* (1793; hereafter *Beitrag*). For our purposes, the basic difference between Schiller and Fichte on the French Revolution is their respective attitudes to the events of 1793: Schiller rejects and Fichte affirms

⁸ See François Furet, “Terror,” *Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, 145-50.

⁹ Slavoj Žižek, “Introduction: Robespierre, or, the ‘Divine Violence’ of Terror,” in *Virtue and Terror*, vii-viii.

them. By the time Büchner is writing in the 1830s, the French Revolution is literally history, and no longer a matter of a simple affirmative or negative response. Thus the equivocation and density of *Dantons Tod*, which stages the dynamic of 1793 coming to terms with 1789 as the Jacobins debate the fate of the moderate, but nonetheless revolutionary Girondins.

By the rubric I am proposing, Schiller is a moderate, Fichte a radical. Büchner is a radical as well, though in a different way than Fichte, whose position is that of a spectator affirming events others consider extreme. For one, Büchner is an actual political organizer and operative—*Der hessische Landbote* is a pamphlet meant to galvanize a popular movement, not simply a theoretical statement of principles—and we will return to this difference. For the moment, it is important to say a few more words about the revolutionary events of 1793, which saw not only the deposition of the moderate Girondins (May 31-June 2) and the onset of the Terror later in the year, but also, on January 21, the execution for high treason of King Louis XVI. For political philosopher Claude Lefort, this is effectively the beginning of modern politics: the three dominant political forms of the past two centuries—democracy, totalitarianism, and bureaucracy, according to Lefort—share a common root in the French regicide. Lefort locates this effect in the symbolic function of the king's body, which, prior to 1793, kept intact an image of society as an integrated *corpus*. This is the formula framing public life before the Revolution: “the society of the *ancien régime* represented its unity to itself as that of a body—a body which found its figuration in the body of the king, or rather which identified itself with the king's body, while at the same time it attached itself to it as its head.”¹⁰ In this symbolic arrangement, the individual bodies of the citizenry “fitted together within a great imaginary body for which the body of the king provided the model and the guarantee of its integrity” (Lefort 303). The execution of Louis

¹⁰ Claude Lefort, “The Image of the Body in Totalitarianism,” *The Political Forms of Modern Society*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 302.

XVI explodes this figural system: the king's body is no longer available as a symbolic representation of social cohesion.

A widespread “disincorporation” (Lefort’s term) of social units results: individuals, groups, areas of discourse and specialization, but most generally, “the disengagement of civil society from a state, itself hitherto consubstantial with the body of the king” (Lefort 303). The zone of the public, the people, popular society—this can no longer completely coincide with the state, the actual apparatus of government. This is the immediate symbolic consequence of decapitating the king. Moreover, because he is executed in the name of a democratic movement—Lefort calls the execution the moment in which the “democratic revolution, for so long subterranean, burst out” (“Image,” 303)—the newly sundered category of “the social” makes a claim to replace him as the source of sovereign authority. But because the king (and his symbolic, integrating function) is dead, society can no longer be represented as unified, and the will of the “popular” sovereign is very difficult to identify. Thus, for Lefort, the elementary difficulty of modern democracy: “unity can no longer efface social division. Democracy inaugurates the experience of an ungraspable, uncontrollable society in which the people will be said to be sovereign... but whose identity will constantly be open to question, whose identity will remain latent” (“Image,” 303-4).

This is precisely the problem of representation sketched by Rosanvallon: once popular society emerges as the locus of sovereign power (in the late 18th century), government must determine how to represent it. Crucial to note for both Lefort and Rosanvallon is that there is an *interminable gap* between society and the state: the two can never truly coincide, which is another way of saying that the total system of political society is essentially, at some level, divided. As I mentioned, Lefort discerns three major political forms active since the French

Revolution, each of which is morphologically distinct based on how it approaches this basic social-political division: democracy affirms the distance between state and society as well as the constitutive multiplicity of the social; totalitarianism attempts to overcome this multiplicity by using the state to impose a vision of social unity; while a sprawling, bureaucratic state strives to resemble as much as possible the variegated society it governs, effectively eliminating the difference between the two.

We find a similar typology in the work of political theorist and historian Frank Ankersmit, who describes as “chameleonic” the bureaucratic state’s process of becoming “as close a copy of society as possible.”¹¹ Bureaucracy, in this conception, is akin to totalitarianism, which Ankersmit defines as “the subsumption of state and society under one principle,” in that both seek to efface the division between government and the social body. So far very close in his categories to Lefort, Ankersmit suggests there is an additional distinction at work here: addressing the larger-scale intellectual history, Ankersmit places bureaucracy and totalitarianism within the trajectory of “mimetic” political forms extending back to the Stoa. In this context, mimesis is a paradigm of representative politics in which the “*identity* of the representative and the person represented” is the “ideal of all political representation” (“Representation,” 54; original emphasis). We can see, between Lefort and Ankersmit, how bureaucracy and totalitarianism are different ways of attempting to fashion this identity. Both thinkers conclude these programs are inevitably doomed and potentially (if not probably) violent. Thus Lefort affirms the full, maddening social multiplicity of democracy (against any attempt to unify society), while Ankersmit advocates a counter-paradigm to the mimetic theory of political representation—he calls it *aesthetic*.

¹¹ Frank Ankersmit, “Political Representation: The Aesthetic State,” in *Aesthetic Politics: Political Philosophy Beyond Fact and Value* (Stanford University Press, 1996), 54.

By “aesthetic,” Ankersmit refers to a theory of politics in which “the difference between the representative and the person represented... is as unavoidable in political representation as the unavoidable difference between a painted portrait and the person portrayed” (“Representation,” 54). The impossibility of mimetic identity is the starting point for this aesthetic politics, which affirms the constitutive and necessary distance between state and society. Significantly for our purposes, Ankersmit writes that aesthetics displaces mimesis as “the most authoritative” model of politics around 1800. The core figures in this transition, not surprisingly, are French: as Ankersmit describes, Rousseau and Sieyès—two intellectual godfathers of the French Revolution—conclude in respective ways that (mimetic) representation is unrealizable as a model of politics, thus practically “invit[ing] us to consider alternative forms” of representation, i.e. aesthetic (“Representation,” 29). Thus we get another glimpse into the “crisis of representation” (Rosanvallon) that occurs around the French Revolution: not only is it the point, epochally, in which aesthetics overtakes mimesis as the principal paradigm of representative politics, it is also the stage on which these two models collide: the first phase of the Revolution closely approximates what Ankersmit calls “aesthetic” politics, while the Terror can easily be read as a particularly brutal program of social and political mimesis.

There is another important consequence to Ankersmit’s “aesthetic” understanding of politics. Ankersmit is partial to the metaphor of painting—that the same process or principle is at work in *politically* and *pictorially* representing a person. Again, aesthetic representation paradigmatically affirms the difference between the representative and what is represented—the point is to keep them apart. The result, for Ankersmit, is to put emphasis on political “style” and encourage innovation in political forms, much in the way artistic movements develop over time. The representative distance inherent to aesthetics guarantees there will always be space for

transformation. Ankersmit's position helps us see why Kompridis, for one, can claim 1800 is the beginning of "aesthetics and politics" as we know it: obviously the categories have been in contact at least since Plato banished artists from the Republic, but only since the time of the French Revolution have they really *interpenetrated*, initially as *forms of representation*. To put it another way, since the French Revolution, aesthetics and politics have displayed homologous representational dynamics.

Talking about aesthetics and politics, today, is different than talking about literature and statistics, or chemistry and human rights—they are not simply separate domains that may or may not come into contact, but mutually constituting fields of knowledge and practice. Or at least, following Ankersmit, they should be, and he is not alone in this position: one highly visible philosophical partisan of aesthetic politics is Jacques Rancière, who has been theorizing this intersection since the 1990s. Signature Rancièrian concepts like "dissensus" and the "distribution of the sensible" all refer to aesthetics and politics, and it should come as no surprise that Rancière traces his thought on these questions to the era of the French Revolution, and especially Schiller's *Ästhetische Erziehung*, which Rancière refers to as the "original scene" of modern aesthetics.¹² There is a trend here: Lefort, Rosanvallon, Ankersmit, Rancière—like Kompridis, all "return" to revolutionary Europe as the constitutive scene of political and aesthetic modernity.

This is only a sketch, but at the very least we can appreciate the ongoing importance of the French Revolution: not only is the event itself decisive for modern political history, but theoretical debates about how to evaluate and represent it have proved just as determinative for

¹² "Aesthetics and politics" as we know it begins, for Rancière, with Schiller's aesthetic letters. See Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus*, trans. Steven Corcoran (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010), 117. See also Rancière, "Aesthetics as Politics," in *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Malden, MA: Polity, 2009). Hereafter *AD* in in-text citations.

modern political self-understanding. The Revolution persists as the original occasion for theoretical systems that continue to structure contemporary thought. German philosophy and literature are especially rich in this respect, and to appreciate Schiller, Fichte and Büchner in the full uniqueness of their individual contributions, it helps to revisit the first great systematic interpreter of the French Revolution: Kant.

Representative Judgments

I will discuss Kant's analysis of the French Revolution at some length, for two reasons: first, it is an important part of the immediate intellectual context in which Schiller and Fichte are writing, and second, it constitutes a prototypical form of what I've called "representative judgment." In this sense, Kant's post-revolutionary works "Über den Gemeinspruch: Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein, taugt aber nicht für die Praxis" (1793) and *Der Streit der Fakultäten* (1798) can help introduce the aesthetic-political fusions we find in Schiller, Fichte and Büchner.¹³

Kant's response to the Revolution continues to loom large in debates on political theory and democracy, both as an inspiration (i.e. to Arendt and Arendtians) and a foil: in his introduction to Badiou's *Metapolitics*, Jason Barker calls Kant an emblematic "fraud" for turning on the Jacobins after praising 1789.¹⁴ Badiou himself makes sustained attacks on Kant (and Arendt) throughout that book, a work rich in hymns to Robespierre and Saint-Just and denunciations of present-day "political philosophy" and western capitalist "parliamentarism." This should give us a rough sense for how Kant has come to be situated in contemporary

¹³ For both of these texts I cite from Immanuel Kant, *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H.B. Nisbet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991). 61-92; 176-90. Excerpted in this edition is the "Renewed Question" section from *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, "Erneuerte Frage: ob das menschliche Geschlechte im beständigen Fortschreiten zum Besseren sei."

¹⁴ Jason Barker, translator's introduction to *Metapolitics*, xi.

discussions: from the radical perspective of Badiou, Žižek, et al., he is “1789 without 1793,” a philosophical Furet, “decaffeinated,” an impotent moderate, etc.

Much of this critical response involves Kantianism’s absolute prohibition on violence, even in resistance,¹⁵ but perhaps even more important is Kant’s emphasis on the role of the *spectator*. Kant’s analysis of the Revolution comes from the perspective of an observer, someone watching political events unfold and *judging* (rather than enacting or seeking to further actualize) them. It is a political philosophy of the critic, and avowedly so: “We are here concerned only with the attitude of the onlookers as it reveals itself *in public* while the drama of great political changes is taking place,” Kant writes in *Der Streit der Fakultäten* (181; original emphasis). Of highest priority, for Kant, is what happens among the spectators as major political events transpire—ideally, in the process of sympathetically choosing sides and developing their own positions, these remote observers experience a specific kind of elevation: Kant continues in *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, “Their reaction (because of its universality) proves that mankind as a whole shares a certain character in common, and it also proves (because of its disinterestedness) that man has a moral character, or at least the makings of one” (181). This twofold realization is the stuff of actual political progress: onlookers’ grasping the universality of their humanity as well as their own moral powers, no longer identifying as self-interested individuals but as morally endowed representatives of a common, human cause. To self-actualize in this way while observing great political change is to experience *enthusiasm*, a crucial concept in Kant’s political thought: “true enthusiasm is always directed towards the *ideal*, particularly towards that which is purely moral... and it cannot be coupled with selfish interests” (*Streit* 183; original emphasis).

¹⁵ Passages like this from “Über den Gemeinspruch” will appall any political radical, especially one that admires the Jacobins: “all resistance against the supreme legislative power, all incitement of the subjects to violent expressions of discontent, all defiance which breaks out into rebellion, is the greatest and most punishable crime in a commonwealth, for it destroys its very foundations. This prohibition is *absolute*.” 81; original emphasis.

Politics should aim to induce enthusiasm in the public, and even in 1798, when many have given up the French Revolution entirely, Kant still reflects favorably on the political enthusiasm it inspired, in which “the external public onlookers sympathized with [the revolutionaries’] exaltation, without the slightest intention of actively participating in their affairs” (*Streit* 183).

This formulation is significant, and intentional: central to the concept of enthusiasm is *non-participation* in the actual events one is observing. Enthusiasm is not about political action itself but how that action is *signified* from outside. Kant abstracts from the concrete reality of the Revolution—especially after its violent turn and what he regards as the “horrible crime” of the king’s execution—and renders it into a symbolic sequence. Andreas Gailus describes the sequence: “First, Kant shifts the historical focus from production to reception, from the Revolution as a political event to the emotional response it inspires in those that observe it from afar. Second, he splits the occurrence of enthusiasm, distinguishing between its actual expression as a feeling... and the moral disposition to which this feelings points.”¹⁶ In this double move we see two forms of representation: first, spectators represent the Revolution in coming up with ways to depict and signify it, in the sense that debating anything requires that we represent it to ourselves; second, their enthusiastic feeling represents morality insofar as it indicates, stands for, manifests that morality—thus Kant famously calls the French Revolution a *Geschichtszeichen*.

The fact that Kant’s signature judgment of the Revolution—that it is materially lost but symbolically redeemed—rests on this twin model of representation makes it, in my terms, a representative judgment. Kant’s mixed conclusion on the Revolution is inseparable from the idiosyncratic representational paradigm underlying his concept of enthusiasm. Also important to note is that representation, as Kant presents it here, would be described by a thinker like

¹⁶ Andreas Gailus, *Passions of the Sign: Revolution and Language in Kant, Goethe, and Kleist* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 40.

Ankersmit as both aesthetic and political, both stylistic-constructive (spectators' reception of the Revolution) and a matter of standing for something (feeling and morality).

We can see how a political radical would find this position repellant. Kant subordinates action to reception, and there is an anti-populist flavor to the way he frames this reception: why should the public need moral “elevation” beyond what it already feels? This becomes explicit later in *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, where Kant avows civic progress must proceed “*from the top downwards*,” and leaders “should treat the people in accordance with principles akin in spirit to the laws of freedom which a people of mature rational powers would prescribe for itself, even if the people is not literally asked for its consent” (188; 187; original emphasis). In other words, Kant advocates a kind of enlightened elitism in which political leaders govern according to rational principles—i.e. they *represent* these principles—but do not actually solicit the popular will, which, for Kant, enjoys no special, inviolable sanctity. In contrast: the popular will should evolve.

An attentive reader of Kant who shares this idea is Schiller. Like Kant, Schiller believes no people is innately entitled to political enfranchisement or control over government. Instead, they earn that privilege through “wholeness of character” (*Totalität des Charakters*), which he considers a prerequisite to political liberties (*Ästhetische Erziehung* 4; 7).¹⁷ Schiller ascribes the violent turn of the French Revolution to a deficit of precisely this wholeness among the French polity, but it is hardly a problem for France alone. It is epochal—Schiller’s aesthetic letters are a clarion call against the fragmentation characteristic of modernity itself. He does not consecrate

¹⁷ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*. Ed., trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983). Subsequent citations from the aesthetic letters are in the following parenthetical form: (*ÄE* [letter]; [paragraph]), based on the Wilkinson and Willoughby edition.

the popular will because this will arises from a fractured state of being. As Marx would say, the point is to change it.

When it comes to the mechanism of this change, Schiller shares Kant's gradualism—wholeness of character can only develop over time—but unlike Kant, he does not trust an enlightened state to drive it. According to Frederick Beiser, fearing inevitable corruption at the “top,” Schiller argues reform has to “come from below, and more specifically from enlightened individuals taking responsibility for the education of the people.”¹⁸ Beiser considers Schiller quintessentially “republican” because of this “fundamental principle” that “civil freedom must derive from moral character”—in effect, that “the character of the people themselves has to be reformed” before tangible political progress is possible (*SP* 124). Kant is republican in this sense as well, but while both he and Schiller agree the character of the people must evolve, they imagine diametrically opposed processes for bringing that about: Kant advocates enlightened governance by politicians who listen to public opinion but do not grant the public any power to actually make law, while Schiller develops a bottom-up program of civic education—by artists.¹⁹

Artworks shaping the popular character, fortifying it to responsibly wield political liberty in the future—this is the basic idea of aesthetic education. Again, as thinkers like Beiser have pointed out, this is a republican program—i.e. it ties outward political freedoms to the moral psychology of a people—but Schiller's emphasis on aesthetics is totally new to this tradition.²⁰ In essence, Schiller (like Kant) is proposing a theory of reception: rather than simply morally self-educate, citizens should consume aesthetic representations, especially plays (we'll see why

¹⁸ Frederick Beiser, *Schiller as Philosopher: A Re-examination* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 132. Hereafter *SP* in in-text citations.

¹⁹ Beiser, *Schiller as Philosopher*, 129: “On a practical level, [aesthetic education] puts an enormous burden on the artists who would execute it. For they not only have to maintain their integrity throughout the corruptions of the age, but they also have to influence the public... all this without the aid of the government.”

²⁰ See Beiser, *Schiller as Philosopher*, 126.

in the next section)—in developing a real “delight in semblance... a propensity to ornamentation and play” (“Freude am Schein, die Neigung zum Putz und zum Spiele”), they come closer to human completeness (*ÄE* 26; 3). *Schein* and *Spiel* are the crucial terms here: aesthetic semblance (“ästhetischer Schein”) is the general property inhering in all artworks that serve as vehicles of aesthetic education; play (*Spiel*) is the psychological mechanism of that education, a unifying agent that re-integrates components of human cognition and experience alienated from each other by modern existence. For Schiller, we are only at the point of *Totalität des Charakters* when that character is imbued with *Spiel*: in one of his famous chiasmic statements, Schiller declares “man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays” (“der Mensch spielt nur, wo er in voller Bedeutung des Worts Mensch ist, und er ist nur da ganz Mensch, wo er spielt”) (*ÄE* 15; 9).

Spiel is something only aesthetic experience provides, and we feel it most powerfully in the theater. This is why I call aesthetic education a model of reception analogous to Kant’s notion of enthusiasm: in the latter case, spectators witness a political event and experience moral elevation; for Schiller, an audience likewise witnesses an aesthetic production—as we’ll see, *of political events*—and experiences *Spiel*, which strengthens its members’ internal wholeness. Schiller’s *Totalität* is different than Kantian morality, but their models are structurally nearly the same. If anything, aesthetic education is more representational in nature than Kantian enthusiasm: whereas Kant calls for the self-presentation (in debates and discussions) of a political event as it transpires, Schiller’s program demands exactly this kind of presentation of something that is itself already an (artistic) representation, e.g. a history play. But this threatens to get too detailed for introductory purposes—chapters one and two take us through the genesis of Schiller’s aesthetic theory and its expression in his late historical dramas. At this point, it is

enough to say that Schiller's judgment of the French Revolution—that it is a colossal missed opportunity and its violence is degenerate (more or less “1789 without 1793”)—is inseparable from (1) a concept of aesthetic representation in which aesthetic images educate and prepare the public for real political freedoms; and (2) a republicanism which amounts, in essence, to Schiller's insistence on some representative distance between political leaders and the people.²¹ Later we will see how he integrates these principles into a dramaturgical program of representing political theory. The convergence of these separate representational dynamics in Schiller's rejection of the French Revolution make it what I call a representative judgment.

Fichte's response to the French Revolution involves the same educational pretense we find in Kant and Schiller, i.e. that the people needs to undergo some instruction before it can be part of a free, modern state.²² In the preface to his *Beitrag* defending the Revolution, Fichte refers to this as instruction in the “duties, rights and prospects of humanity” (“Die Lehre von den Pflichten, Rechten und Aussichten des Menschen”) and claims the Revolution is a unique opportunity to disseminate these principles through the social body.²³ This is the second major commonality between Kant, Schiller and Fichte: each addresses the French Revolution as a symbol, an occasion—in each respective analytical system, the event of the Revolution always ramifies in terms of some other, higher priority. The chief work of the Revolution is to *signify*: for Kant, civilizational progress; for Schiller, the immaturity of modern humanity; and for his part, Fichte likens it to a “painting” (“Gemälde”) set over the “text” of human rights and human

²¹ Beiser, *Schiller as Philosopher*, 125: “While never a champion of radical democracy, [Schiller] was still an admirer of the classical republics and their ideal of community. Like Montesquieu and Ferguson, Schiller stressed the value of representative institutions and prized a mixed constitution along English lines.”

²² Beiser, again: “Like so many *Aufklärer*, the young Fichte saw himself as an educator, a *Volkserzieher*. His aim was to educate the public, to make them conscious of the need for social and political reform and of their rights and duties with regard to the government.” *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992), 76.

²³ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Beitrag zur Berichtigung der Urtheile des Publicums über die französische Revolution* (Berlin: Holzinger, 2014), 4.

worth (“Menschenrecht und Menschenwert”) (*Beitrag* 4). Repeatedly in his preface to the *Beitrag* Fichte refers to the Revolution as a *Gemälde*, usually in relation to the book’s stated ambition of educating the public in its political rights and duties.²⁴ Which is to say we draw instruction from the Revolution in much the same way we draw perceptual insights from a picture: like the latter, the French Revolution is something to be observed appraised, made to signify in some way.

This, in Fichte’s view, is what it means to practice *judgment* (“*Beurtheilung*”), the process by which a concrete, empirical fact is compared with a law. For Fichte, the whole question of judgment is what standard we are using to judge—what is the *law* that either condemns or commends a given fact or event? The argument of the *Beitrag* is that only “empirical” laws—self-interest, utility, tradition, etc.—can condemn the French Revolution, whereas if we judge from the eternal principles of reason (*Vernunft*), we must endorse it. The boldness of Fichte’s claim is that he writes this *in 1793*, after Louis XVI has been executed and the Jacobins begin their rise. Fichte knows many (like Schiller) have already turned away from the Revolution—thus it is the most urgent time to defend it, to educate the people on how to rightly judge what is taking place in France. There is a reason he chooses the term *Berichtigung* for his title. And whereas Schiller’s aesthetic education is designed to prepare the people for eventual stewardship of society, Fichte insists the people can overthrow the state at any time, provided the state acts contrary to the laws of reason. In this respect, Fichte inverts Kant: the legitimacy of government emanates from rational principles embodied in the people, who can depose at will any state that fails to honor its foundation in popular reason.

²⁴ The goal is “das Volk gründlich über seine Rechte und Pflichten zu unterrichten. Die französische Revolution giebt uns dazu die Weisung und die Farben zur Erleuchtung des Gemäldes für blöde Augen.” 5.

In this conception, the state is simply a means to a higher moral-rational end, what Fichte calls the final purpose of humanity (“Endzweck des Menschen”): the complete coincidence of the will with rational law (“völlig[e] Uebereinstimmung seines Willens mit dem Gesetze der Vernunft”) (*Beitrag* 39). Political progress is a society’s ongoing approximation of this *Übereinstimmung*, and if the government in question acts counter to that process, Fichte asserts the people has a right to overthrow it. Once a political order is on the right track in terms of delivering its people to the rational law, Fichte suggests the governing apparatus itself will gradually slip away, will become unnecessary and eventually disappear, because fully rational humans require no external government.²⁵ All in all, the *Beitrag* is a sui generis political work. The specifics of Fichte’s argument are difficult to situate comfortably in any established theoretical tradition. My argument below is that an important concept from aesthetic theory helps us illuminate some of the treatise’s peculiarities: the *sublime*, especially as it is laid out in Kant’s third *Kritik*. The central claim of chapter three is that the concept of sublimity implicitly structures Fichte’s *Beitrag* to such a degree that we can call the work a specimen of “sublime politics.” In chapter one, I introduce the idea of a political program conceived as sublime in relation to the Jacobins, and chapter three argues Fichte’s *Beitrag* is effectively its theoretical statement of principles.

The sublime is one of two categories that dominate German aesthetic thought after Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. The other is *beauty*, and the difference consists in how each configures the faculties of cognition and sensibility: while the effect of a beautiful artwork is to harmonize them, to make thought and sensation agree, sublimity is a state in which intellect totally subordinates the body. I argue Schiller and Fichte present an especially instructive contrast for

²⁵ Fichte, *Beitrag*, 48: “Könnte der Endzweck je völlig erreicht werden, so würde gar keine Staatsverfassung mehr nöthig seyn; die Maschine würde still stehen, weil kein Gegendruck mehr auf sie wirkte.”

thinking through aesthetics and politics because each essentially chooses a category—beauty for Schiller; sublimity for Fichte—and constructs an aesthetic politics around it. This is explicit in Schiller but tacit in Fichte, whose defense of the French Revolution, I claim, rests on an interpretation of the event as an opportunity for sublime elevation, to lock humanity into a rational mode and leave behind its physical nature once and for all. This is what Fichte considers education: the extirpation of the sensuous, while for Schiller the integration of sense into practices of thought is a hallmark of (aesthetically mediated) maturation. Fichte’s judgment is *representative* insofar as he praises the French Revolution as a *symbolic occasion* for humanity’s sublime elevation, but we’ll see Fichte, unlike Kant and Schiller, structures his favorable judgment of the Revolution around *negation* of representation as both a political and aesthetic principle: his arch-rational populism is really a strict form of direct (non-representative) democracy; and as an aesthetic category, sublimity rejects both (1) the creation of stimulating images and (2) the principle of mediation and distance. To put it another way, Fichte presents a representative judgment of the French Revolution in that his conclusion is inseparable from a paradigm of (aesthetic and political) *non-representation*.

Büchner concurs with Fichte on one important point: the French revolutionaries were justified in executing the king. *Der hessische Landbote* calls Louis a “Verräter” and judges his punishment a righteous one: he failed to honor his position as “der erste Diener im Staat,” and instead arrogated undue power to himself at the expense of the people.²⁶ This duty emanates from the French Revolution’s first phase: “[das Volk] erhob sich und berief Männer, denen es vertraute, und die Männer traten zusammen und sagten, ein König sei ein Mensch wie ein anderer auch” (*WB* 223). In this vision, the king is accountable to the people (“er müsse sich vor

²⁶ George Büchner, “Der hessische Landbote,” in *Werke und Briefe* (Hanser, 1980), 223. Subsequent citations of Büchner, including *Dantons Tod*, all refer to this edition. In-text citations as *WB*.

dem Volk verantworten”), but it is important to note nonetheless that, as Büchner’s pamphlet describes, it was not simply *das Volk* that placed this stricture on the king, but *representatives* of the people (“Männer, denen es vertraute”). Even at this early moment of self-assertion, the Revolution was a movement of popular *representation* rather than direct popular *insurrection*, and in Büchner’s description, the execution of the king simply facilitated the representational streamlining of France’s new (free) government: “Die Männer, die über die Vollziehung der Gesetze wachen sollten, wurden von der Versammlung der Volksvertreter ernannt, sie bildeten die neue Obrigkeit. So waren Regierung und Gesetzgeber vom Volk gewählt und Frankreich war ein Freistaat” (*WB* 223).

Of course, just months after Louis’ death comes the Terror, but this is not Büchner’s direct concern in *Der hessische Landbote*, a pamphlet about 1830s Germany, not 1790s France. The point of discussing the latter is to illustrate the generative conditions of the former: *Der hessische Landbote* presents a kind of miniaturized (two paragraphs), highly compressed version of European history since 1789, passing through the Declaration of the Rights of Man, Louis XVI’s execution, the onset of the revolutionary wars, Napoleon’s rise and fall, the restoration of the Bourbons, finally to the dubious victory of the July 1830 Revolution, in which one French monarch (Charles X) is exchanged for another (Louis Philippe). Büchner regards 1830 as specious progress at best, an occasion to mislead the people of both France and Germany into choosing the lesser of two evils—i.e. less autocratic monarchs—instead of insisting on their rights. In Büchner’s picture of 1830, an emergent popular force lets itself be placated and deceived by empty concessions from the ruling princes—“und so ward Deutschland betrogen wie Frankreich” (*WB* 225).

Chief among these hollow gestures at political enfranchisement are the civil constitutions (*Verfassungen*) that do effectively nothing to constrain standing rulers like Hessian Grand Duke Ludwig II, who “nach den Artikeln” of the Duchy’s constitution is “unverletzlich, heilig und unverantwortlich. Seine Würde ist erblich in seiner Familie” (*WB* 225). In other words, Ludwig embodies the kind of monarchy the first generation of French revolutionaries wanted to abolish forever—immune, hereditary (i.e. not representative), unaccountable: tyrannical. Büchner uses the term *Tyrann* freely to describe those in power in 1834, when *Der Hessische Landbote* was first disseminated, and he predicts a popular uprising will be necessary to overthrow them. Rather than settling for institutional reforms from above, “Das ganze deutsche Volk muß sich die Freiheit erringen” (*WB* 227). But what follows that struggle is not a gradual withering of the state apparatus à la Fichte, nor Schiller’s aesthetically integrated society, but a representative democracy: “Die besten Männer aller Stämme des großen deutschen Vaterlandes werden, berufen durch die freie Wahl ihrer Mitbürger, im Herzen von Deutschland zu einem großen Reichs- und Volkstage sich versammeln, um da... christlich über Brüder zu regieren” (*WB* 231). Büchner envisions a political arrangement of honest representation, dedicated to “das allgemeine Wohl.”

In such a society, “Kunst und Wissenschaft” flourish “im Dienste der Freiheit” (*WB* 233). This is one of two very brief references to *Kunst* at the end of *Der hessische Landbote*, and Büchner never spells out explicitly what “service to freedom” entails as a paradigm of art (or science). Of course, the relationship between Büchner’s own literary work and his politics has drawn vast scholarly commentary, one theme of which I want to highlight in this project: the act of citation. Büchner is known for quoting liberally in his works: just one example of significance for this project is the exact reproductions of speeches by Robespierre and Danton in *Dantons*

Tod. I want to investigate this practice as a paradigm of aesthetic representation, taking as a point of departure Rüdiger Campe's claim that, in Büchner's writing, "citation is meant to highlight the process by which a thing (or person) is, by being cited, *made to appear before an audience*."²⁷ Understood in this sense, Campe considers Büchner's practice of citation an "integrative and performative process," and in the following two sections, we'll see how that model of integration and performance puts significant pressure on the aesthetic principles at work in Schiller and Fichte.

For the moment, let me briefly characterize Büchner in terms of representative judgment: he judges the (first) French Revolution positively insofar as it deposed an unaccountable monarchy in favor of representative government; the need for legitimate political representation is recurrent and emphatic in *Der hessische Landbote*—if the pamphlet stands for a particular political worldview, it is evidently representative (not direct) democracy. This is the first strand. But Büchner's judgment is also more nuanced than either Schiller's or Fichte's because, by Büchner's time, evaluating 1789 is no longer just a matter of choosing sides—that is, Büchner does not simply affirm or reject the Revolution, but also judges it *historically*, placing it in a sequence of conditions terminating in the political situation of the 1830s. And if, extending the concept of representative judgment to Büchner, we confront historical sequences as objects of judgment, we will have to expand our concept of representation to include history as well. That is to ask: what is the proper mode of interfacing with historical reality? What is the proper *venue*?

²⁷ Rüdiger Campe, "Three Modes of Citation: Historical, Casuistic, and Literary Writing in Büchner," *The Germanic Review* 89 (2014), 44-59. 48; my emphasis.

Politics, History, Theater

I earlier distinguished between the first and second phases of the French Revolution in terms of their respective attitudes to representative government. Marie-Hélène Huet has shown there is another important axis to this distinction: the role of theater. Between 1789 and 1792, the Revolution endeavored to “stage both the erasure of the old regime and the emergence of the new order” as a public event, a *spectacle*, and this ambition was reflected in a comprehensive theatrical program: “a series of decrees regulating all levels of performance, permitting the unchecked proliferation of theaters... and the decision, by the Convention, that a selection of patriotic plays be produced, at no cost to the public, for the education and benefit of all citizens.”²⁸ In this way, the first wave of revolutionaries directly reversed the *ancien régime*, which had imposed oppressive restrictions on numerous “little theaters” that later flourished in Paris after 1789 as part of the Revolution’s public, citywide, *dramatic* self-presentation. Paris itself was conceived as a “stage for the revolutionary project,” and “observers could not help seeing the events of 1789 and 1792 as a powerful, if mixed, theatrical genre... a spectacle for all” (Huet 137).

But as Huet describes, the Jacobins were just as committed to purging the theatricality of the Revolution’s first phase: “The Terror was a war against spectacles and images, performance and representations; ultimately, it was a war against language itself,” insofar as language could be used to conceal the truth, i.e. “that the most revolutionary proclamations only served to hide or mask aristocratic plots” (“Performing Arts,” 138). In April 1794, the Jacobin government reinstated censorship on the theaters enfranchised after 1789, instead confining official display of the Revolution to a “Festival of the Supreme Being” scheduled for several weeks later. The

²⁸ Marie-Hélène Huet, “Performing Arts: Theatricality and the Terror,” *Representing the French Revolution*, ed. James Heffernan, (Dartmouth 1992), 136-137.

Supreme Being, a deity conceived by Robespierre, was to be honored at a public celebration “without images or representations,” itself part of a new civic religion—the “Cult of the Supreme Being”—that, “like revolutionary virtue, would be *sublime* and would wrest itself away from all sensual representations of its ideal” (“Performing Arts,” 139; my emphasis). The Jacobin “war on spectacles” and representations was essentially, per Huet, a war on the kind of distance they entail: between image and reality, statement and intention, representative and constituent. Robespierre and St. Just wanted these categories to coincide in a kind of total integrity they called “virtue,” understood as “not only what drives and motivates revolutionary discourse, but also, in its *sublimity*, what would elevate such discourse beyond all possible misrepresentation” (“Performing Arts,” 143; my emphasis). Sublimity as a concept and Terror as a practice “both transcended material representations and allowed for no spectacle” (Huet 142)—which is to say they were anti-theatrical.

Thus the sublime, in the hands of the Jacobins, becomes a means of opposing both aesthetic *and* political representation: no theatrical spectacle could represent patriotic zeal, just as no statement or official could represent the popular will—only the sublime immediacy of revolutionary virtue would suffice for Robespierre and Saint-Just. Huet claims they (selectively) appropriate this conception of the sublime from Kant’s third *Kritik* (139), and I explore this connection at the beginning of chapter one, which details Schiller’s transition *away* from sublimity as the dominant concept in his aesthetic thought. Between 1791 and 1793, Schiller composed a series of theoretical essays—“Über den Grund des Vergnügens an tragischen Gegenständen,” “Über die tragische Kunst,” “Über das Pathetische,” and “Vom Erhabenen”—that expounded the Kantian sublime and proposed ways it could be applied in artworks. In these pieces, Schiller argues the task of sublime art is to showcase the independence of morality from

nature, to consecrate the superiority of humanity's rational and spiritual essence over its worldly embodiment. But as Huet has observed, this was precisely the maxim of the Jacobin government: "Robespierre tried to define the Revolution as sublime," as the transcendence of virtue over the material world ("Performing Arts," 141). The results, from Schiller's perspective, were catastrophic. On February 8, 1793—two weeks after Louis XVI's execution—he writes to friend and frequent interlocutor Christian Gottfried Körner, "Ich kann seit 14 Tagen keine franz[ösische] Zeitung mehr lesen, so ekeln diese elenden Schindersknechte mich an" (TS 286).²⁹ Five months later, in the first of his letters to the Duke of Augustenberg that provided the foundation for the *Ästhetische Erziehung*, Schiller concludes, again harshly:

Der Versuch des französischen Volks, sich in seine heiligen Menschenrechte einzusetzen, und eine politische Freiheit zu erringen, hat bloß das Unvermögen und die Unwürdigkeit desselben an den Tag gebracht, und nicht nur dieses unglückliche Volk, sondern mit ihm auch einen beträchtlichen Theil Europens, und ein ganzes Jahrhundert, in Barbarey und Knechtschaft zurückgeschleudert. (TS 501)

Incidentally, Schiller writes this letter on July 13th, the day Jean-Paul Marat is assassinated by Charlotte Corday in Paris, prompting a widespread crackdown and consolidation of Jacobin power. But the Jacobins had been ascendant for months, at least since their victory in the debate on the fate of the king. As I argue, the Revolution was now in its sublime mode. Schiller's feelings on this turn of events are clear in his correspondence from 1793, in which Schiller not only expresses his regrets about France, but simultaneously begins to sketch a new direction in his aesthetic thought: starting in 1793, Schiller is almost exclusively concerned with the concept of beauty. The letter to Körner is effectively a small aesthetic treatise concluding with the famous formula that "Schönheit also ist nichts anders, als Freiheit in der Erscheinung" (TS 285), and the *Augustenberger Briefe* germinate into the aesthetic letters. Schiller's turn away from the

²⁹ Subsequent in-text citations from Schiller's *Theoretische Schriften* as TS.

French Revolution coincides with a turn toward beauty as the guiding concept of his aesthetics, and we could even say Schiller and the Revolution display a kind of cross movement: the Revolution begins in the spectacular, beautiful mode and transitions, with the Jacobins, to the sublime; Schiller's first pass at Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft* is largely preoccupied with sublimity, but after 1793, he shifts his emphasis to beauty, and not just as an aesthetic concept, but also a principle for politics—he famously insists early in the *Ästhetische Erziehung* “dass man, um jenes politische Problem in der Erfahrung zu lösen, durch das ästhetische den Weg nehmen muss, weil es die Schönheit ist, durch welche man zu der Freiheit wandert” (*ÄE* 2; 5).

I argue in chapter two that Schiller's late history plays—*Wallenstein* (1798-99), *Maria Stuart* (1800), and *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* (1801)—effectively comprise the practical wing of this beautiful politics, his effort to instantiate aesthetic education. Schiller returns to the theater with *Wallenstein* after a ten-year hiatus from playwriting, and I suggest the medium, as well as the genre of historical drama, is uniquely suited to the program laid out in the *Ästhetische Erziehung*. For one, in exchanging sublimity for beauty as the organizing principle of his artistic work, Schiller wants a venue that is as profuse in representative mediations as possible—in the theater, viewers witness a spectacle; actors represent not only roles but, especially in Schiller's plays, ideas and drives; and in the three dramas I consider, episodes from remote European history are made present on the 1800 stage. Second, Schiller wants a mode of expression that most forcefully embodies *Spiel*, the harmonizing mechanism that is the trademark of beautiful works—this likewise is the theater, where an audience can actually see play-dynamics develop and falter in the relationships and events on stage, and (in this case) empirical history can be brought into reciprocal interchange with not only the present, but history as it could have been. I will argue this latter form of *Spiel*—between concrete and potential political history—is an

indispensable component of Schiller's late historical dramas, and the point where they link most resonantly with the program laid out in the *Ästhetische Erziehung*.

Unlike the sublime politics of the Jacobins and Fichte, Schiller's politics of beauty and play insists on a surfeit of representations and mediations: everything has to be balanced, negotiated, reciprocated—has to be subject to *Spiel*. For Schiller, there is no reason without countervailing sensibility, no necessity without contingency, no autonomy without constraint, no empirical without counterfactual history. Any of these mutually conditioning statements could be drawn from the *Ästhetische Erziehung*, but I claim they are most evident in *Wallenstein*, *Maria Stuart*, and *Die Jungfrau von Orleans*, where they are literally performed. Schiller uses the theater to *display* in multifaceted form a paradigm of beauty and play that is at once aesthetic, political, analytical, representational—only in the historical dramas is this system present in all its dimensions. As I've intimated, the element of history is crucial in this theatrical program. The French Revolution is an occasion for Schiller to return to playwriting as well as the symptom of the social alienation his dramas are designed to address, yet 1789 is nowhere in his plays: instead, we find the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648); the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots in 1587; and the late Medieval story of Joan of Arc. We'll see this is yet another mediation integral to Schiller's aesthetic politics: engaging the political present through past struggles for power. Schiller chooses historical tipping points, moments of concentration in which, I argue, the *Spiel*-dynamics underlying the practice and transformation of political authority are most patent.

Schiller addresses the aftermath of 1789 via critical episodes in Medieval and pre-modern European politics; Büchner, likewise, comes to terms with 1830s monarchy via 1789. *Dantons Tod* is the first German play to stage the French Revolution *as history*. Büchner's interest in the French Revolution is apparent from *Der Hessische Landbote*: it initiates the historical sequence

terminating in the social-political circumstances of the 1830s—for Büchner, 1789 belongs to the history of the present. Similarly, as we'll see in chapter two, Schiller chooses dramatic material relevant to the geopolitical preconditions of the 1790s. For both playwrights, then, historical drama is part of a politics oriented to the present, or to put it differently: Schiller as well as Büchner are politically engaged dramatists who select historical materials, who use theater as a venue to display political history. But why they make this decision, and the way it connects to their respective politics, are more difficult questions.

One thing is clear: having chosen the same genre—historical drama—Schiller and Büchner adopt radically different approaches to it. As I describe below, Schiller's plays present a highly idealized vision of European political history—not idealized in the sense of glorified, but *conceptualized*: Schiller freely invents and transforms the empirical record in order to provide a more theoretically crisp depiction of the events he wants his audience to understand, where “understanding” entails not grasping history exactly as it was, but as it could and perhaps should have been: to perceive the necessary, elemental, latent forces (all deduced from the *Ästhetische Erziehung*) at work in any historical conjuncture. Not so with Büchner, who takes “history as it was” to an unprecedented step in *Dantons Tod*, literally quoting and having actors deliver verbatim speeches by Robespierre and Danton. Büchner not only depicts but *cites* the French Revolution, lets his audience experience its actual language in a process Campe calls “making [it] appear.” It is a mode of citation that *represents* what it cites.

This is much different in form and function than what Schiller describes in the aesthetic letters, where the reciprocal completeness of *Spiel* is communicated to a spectator through a vision, a “vollständige Anschauung seiner Menschheit,” and the object (*Gegenstand*) that provides this image becomes a “Symbol seiner ausgeführten Bestimmung” (*ÄE* 14; 2). The

Gegenstand, of course, is the drama, and it transmits *Spiel* to its audience to the extent that it activates this representative relay: the image communicates to the spectators their (at least potential) human *Totalität*, and in being recognized as such, accedes to a symbolic register in which it expresses humanity's "accomplished destiny." In this sense, theatrical representation for Schiller is inseparable from a process of reflection and reflective distance, in which spectators contemplate the dramatic material, which, rather than simply being what it is, is reflected back on the those spectators' internal faculties (where *Spiel* is supposed to take effect)—it becomes an image not, for instance, of Mary Stuart's execution, but of humanity's process of reconciling its own cognitive powers, all of which is then reflected onto the higher order question of the human race's *Bestimmung*.

I argue in chapter four that Büchner's approach to historical drama in *Dantons Tod* has the effect of short-circuiting this reflective chain. Büchner's play shows no concern with the French Revolution's external symbolic significance or how it reflects on humans as a whole. This is likely part of what has made the work so maddeningly resistant to interpretation, insofar as interpretation entails adding a layer of significance to it. In the critical literature, *Dantons Tod* is notorious for its ambivalence, for not giving its viewers a clear choice—for being a political play without a politics. At its simplest, my argument in chapter four is that *Dantons Tod* is best approached as a "process" work—the point is to show us how, in a given constellation of circumstances, politics was actually practiced. Büchner is not interested in dispensing political principles, in playing the partisan—he has already done that in *Der hessische Landbote*, and *Dantons Tod* comes at the larger political questions driving Büchner's work from a different angle. And if the play is about political process, the conclusion we draw is that the process of politics *is representation*. This is especially clear from the rhetorical circumstances they play

depicts. We see French revolutionaries scrambling to characterize the event *as they are executing it*, to position themselves within a larger discourse that is constantly in flux. Büchner's use of citation not only presents these rhetorical acts themselves, it gives us a chance to glean from them—from the linguistic decisions and preoccupations on display with Robespierre and Danton—the outline of this overall discursive field structuring the Revolution. This involves another level of citation: because, as Campe writes, Robespierre and Danton have a “citational” way of speaking, of drawing on and organizing their surrounding discourse, *Dantons Tod* effectively cites their citations (“Citation,” 53).

Before bringing Fichte back into the fold, it is worth reviewing exactly where Schiller and Büchner fall on the concept of representation and its various axes: in terms of *political* representation, both favor representative government (neither is a direct democrat) though Büchner is less skeptical of the people's present enlightenment—he locates the problem with their leaders; when it comes to *aesthetic* representation, both choose the same form (theater) and genre (history), but Schiller's conception of *theatrical* representation—and any *schöne Kunst*—relies heavily on the *image (Schein)* as the atomic form of all artistic experience, while *Dantons Tod* uses theater to showcase the *linguistic-discursive* dimension of political action; finally, in terms of *historical* representation (within the plays), Schiller presents schematic, substantially modified histories driven by the concepts of the *Ästhetische Erziehung*, while Büchner employs rigorously cited materials. In chapters two and four, I will use the terms *hybridization* and *citation* to refer to Schiller and Büchner's respective paradigms of representing history in dramatic works.

Aesthetic-Political Idealism and its Limits

Virtually any intellectual history of German around 1800 will refer to Schiller and Fichte as “idealists”: Fichte (along with Kant, Schelling and Hegel) as a canonical philosopher of German Idealism; Schiller as an “aesthetic idealist” or something equivalent.³⁰ I argue this term is not so much false as inexact: Schiller and Fichte are not simply “idealists,” or rather, their writings in response to the French Revolution are not reducible to idealism as it is typically conceived philosophically, politically or otherwise. Instead, I claim these texts display a more precise *aesthetic-political* idealism that needs to be delineated from more general uses of the term, as well as the usual characterizations of Schiller and Fichte: Schiller’s *Ästhetische Erziehung* and late historical dramas do not embody idealist “aestheticism” and Fichte’s *Beitrag* is not simply another programmatic treatise of German Idealism. It is true that these works accord reason, morality, cognition, etc. a privileged role over material sensations and concrete experience—in this sense they are generically “idealist”—but the way they configure that hierarchy, the way they assign and construe that privilege, is inseparable from the specific way they merge aesthetics and politics. This is what I mean by aesthetic-political idealism: idealism that is not so much an upfront commitment or guiding principle, but a *result* of certain theoretical decisions about how to connect aesthetic and political concepts.

At its simplest, idealism (like materialism) is a paradigm of how to relate ideas and bodies. Schiller projects these two regions onto separate “drives” (*Triebe*) operating within the psyche: the material-drive (*Stofftrieb*), which roots us in the physical circumstances of the moment; and the form-drive (*Formtrieb*) that challenges us to transcend immediate conditions and strive for infinity. The *Stofftrieb* “geht aus von dem *physischen* Dasein des Menschen oder

³⁰ See especially the critiques of Lukács and De Man’s *Aesthetic Ideology* (1983) for representative (negative) characterizations of Schiller’s aesthetic idealism.

von seiner *sinnlichen* Natur,” while the *Formtrieb* proceeds from the “*absoluten* Dasein des Menschen oder von seiner *vernünftigen* Natur” (*ÄE* 12; 1, 4; my emphasis). Schiller departs from typical forms of idealism and materialism by introducing a third term, the *Spieltrieb*, to mediate between the other two. As we saw, this process takes place under the auspices of aesthetic education, via a *schöner Schein*—in this case, the theatrical representation of history. The central harmonizing mechanism of the *Ästhetische Erziehung*—play—is also Schiller’s solution, so to speak, to the ancient philosophical problem of how to configure minds and bodies. And whereas antecedent (and later) traditions simply choose a side, Schiller insists that both need to be present in any viable resolution—the *Ästhetische Erziehung* is nothing if not a screed against one-sidedness (*Einseitigkeit*), the undue dominance of any one drive or faculty over the others. The politics of the beautiful brings these elements into contact, demands negotiation in the name of a higher (aesthetic and political) unity. In this respect, Schiller’s system seems less “idealist” than dialectical.³¹

Nonetheless, there is reason to retain the term for Schiller’s aesthetic politics: even if the rational faculty and its corresponding *Formtrieb* do not enjoy an automatic privilege over sensibility in the world of the *Ästhetische Erziehung*, the aesthetic image in which they are reconciled *does*—recall it is the symbol of humanity’s accomplished destiny, of the *Totalität des Charakters* missing from the fractured modern age. Schiller adds a crucial clarifying point: the task of reconciling the formal and sensuous component of human existence is *itself a commandment of reason, an idea*.³² *Spiel* is, at some level, a product of the *Formtrieb*: *Vernunft*,

³¹ De Man would protest this claim vehemently. His critique is also emblematic of what we could call the “anti-dialectical” reading of Schiller, in which Schillerian harmony precludes any sort of constructive collision of opposites. See “Kant and Schiller,” in *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

³² “Dieses Wechselverhältnis beider Triebe ist zwar bloss eine Aufgabe der Vernunft, die der Mensch nur in der Vollendung seines Daseins ganz zu lösen im Stand ist. Es ist im eigentlichen Sinne des Worts die Idee seiner Menschheit” *Ästhetische Erziehung* 14; 2.

in Schiller's conception, does not simply aim for its own predominance, but the reciprocal operation of formal and sensuous faculties, and to this end, deploys the *Spieltrieb* where this reciprocity is lacking.

I argue in chapter two that Schiller sees European political history as a tangle of non-reciprocity, and the theater becomes his venue for dispatching the *Spieltrieb*: to the Thirty Years' War; to Elizabethan England; to the late Middle Ages. It never succeeds in "fixing" history, but the point is that we *see* history as, effectively, a drama of drives. Thus Schiller freely intervenes into the historical record to make the drive-dynamics clearer. As we'll see, this becomes a complicated and multi-tiered process, but for the moment, I want to emphasize that, once he returns to playwriting with *Wallenstein*, Schiller's relationship to his dramatic material is analogous to that between *Vernunft* and the drives in the aesthetic letters: just as reason discharges the task of reciprocally configuring formality and sense, Schiller has to coordinate historical sources with specific poetic, formal ambitions—with aesthetic ideas. But unlike in the theoretical situation, Schiller can write a play that presents *Spiel* as a *failure*—or more specifically, as a missed opportunity—and still "succeed" aesthetically: it just means he's written a new kind of tragedy.

In sum, Schiller's aesthetic politics is idealist in two central respects: first, the process of creating an aesthetic symbol that harmonizes form and sense is assigned and driven by reason itself; second, aesthetic education *transfigures* material—*Stoff* has no programmatic value in itself, but only in entering a higher unity with form. The history plays are the clearest example: Schiller has no interest in presenting history as it was, but as a mutual coordination of empirical and hypothetical history, as a specific amalgam of drives. But neither is material wholly discounted or simply treated as a recalcitrant element to be overcome by reason: the process is

genuinely mutual—as I’ve suggested, it has hallmarks of dialectics—and for this reason, I’ve chosen to call Schiller’s aesthetic-political idealism *reciprocal*.³³

The concept of reciprocity is the analytical backbone of the *Ästhetische Erziehung*, but Schiller is hardly proprietary about it—on the contrary, he credits it to Fichte, whose conception of *Wechselwirkung* in the *Wissenschaftslehre* provides the model (Schiller claims) for his reconciliation of form- and sense-drives (*ÄE* 13; 2, fn1). Paul de Man accuses Schiller of egregiously misappropriating Fichte on this count, and the *Beitrag* would only seem to support de Man’s critique: there is no sign of aesthetic harmony in this work, nor anything that evokes the *Wechsel*-dynamics so central to the *Ästhetische Erziehung*.³⁴ Nonetheless, I do claim Fichte is, like Schiller, an aesthetic-political idealist. The difference is that where Schiller’s program is *reciprocal*, Fichte’s is *oppositional*: rather than harmonizing discordant drives or faculties, Fichte’s aesthetic politics intensifies the conflict; and while the “higher unity” of aesthetic education is a beautiful symbol that incorporates formality and sense, Fichte’s is a truly *unitary* unity, with *one* element that has eliminated all opposition. At a certain level, I argue, this difference reflects the respective aesthetic concepts at work in Schiller and Fichte’s political thought: for Schiller it is beauty, which calls for harmony and reciprocity; for Fichte it is the sublime, which stages conflict and victory. This is one illustration of what I mentioned above: idealism—the programmatic privileging of ideas over material—assumes the form it does in Schiller and Fichte not at the outset, but as the result of specific aesthetic-theoretical decisions.

³³ This in part to underscore the ubiquity of the prefix *wechsel-* in Schiller’s descriptions of beauty and *Spiel* in the *Ästhetische Erziehung*: like we saw above, letter 14 tells us *Vernunft* demands a *Wechselverhältnis* between the drives; in a footnote to letter 13, Schiller names *Wechselwirkung* the mutual necessity “ohne Forme keine Materie, ohne Materie keine Form”; in the same footnote, he acknowledges the inevitability of one drive’s occasionally subordinating the other, with an important caveat: “Unterordnung muss allerdings sein, aber *wechselseitig*” (my emphasis).

³⁴ See de Man, “Kant and Schiller,” 149.

The idealism of *Spiel* looks the way it does because it is structured by the concept of beauty; likewise with the idealism of Fichte's *Beitrag* and the sublime.

In the *Beitrag*, the material category exists to be overcome. It is not neutral or incidental—it is a *problem*, and Fichte's aesthetic-political idealism is a program of surmounting it. Again, his analytical style is oppositional: he intensifies the conflict between ideal and material registers in such a way that the former not only outpaces the latter, but obliterates it. It is a transcendent—not transcendental, in the Kantian sense—model: ideality, gripped in struggle with material, finally rises above and purges it. Thus, as we saw earlier, Fichte can claim in the *Beitrag* that humanity's final purpose is total coincidence with the rational law—humanity is consummated when its collective volition is determined under the absolute and exclusive power of reason. Whereas Schiller's human *Vollendung* involves the proper balancing of faculties, for Fichte, it is *one proper faculty* exerting complete control. Human fulfillment is synonymous with total rationality. Under the rubric of Schiller's form- and sense-drives, this would amount to a *total formalization*, an *absolute principle* for politics. Fichte intimates this is simply pursuant to Kantian moral theory and that the *Beitrag* is his attempt to apply that theory to public life, but my basic argument in chapter three is that Fichte's analytical choices in that book—especially concerning the relationship between reason and material—are far more indicative of the Kantian sublime than the categorical imperative.

While Kant's moral thought is designed to produce certain forms of behavior—the categorical imperative tells us how to *act*—the *Endzweck* espoused by Fichte's *Beitrag* is an internal condition of the will, its proximity to reason. Not free *action* but free *volition* is the core of the *Beitrag*'s politics. Still, some concrete externality is necessary for this kind of volition to congeal. In this case, it is the French Revolution: Fichte presents it as a crucial occasion, a

unique opportunity for the moral elevation of European politics. In fact, in the world of the *Beitrag*, this is the basic mechanism whereby societies foster the popular moral will (and thus approach the *Endzweck*): they respond with proper judgment to critical political events. The act of judging politics consolidates their moral integrity. I argue in chapter three that this stimulus-response structure is precisely that of the sublime, in which a harrowing external experience is converted into moral transcendence. Though the idea behind sublimity is to realize moral autonomy, the distinctive moment of the process—and the one most called to mind when we describe things as “sublime”—is the first, empirical moment: an encounter with something terrifying, enormous, dangerous, threatening, etc. Put another way, it is inconsistent with the sublime to simply state moral principles, though sublimity as a process eventuates in autonomy grounded on these principles. The *process* is important: we have to pass through the initial, experiential stage; we have to be subject to a struggle between what we experience and our moral response to it. This is the oppositional principle of the sublime that is also at work in Fichte’s *Beitrag*, which insists we need to properly judge the French Revolution in order to *overcome* antecedent political history and the current iniquities of public life. But as I argue, there is a corresponding danger: this process of overcoming is one manifestation of Fichte’s overall imperative to formalize, to reduce material to absolute principles, and there is no structural limitation on *how* political formalization takes place, nor *who* qualifies as resistant “material.” That is, sensuous overcoming, understood as a process of formalization, is easily conducive to political violence—and indeed, as I suggest, it is the basic formula of the Terror.

But to return to the comparison with Schiller: it is worth noting that, for both aesthetic-political idealists, empirical political history often plays the part of the problematic “material” category their respective idealisms have to contend with. That is, “politics as it was” is the

element that is transfigured or overcome, whether in one of Schiller's hybrid history plays or the process of political transcendence Fichte calls for in the *Beitrag*. In both cases, the idealism results from the specific aesthetic politics: Schiller's aesthetic education is, in essence, a process of enlightened elitism tied to a moderate, representative idea of democracy; beautiful images are a means of both developing (i.e. balancing) the public's powers of cognition and setting political history on its right course; the "ideals" at work—a consummated humanity and history progressing toward freedom—match directly to the aesthetics of beauty and Schiller's gradualist liberalism. Likewise, the notion of moral autonomy via transcendence at the core of Fichte's *Beitrag* could be taken straight from Kant's analytic of the sublime, and his insistence on a clean break from the corruptions of antecedent political history aligns neatly with the great direct democrats of the day, the Jacobins. We can imagine two distinctions—one aesthetic, one political—configured in one analogy: beauty and moderate, representative democracy paired on one side (in Schiller's reciprocal idealism); the sublime and radical democracy on the other (in Fichte's oppositional idealism).

Büchner dismantles this analogical picture, on several levels: for one, the practice of citation rejects the premise common to the aesthetics of beauty and the sublime, that "material," however defined, in some way needs to be transfigured or converted into something that ramifies on a more "ideal" register like reason or morality. In all three figures empirical political history ends up playing the role of material, but only Büchner presents it directly, in the form of a citational montage. Unlike Schiller's hybrid-technique, which also mixes empirical and invented content, Büchner's use of montage does not attempt to harmonize them in a higher form. Büchner reverses the others still further: he uses theater, the venue Schiller had chosen to disseminate idealized images of European political history, to present the empirical linguistic

content of that history; and in *Dantons Tod*, he represents citationally the event Fichte treated as a symbolic opportunity for sublime elevation. In this way, Büchner anticipates and perhaps renders moot the whole conflict between Schiller's and Fichte's idealisms, which is essentially a debate about *how* concepts should govern content. It is unclear whether this distinction even holds for Büchner, and whatever the case, the aesthetics of citation has no need for it.

Does this make Büchner “materialist”? Maybe, but not in the sense I mentioned earlier, in which materialism is the straightforward antithesis of idealism. In this understanding, both principles emerge from the same problematic—hierarchizing ideas and bodies—and simply choose different sides. But Büchner is not the “body” to Schiller and Fichte’s “idea,” nor is *Dantons Tod* really beautiful *or* sublime—the logic of citation is, as I’ve suggested, outside this particular discursive zone, and does not engage these distinctions inside the basic parameters of the 1790s. If anything, citation gives us *both* ideas and bodies (and beauty and the sublime), not in any idealized harmony, but insofar as they register *linguistically, rhetorically*: it shows them as elements of political language.

Büchner’s use of citation indicates a particular disposition to political history, a certain *value* placed upon it, absent from the aesthetic-political idealisms of Schiller and Fichte. Where historical “understanding” for the latter two means penetrating to the moral forces or structures of necessity underlying political change, *Der hessische Landbote* stays true to the manifest level of politics, does not subordinate events to metaphysical or spiritual powers. In this sense, Büchner’s understanding of history is more straightforward: he states what he sees since 1789, and the result is a concrete *sequence* of political events. Büchner’s pamphlet invites disenfranchised Germans in the 1830s to place themselves in that sequence—i.e., the latest round of struggles between European monarchs and their subjects—and that gesture constitutes its real

“politics.” Büchner does not avail himself of aesthetic or moral ideals because the motive core of his politics is the experience of history itself; no special symbolic treatment of politics is disseminated among the people because these people are the nucleus of politics—politics emanates from them. This is the crucial difference between Büchner and Schiller: though both advocate representative (not direct) democratic government, Schiller insists the people need to be brought gradually in line with aesthetic-political ideals—they need to be educated, i.e. *formed*; in *Der hessische Landbote*, it is enough that the people are able to select leaders who represent their will and interests, and any discrepancy between the governing apparatus and the people in this regard needs to be remedied *on the side of government*.

But *Der hessische Landbote* also makes clear that Büchner does not idealize “the people” in manner of Robespierre and Fichte. The people is not an abstract entity in Büchner: it is the empirical people suffering the iniquities of monarchy *and radical democracy* alike; it is the Hessians being extorted by the arch-duchy of Ludwig II as well as Parisians starving in the streets while the Jacobins debate about Rousseau. While Schiller and Fichte represent the people on the model of *one universal person* with an individual’s cognitive faculties to scale—i.e. there is popular reason, sensibility, morality, and it is a question of reconfiguring these faculties to improve the social body—for Büchner it is not the people as the classical One, but a concrete multiplicity: people with jobs, families, and, famously in *Der hessische Landbote*, taxes. Büchner’s strategy of citing tax statistics for the people of Hessen may be the best index for his departure from Schiller and Fichte: rather than assessing the present by a people’s proximity or distance from an aesthetic-political ideal, Büchner measures it by how much a government materially takes from and gives to its citizens. In that discrepancy we can sense much to come, in

which questions of representation and political legitimacy are inseparable from economics, and the content of theoretical discourse tends less to principles than information.

Chapter 1

Schiller's Turn:

Sublime Terror and the Politics of Beauty

Schiller responds to the French Revolution first with theoretical, then literary works. This chapter is largely concerned with the former: Schiller's aesthetic writings, beginning with his essays on the concept of sublimity in the early 1790s and ending with 1795's *Ästhetische Erziehung*, his most famous work of theory. There is a noticeable difference between the aesthetic vision Schiller develops in the earlier essays and that of the aesthetic letters. After Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft* established beauty and sublimity as the governing categories of German aesthetic theory, Schiller initially threw himself into expounding the sublime. In 1792-93, he published four pieces in the journal *Neue Thalia*—"Über den Grund des Vergnügens an tragischen Gegenständen," "Über die tragische Kunst," "Vom Erhabenen," and "Über das Pathetische"—in which he hoped to elaborate both the basic conceptual parameters of sublimity as well as its promise as an element of tragic drama. But in 1793, Schiller changed his focus from sublimity to beauty with the *Kallias-Briefe*, his first sustained work on the concept of the beautiful, and the *Augustenburger Briefe*, written to Schiller's patron, the Duke of Augustenburg, which provided the foundation for the *Ästhetische Erziehung*.

We know from Schiller's correspondence that he lost faith in the French Revolution after the execution of Louis XVI in January 1793, and that his interest in beauty coincides with this disappointment. Not incidentally, Schiller developed his aesthetics of the beautiful as the Revolution entered its radical phase, culminating in the Terror. My argument here is that the Terror presented Schiller with a political manifestation of sublime aesthetics, and that this helps us understand his subsequent commitment to the category of beauty after 1793. Not only did Robespierre's speeches expressly frame the Terror (and the Revolution itself) as a sublime event, but the very conceit of the Terror—eliminating sensuous vice in the name of moral transcendence—fit squarely the principles of sublimity Schiller had just expounded in his *Neue Thalia* essays. Much as the Jacobins adopted the sublime as a framework for their own political vision, Schiller's unambiguously politicized his aesthetics of beauty. Above I quoted the programmatic line from letter two of the *Ästhetische Erziehung*, “dass man, um jenes politische Problem in der Erfahrung zu lösen, durch das ästhetische den Weg nehmen muss, weil es die Schönheit ist, durch welche man zu der Freiheit wandert.” As I argue, Schiller proposes a specifically “beautiful” kind of freedom, one defined against the specious liberties promised by Robespierre and the violent political program they are used to justify.

The second and third sections below lay out these two formations: Schiller's concept of sublimity and its resonances with the Jacobin Terror, and the politics of beauty Schiller commits to after his turn away from the French Revolution. I conclude with two sections that anticipate chapter two, on Schiller's late history plays: one on the relationship between approaches to historiography and Schiller's concept of *Spiel*; and another on the idea of dramatic writing as a form of political praxis. These sections are designed to serve as a link between the exposition of Schiller's aesthetic concepts in chapter one and the readings of his plays in chapter two. But I

begin below by expanding on Claude Lefort and Jacques Rancière, two contemporary thinkers I discuss in the introduction, whose work can help us understand the situation in which Schiller turns from sublimity to beauty. First, Lefort and Rancière provide an instructive complementary picture of why 1790s Europe is so crucial for what we temporarily think of as “aesthetic politics,” and also what this conjunction signified for thinkers and artists working in the wake of the French Revolution. Second, though they work from very different analytical directions, Lefort and Rancière alike arrive at the centrality of *theater* and dramatic literature as the aesthetic-political form par excellence. For this reason, it will be helpful to keep Lefort and Rancière in mind, not just for the largely conceptual discussion of this chapter, but also when we turn to Schiller’s history plays in the next.

Parallel Returns: Lefort and Rancière

Lefort and Rancière give us two very different bodies of work that nonetheless converge on 1790s Europe as a point of origin. There is for each theorist a critical moment: as I discussed in the introduction, Lefort traces modern politics to the execution of King Louis XVI of France on January 21, 1793¹; similarly, Rancière considers Schiller’s aesthetic letters themselves the “original scene” of aesthetics as we know it. As we’ll see, Lefort’s conception of modern politics is inseparable from principles of aesthetic representation; likewise with the aesthetics Rancière traces to Schiller and modern theories of power. Both thinkers are very clear about this connection. If we put their genealogies of the modern age side-by-side—Lefort’s modern politics alongside Rancière’s modern aesthetics—and follow them back to the beginning, we get a

¹ See Lefort, “Image,” 303; and Oliver Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* (Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 95. Subsequent in-text citations of this Marchart text as *PF*.

discrete sequence of events in the 1790s: the execution of the king (January 1793); Schiller's publication of the *Ästhetische Erziehung* (1795); and in the middle, the Terror (1793-94). These are the benchmarks I will use below to trace the development of Schiller's aesthetic thought.

According to Lefort, the French Revolution constitutes the crucial point of consolidation for a wider trend that, before 1789, had remained largely subterranean. As we saw, Lefort calls this incipient movement the "democratic revolution," which "burst out when the body of king was destroyed" ("Image," 303). When the French executed Louis XVI, they severed an artificial bond it had been the King's (and all monarchs') symbolic duty to hold intact, what Oliver Marchart calls "the link between society and its transcendent legitimacy foundation" (*PF* 95). That is, in this arrangement—the "monarchic dispositive"—any political society has its legitimating ground outside (transcending) it, and whether this ground is God or, later, Justice and Reason, it is the monarch's function to fasten that ground to the empirical people and institutions that make up the 'corporeal' manifestation of that society. The monarch connects the earthly and the divine (or ideal). Hence the precise symbolic significance of the king's body: it is both a physical human body *and* the site for channeling the divine (or ideal), and thus, for Lefort, "long after the features of liturgical royalty had died away, the king still possessed the power to incarnate in his body the community of the kingdom, now invested with the sacred, a political community, a national community, a mystical body" ("Image," 302). This is the working model of the *ancien régime*, which society "represented its unity and its identity to itself as that of a body—a body which found its figuration in the body of the king" ("Image," 302). It is also the model detonated by the public decapitation of Louis, the symbolic condensation point of the democratic revolution. As we saw, Lefort refers to the resultant process as "disincorporation," in which the centripetal operation by which a community unifies around a monarch is reversed: the

king is disincorporated in destruction of his earthly body and renunciation of his transcendent function; concurrently, individual members of the polity are disincorporated in becoming dislodged from the cohesive, homogeneous “body” that had previously defined their community—they are now free to circulate *as individuals*.² We came roughly this far with Lefort in the introduction.

Pushing somewhat further: It is important to recognize that Lefort is not simply describing a transformation in French society; more significantly, he is identifying a “mutation” in that society’s self-representation. For Lefort, political power has a double function: it *forms*—it gives shape to an otherwise amorphous social mass—and then *signifies* that form, such that, in the monarchic dispositive, power is present not only in the concrete social and institutional architecture that terminates in the figure of the monarch, it also invests the monarch with the capacity to represent that society to itself as a coherent and unified entity, *qua* monarchy.³ Beheading Louis was not simply an act with important consequences for French government, but an intervention into the very symbolic constitution of authority, an insurrection on a stage extending far beyond just France—the king was deposed as a symbolic guarantor of national integrity by a new element, *the people*. Hence a transformation in the symbolic practice of governance itself, and the specific historical magnitude of the French Revolution: Marchart calls it “the moment when the monarchic dispositive mutated into the democratic dispositive” that has structured the next two centuries (“Representing Power,” 99). And while monarchy labored to achieve the *unity* of political society, the democratic element is one of discord: without

² Lefort, “Image of the Body,” 303, cited above. See also Oliver Marchart, “Representing Power: Public Space, the Artist, and the Body of the Leader,” *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geisteswissenschaften* (2004), 100.

³ See Marchart, “Representing Power,” 99.

transcendent power source, individuals attach and collide at will; they autonomously engage (or disengage) in a contest for influence that pervades the social body.⁴

At this point in Lefort's argument, aesthetics becomes central. The freely circulating autonomy individuals experience after monarchy is especially pertinent for artists. The effect of the democratic revolution was to de-monopolize a field of symbolic resources that had previously consolidated around the monarch. Practically speaking, it was no longer the sole task of the artist to glorify, edify, or otherwise creatively serve a king or queen; now the artist could *choose* what or whom to serve. This is non-trivial: if the representative image of power is as important as its tangible conditions, power needs people who are skilled at crafting representations, who can effectively manipulate the symbolic field—it needs artists. And now that competing political parties have replaced a unitary monarch, we have the “party artist,” the partisan, who lends creative work to a specific agenda. The prototype on both counts emerges in the French Revolution: the Jacobins and their partisan painter, Jacques-Louis David, whose iconic *Death of Marat* (1793) attests to the potency of artists' new political vocation.⁵

Further, as Marchart has observed, the whole transformation in which party and artist first appear in their modern function is *itself* aesthetic. The decapitation of the king deprives political representation of any specific substance, and in the resultant void, representation itself is foregrounded as the stuff of politics: “now it is the very symbolic nature of power which is recognized as its true essence”; consequently, the public sphere becomes an “agonal space” of contestations between representatives of a variegated political community; and “from a Lefortian

⁴ Raf Geenens: “Democratic regimes are not only aware of their own historicity, they also welcome it and even institutionally protect it... The fact that the identity of society cannot be established once and for all literally assumes center stage in a democracy. By turning politics into a ritualized conflict over the interpretation of society, democratic procedures recognize the dynamic nature of interhuman relations.” “Democracy, Human Rights and History: Reading Lefort,” *European Journal of Political Theory* (2008), 274.

⁵ See Marchart, “Representing Power,” 106.

perspective,” every such public sphere “assumes the function of a *theater*. It is the ‘place’ where conflict and democratic contest are *staged*. And by being openly and legitimately *staged*, the ‘*drama*’ of conflict and contest attests to the fact that the place of power does not have any substantial content” (“Representing Power,” 100-1; my emphasis). The theatrical language is not incidental: Lefort adopts the term *mise-en-scène* from theater to denote political society’s *staging* of its own self-identity, its own performative self-enactment in the world of symbols and appearances. Post-democratic revolution, the representational substrate of politics that structures this performance assumes acknowledged primacy; as a result, for Marchart, politics becomes more properly and officially aesthetic.

Lefort and Rancière converge on this point: theater is a crucial locus and figure for aesthetic politics as it emerges in the 1790s. For Rancière, modern politics is essentially theatrical: “performing or playing, in the theatrical sense of the word,” politics is about “creating a stage,” “establishment of a theater” in which pertinent relationships can be “acted out.”⁶ In Lefort’s political theater, those relationships are manifold, and correspond to given historical dispositives—monarchy, democracy, aristocracy, totalitarianism—but Rancière distills that range to one governing tension between poles he labels “people” and “police.” Rancière uses the latter term to denote any developed political order comprising both a clear delineation of social roles and procedures and a symbolic representation of itself “characterized by the absence of void and of supplement.”⁷ The police represents itself as a social whole, a symbolic act that, for Rancière, necessarily involves some degree of elision—the police’s self-enclosure inevitably excludes

⁶ See especially *Disagreement* and “Entretien avec Jacques Rancière,” quoted in Peter Hallward, “Staging Equality,” *New Left Review*, (1-2/2006); there are excellent profiles of Rancière’s theatrical politics in Hallward as well as Richard Halpern, “Theater and Democratic Thought: Arendt to Rancière,” *Critical Inquiry* (Spring 2011), 545-572.

⁷ Jacques Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics,” *Dissensus*, trans. Steven Corcoran (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010), 36.

something. This element is the people, the *demos*, the “supplementary existence that inscribes the count of the uncounted, or part of those who have no part” in the order of the police (*Dissensus* 33). Politics proper is the means by which the people asserts itself and confronts the police, or, closer to Rancière’s own language, makes itself *seen and heard*. The dynamics of political contestation are, for Rancière, always sensuous: exclusion means invisibility and silence, and politics is the people’s intervention into the prevailing “distribution of the sensible” (Rancière’s signature phrase) that keeps them visually and aurally absent.⁸ The priority of sensuous presence over specific political demands makes Rancière’s emphasis on theatricality easier to understand. As Peter Hallward expresses eloquently, “before it is a matter of representative institutions, legal procedures or militant organizations, politics is a matter of building a stage and sustain a spectacle of ‘show’. Politics is the contingent dramatization of a disruptive equality, the unauthorized and impromptu improvisation of a democratic voice” (“Staging Equality,” 112).

In Rancière’s vision, aesthetics is the aegis under which that spectacle takes place. Hardly some myopic “theory of art,” aesthetics is the paradigm by which *demos* creates an alternate “sensorium,” an experiential space in which predominant relations of domination are abolished (*AD* 11-12). For Rancière, the politics of art “consists in suspending the normal coordinates of sensory experience” in favor of the *extra*-normal space of aesthetic experience, in counter posing daily life and art as experiential modes (*AD* 25). Aesthetics, in a precise sense, is the “regime” by which we identify what constitutes art and artistic experience, what specifically composes the alternative sensorium that opposes the governing distribution of the sensible. This demarcation is

⁸ Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, 25: “Politics consists in reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible which defines the common of a community, to introduce into it new subjects and objects, to render visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals.”

its politics.⁹ The relevant opposition is between a democratic and emancipatory space of art and the reified life-world of the police order. That seems straightforward, but it is not: “the politics of art in the aesthetic regime of art,” Rancière reminds us, “is determined by this founding paradox: in this regime, art is art insofar as it is also non-art, or is something other than art” (*AD* 36). Art, in the aesthetic regime, is a non-integrated category; it *is* itself insofar as it partakes in what is outside it, *life*. For Rancière, this paradox dominates the course of the “aesthetic revolution” that has governed cultural production in the West for two centuries, still holds today, and started with Schiller.

The *Ästhetische Erziehung* is the founding text of this revolution, and Rancière, in book after book, remains fixated on the final section of letter 15, in which Schiller states the paradox, “der Mensch spielt nur, wo er in voller Bedeutung des Worts Mensch ist, und er ist nur da ganz Mensch, wo er spielt,” and summarily claims this proposition will bear “das ganze Gebäude der ästhetischen Kunst und der noch schwierigeren Lebenskunst” (*ÄE* 15; 9). For Rancière, the aesthetic revolution is the story of this *und*:

Schiller says that aesthetic experience will bear the edifice of the art of the beautiful *and* of the art of living. The entire question of the ‘politics of aesthetics’ – in other words, of the aesthetic regime of art – turns on this short conjunction. The aesthetic experience is effective inasmuch as it is the experience of that *and*. It grounds the autonomy of art, to the extent that it connects it to the hope of ‘changing life’. (*Dissensus* 116)

Art is autonomous insofar as it is distinguished from something outside it, yet an immanent condition of this autonomy is that art *maintains a relation* with its outside, with life. After Schiller introduces this tension in the *Ästhetische Erziehung*, all subsequent work in aesthetics is devoted to establishing the proper configuration of art and life. Rancière identifies two dominant

⁹ *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, 44: “there is no art without a specific form of visibility and discursivity which identifies it as such. There is no art without a specific distribution of the sensible tying it to a certain form of politics. Aesthetics is such a distribution.”

tendencies: on the one hand, there is the school of “art becomes life,” beginning with strains of German Idealism and early Romanticism, continuing through Marxism and manifest in 20th century movements like Art Deco and Bauhaus, in which art constructs possible forms of living and discharges itself into these forms, reconfiguring life while, at the final stage, abolishing itself as a separate condition; there is alternatively a “resistant” form, in which art refuses any sort of discharge or assimilation into life, instead insisting on enclosure as the stamp of its political commitment and “potential for emancipation,” a position that captures the whole trajectory of the modern avant-garde and is encapsulated theoretically in the work of Adorno.¹⁰

Schiller’s *Ästhetische Erziehung* is therefore a kind of theoretical flashpoint: it crystallizes a problematic that has occupied aesthetic work since, much like the execution of Louis XVI, for Lefort, symbolically inaugurates the political terrain of the modern. And if we consider Lefort and Rancière together, as I suggested earlier, we get not just two founding moments from 1790s Europe, but parallel histories of politics and aesthetics in the modern era that attest to the *inseparability* of these two categories, that display the thoroughgoing interpenetration of political and aesthetic logics since the 1790s. This is present formally in the explicitly *theatrical* vocabulary each thinker uses to designate politics, and substantively in the change in symbolic and practical function Lefort and Rancière ascribe to artists vis-à-vis their respective political life-worlds after the Revolution and Schiller. Finally, there is a conception of politics that is fundamentally rooted in *conflict*. Lefort’s monarchic dispositive and Rancière’s police are efforts to represent a false unity, a fictitious social whole that democracy and the people expose and disrupt. True politics, for Lefort and Rancière alike, is a condition of discord;

¹⁰ See *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, 36-41.

every society is insuperably riven with division, and post-1790s, the real danger comes from the drive to *eliminate* that division.

That lesson may be most clear from the interval *between* their founding moments, after Louis' execution and before Schiller's treatise: 1793-94 in France, the years of Jacobin revolutionary government, the Committee of Public Safety, Robespierre, Saint-Just, the radical politics of revolutionary virtue and its practical wing, the Terror.

Sublime Revolution: 1793-94

In the months immediately following Louis' execution, concern in France over threats both foreign and domestic prompted conception of an official body tasked with maintaining the security and integrity of the nascent, post-monarchical republic. To this end, creation of a Revolutionary Tribunal was decreed on March 10, and the Committee of Public Safety established on April 6; these two organs would later form the administrative centerpiece of the Terror. The *journée* of May 31-June 2 removed the moderate Girondins from the National Convention, and power lay decisively with the radical Jacobins and their figureheads: Marat, Robespierre and Saint-Just. On July 13, Marat was assassinated by Girondist sympathizer Charlotte Corday, giving momentum to already widespread paranoia over a counterrevolutionary plot. Robespierre and Saint-Just, both of whom sat on the Committee of Public Safety by late July, rhetorically codified that fear, and the Jacobin phase of the Revolution, from June 1793 to July 1794, was dominated by suspicion of an aristocratic conspiracy. Jacobin oratory, especially that of Robespierre, assumed the task of framing the precise nature of that threat.¹¹ François

¹¹Patrice Gueniffey: Robespierre was "tireless in his denunciation of intrigue and conspiracy... suspicion was not insolated but a general and permanent condition." "Robespierre," *Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*. Eds. François Furet and Mona Ozouf, trans. Arthur Goldhammer. Harvard (1989), 302.

Furet gives a sense of the overall rhetorical parameters: in the Jacobin picture, “the people continued to be menaced by an anti-power, which like the nation was abstract, omnipresent, and all-enveloping, but which was hidden where the nation was public, individual where the nation was universal, and harmful where the nation was good. This anti-power was thus the negative, the inverse, the anti-principle of the nation.”¹²

The Terror itself began in earnest shortly after Robespierre was elected to the Committee. In the spring and summer months of 1793, a number of repressive measures and executions had been justified with reference to the fact that France was at war—at that point, with Austria and Prussia—and could not, in the name of security, tolerate any sedition. But as Furet writes, “from the autumn of 1793 to the spring of 1794 the case for the necessity of the Terror abandoned the circumstantial grounds of the war in favor of a more fundamental justification: nothing less than the Revolution itself” (“Terror,” 148). The vague, scheming “anti-power,” the enemy of “the people,” became the new reference-point of political action. There prevailed in those months an “ambition for regeneration” (Furet), in which the Jacobin government arrogated to itself the task of extirpating any and all anti-revolutionary elements from the populace. It was a considerable task—as Robespierre said in defense of the Committee on September 25, 1793, “everywhere [there are] traitors to expose.”¹³

The number of executions increased dramatically after September 5. In October and November, many of the prominent Girondins deposed in June were guillotined, as were symbolic vestiges of the *ancien régime* like Louis’ widow, Marie Antoinette. On February 5, 1794, Robespierre gave an address to the Convention on “Principles of Political Morality,” which

¹² François Furet, “Terror,” *Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, 138.

¹³ Maximilien Robespierre, “In Defence of the Committee of Public Safety and Against Briez,” in *Virtue and Terror*, 74.

emphasized the convergence of Terror and revolutionary virtue: “Terror is nothing but prompt, severe, inflexible justice; it is therefore an emanation of virtue,” he declared. “Intimidate by terror the enemies of liberty; and you will be right, as founders of the Republic. The revolution’s government is the despotism of liberty over tyranny.”¹⁴ In early April, Committee members Danton and Herault were among a group of moderate politicians executed for accommodating anti-revolutionary sentiment, and the infamous law of 22 Prairial (June 10) accomplished the operational streamlining of the Terror: no longer burdened by any meaningful judicial procedure, the Tribunal could (and did) accept even the most specious accusations of counterrevolutionary activity. The accused had virtually no opportunity for self-defense, and the punishment for all offences was death; there resulted a massive and unstable acceleration of executions in June and July 1794. The Terror had become a frightening burden, and on July 27, exactly one year after he joined the Committee of Public Safety, Robespierre, Saint-Just, and a dozen other prominent Jacobins were arrested on order of the Convention. They were guillotined without trial the next day, and so ended the Terror.

The administrative tendency in the months leading up to the “Great Terror” of June and July 1794 was one of centralization:

the people, it was assumed, now wanted what the Convention wanted, and the Convention wanted what Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety dictated. Between the autumn of 1793 and the spring of 1794 Robespierre left his stamp on the unfinished process of restoring the state: the Convention was muzzled, the organization of the popular movement was dismantled, the clubs were transformed into cogs in the bureaucratic machinery, and local autonomy was destroyed. All that had originated at the base and periphery was transferred to the summit and center.¹⁵

This is a revolutionary politics that begins and ends with the figure of Robespierre: he effectively supervises the Committee; the Committee controls the Convention, which ostensibly represents

¹⁴ Maximilien Robespierre, “On the Principles of Political Morality that Should Guide the National Convention in the Domestic Administration of the Republic,” in *Virtue and Terror*, 115.

¹⁵ Gueniffey, “Robespierre,” 307.

the people, but this “people” is chiefly a rhetorical entity constructed, and its wishes fixed, by Robespierre, whose central role in the Terror combined exhaustive administrative oversight with the effort’s justificatory framing.¹⁶ Thanks largely to Robespierre’s oratory, centralization of authority (around him) was accompanied at all points by a distinct ideological matrix: revolutionary virtue; national regeneration; “severity” in the name of popular unity.¹⁷

In articulating this platform, Robespierre consistently invoked the aesthetic category of the sublime. His “Principles of Political Morality” take as axiomatic the “great purity of the foundations of the French Revolution, the very *sublimity* of its objective,” and he referred to the Revolution’s “sublime” popular cause in speeches defending the Committee of Public Safety (September 25, 1793), denouncing “enemies of the nation” (May 26, 1794), and in honor of the revolutionary government’s short-lived civic religion, the Cult of the Supreme Being (*Culte de l’Être supreme*), on the occasion of its first public festival (June 8, 1794, two days before the onset of the Great Terror).¹⁸ The last deserves special mention: Robespierre developed the Cult of the Supreme Being to replace the disgraced Cult of Reason (*Culte de la Raison*) that was dedicated in November 1793 and dissolved in late March 1794, when Robespierre had most of its leadership executed. The revolutionaries’ staunch opposition to the Catholic Church—the clerical arm of the *ancien régime*—left a spiritual lacuna in France; the Cult of Reason proposed rationality itself as the new object of worship. None of that presented an issue for Robespierre, but the bombast of the Cult’s rituals appalled him. Their events were “deliberately theatrical: an

¹⁶ Gueniffey, “Robespierre,” 308: Robespierre “played a decisive role in determining the course of events with speeches such as those he delivered on 5 Nivose [December 25] and 17 Pluviose [February 5] to systematize and legitimate the Terror. He was also one of the most responsible for the Terror, thanks to his tireless involvement in police matters both in the Committee of Public Safety and in the Bureau of General Police, which remained under his direct supervision.”

¹⁷ Keith Baker describes the “principled” purging of counterrevolutionary elements: “impose unity on the other whenever it was found lacking. This was the essential logic of the Terror. It was a logic that no one articulated better than Robespierre.” “Sovereignty,” *Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, 856.

¹⁸ My emphasis in “Principles.” See “Defense of the Committee” in *Virtue and Terror*, 78.

intricate ceremony took place at Notre Dame where an actress from the Opera, dressed in tricolor garb and surrounded by two groups of young women in white, was paraded around the aisles and up to the altar.”¹⁹ The Cult celebrated reason via performance and spectacle. “By contrast,” writes Huet, Robespierre’s Festival of the Supreme Being “was to be a festival without images or representations... when Robespierre proposed the Cult of the Supreme Being, he explicitly sought to bring the Revolution back to a form of worship that would owe nothing to previous religions or their images” (“Performing Arts,” 138-39).

The problem, for Robespierre, was “idolatry,” the practice of *sensuously* presenting or honoring a deity, of fixing it to an image: as we saw in the introduction, Robespierre wanted to create a form of worship modelled on the sublime, totally stripped of any sensuous component. And as Huet observes, it hardly seems random that the Festival of the Supreme Being was held on the eve of 22 Prairial, which dispensed with legal representation for the accused, nor that these were signature projects of Robespierre and the Jacobin radicals, whose principal departure from their moderate Girondist predecessors concerned the question of representative versus direct democracy.²⁰ The common enemy is representation itself: the sublime Supreme Being cannot be degraded by a representative image; enemies of the people are denied representation in court; and the will of the people, rather than being represented by politicians, directly animates the course of government. The Revolution itself Robespierre “tried to define... as sublime, as an ideal that would transcend all representation and escape all misrepresentation, as a rhetorical purity that could only be expressed in a negative form” (Huet 141). For Robespierriist politics,

¹⁹ Huet, “Performing Arts,” 138. See introduction as well.

²⁰ Huet, “Performing Arts,” 140. See also Denis Richet, “Revolutionary *Journées*,” *Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, 132.

the power of revolutionary virtue lay in its immediacy, its independence from any symbol, image, or sense representation of whatever kind.

Shortly before sublimity became a hallmark of Jacobin politics, it was the centerpiece of Schiller's aesthetic theory. Initially, Schiller came to the sublime through his work as a playwright, and specifically his interest in the concept of tragedy. His essays "Über den Grund des Vergnügens an tragischen Gegenständen" and "Über die tragische Kunst" in the journal *Neue Thalia* mark what Beiser calls Schiller's entry into a "much longer conversation" on a "classical problem in aesthetics"—why do people take pleasure in tragedy?²¹ The question becomes an occasion for Schiller to divide the arts between "fine" and "affective" modes—*schöne* and *rührende Kunst*—on the basis of (Kantian) mental faculties: fine art connects *Einbildungskraft* (Imagination) and *Verstand* (Understanding), and thus shares the latter's foundation in the manifold of sense experience; alternatively, affective art conjoins imagination and *Vernunft* (Reason), which is indifferent to sense experience, and instead occupies itself with ideas and a priori principles. There is thus a sensuous aspect to pleasure in fine art, where there is none in the affective mode. For Schiller in 1792, this makes the latter essentially more *free*:

Frei aber nenne ich dasjenige Vergnügen, wobei die Gemütskräfte nach ihren eigenen Gesetzen affiziert werden, und wo die Empfindung durch eine Vorstellung erzeugt wird; im Gegensatz von dem physischen oder sinnlichen Vergnügen, wobei die Seele dem Mechanismus unterwürfig, nach fremden Gesetzen beweft wird, und die Empfindung unmittelbar auf ihre physische Ursache erfolgt.²²

In a free state, mental powers ("Gemütskräfte") like *Vernunft* and *Einbildungskraft* are subject to their own laws ("nach ihren eigenen Gesetzen") alone. Schiller contrasts this freedom with a condition in which physical, sensuous forces encroach on the operations of the mind, making the

²¹ Frederick Beiser, *Schiller as Philosopher: A Re-examination* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 254. In-text citations as *SP*.

²² Friedrich Schiller, "Über den Grund des Vergnügens an tragischen Gegenständen," in *Theoretische Schriften*, 236-7; original emphasis. In-text citations give *TS* and the page number.

soul subordinate to mechanical functions (“die Seele dem Mechanismus unterwürfig”). The pleasure associated with the latter state Schiller calls “die sinnliche Lust,” and it poses a challenge for the kind of artistic practice he wants to develop:

Die sinnliche Lust ist die einzige, die vom Gebiet der schönen Kunst ausgeschlossen wird, und eine Geschicklichkeit, die sinnliche Lust zu erwecken, kann sich nie oder alsdann nur zur Kunst erheben, wenn die sinnlichen Eindrücke nach einem Kunstplan geordnet, verstärkt oder gemäßigt werden und diese Planmäßigkeit durch die Vorstellung erkannt wird. (“Über den Grund des Vergnügens,” *TS* 237)

Sense pleasure is only permissible when subjected to the rigors of an artistic design which is itself subject to intellectual determination (“durch die Vorstellung erkannt”). And in “Über den Grund des Vergnügens,” Schiller conceives of intellectual determination as the *opposite* of sense pleasure, as pain. Thus the crucial function of the sublime:

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. (“Über den Grund des Vergnügens,” *TS* 239)

The sublime object contradicts our whole physical sensibility, inflicts a kind of pain, provokes an aversion. We are *disinclined* from what we experience, and it is precisely that moment of discontent that provides an occasion (“Veranlassung”) to become conscious of a certain higher faculty, “ein anderes [überlegenes] Vermögen.”

This superlative power is a *moral* system that registers itself through conflict: “Diese moralische Zweckmäßigkeit wird am lebendigsten erkannt, wenn sie im Widerspruch mit andern die Oberhand behält; nur dann erweist sich die ganze Macht des Sittengesetzes, wenn es mit allen übrigen Naturkräften im Streit gezeigt wird” (“Über den Grund des Vergnügens,” *TS* 241).

The moral prerogative is to dominate the physical world and its “Naturkräfte,” which for Schiller here include “Empfindungen, Triebe, Affekte, Leidenschaften so gut als die physische Notwendigkeit und das Schicksal” (*TS* 241). The more calamitous the combined effect of these

forces, the grander morality's final victory over them.²³ And here we get a new kind of pleasure, "die moralische Lust," which Schiller suggests *tragedy* is uniquely suited to provide. It is important to recognize that sensuousness and morality are not simply separate orders that have circumstantially come into conflict—they are conjoined in a hermetic logical antagonism. Consider the following language from "Über die tragische Kunst": "Je lebhafter die Sinnlichkeit erwacht, desto schwächer wird sie Sittlichkeit wirken, und umgekehrt, jemehr jene von ihrer Macht verliert, desto mehr wird diese an Stärke gewinnen" (*TS* 262). The opposition is absolute; natural and moral tendencies are mutually exclusive.

A similar formulation opens "Vom Erhabenen," published in September 1793: "*Erhaben* nennen wir ein Objekt, bei dessen Vorstellung unsre sinnliche Natur ihre Schranken, unsre vernünftige Natur aber ihre Überlegenheit, ihre Freiheit von Schranken fühlt; gegen das wir also *physisch* den Kürzern ziehen, über welches wir uns aber *moralisch* d.i. durch Ideen erheben" (*TS* 395; original emphasis). The tight logical relation is there again: in a sublime context, the diminution of the sensuous category is simultaneously the elevation of the moral, which here is synonymous with *Vernunft* ("moralisch, d.i. durch Ideen") and hence freedom: "Nur als Sinnenwesen sind wir abhängig, als Vernunftwesen sind wir frei" ("Vom Erhabenen," *TS* 395). The statement suggests an overall analogy in which the relationship between sense and reason is the same as that between dependency and freedom—namely, that they are conceptual as well as practical opposites. And in "Über das Pathetische"—the companion piece to *Vom Erhabenen*, published in the same issue of *Neue Thalia*—Schiller states sublimity can *only* be rational, and never sensuous: "Wirkungen aber, welche bloß auf eine sinnliche Quelle schließen lassen und bloß in der Affektion des Gefühlsvermögens gegründet sind, sind niemals erhaben... denn alles

²³ Schiller actually writes "Je furchtbarer der Gegner, desto glorreicher der Sieg" (*TS* 241).

Erhabene stammt *nur* aus der Vernunft” (TS 428; original emphasis). It is also in “Über das Pathetische” that Schiller declares the final goal of all art to be representation of the supersensible, for which tragic form is uniquely suited: “Der letzte Zweck der Kunst ist die Darstellung des Übersinnlichen und die tragische Kunst insbesondere bewerkstelligt dieses dadurch, daß sie uns die moralische Independenz von Naturgesetzen im Zustand des Affekts versinnlicht” (TS 423). Tragic art is ideally equipped to depict the supersensible because tragedy, more than any other form, showcases moral autonomy from the sense world, independence from the laws of nature. In other words, tragedy delivers transcendence because it is sublime.

These pieces together constitute Schiller’s attempt to ground an aesthetics of tragedy on the concept of the sublime. Their publication period is early 1792 to September 1793, during which time was Schiller was closely watching events in France. Though a skeptic from the beginning, Beiser writes that Schiller “began to nurture some hopes for the Revolution” in autumn 1792, shortly after the monarchy was deposed in the *journée* of August 10.²⁴ But with the trial and execution of the king, Schiller abandoned hope for the Revolution entirely.²⁵ Significantly, it is only after he definitively rejected the Revolution that Schiller began to focus his theoretical efforts on the concept of beauty: he wrote the first *Kallias-Brief* to Gottfried Körner ten days after Louis was tried for treason, and the first of the *Augustenburger Briefe* is dated February 9, 1793—19 days after the execution. In June, Schiller published the essay “Über Anmut und Würde,” famous for its concept of the beautiful soul (“schöne Seele”), and his most extensive treatment of beauty before the *Ästhetische Erziehung*.

²⁴ Frederick Beiser. *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism* (Harvard University Press, 1992), 95. The French monarchy fell in the *journée* of 10 August 1792. Subsequent in-text citations as *ERR*.

²⁵ Peter-André Alt: Schiller considers it a “Misslingen einer republikanischen Erneuerung des Staates”; Norbert Oellers: a “Verwilderung der politischen Sitten.” Alt in “‘Arbeit für mehr als ein Jahrhundert’: Schillers Verständnis von Ästhetik und Politik in der Periode der Französischen Revolution (1790-1800).” *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft* (2002), 107; Oellers in “Bürger von Frankreich – Schiller und die Französische Revolution.” *Friedrich Schiller und Europa: Ästhetik, Politik, Geschichte* (Heidelberg, 2007), 22.

But Schiller was still actively theorizing and publishing on sublimity—his last two pieces devoted to it appeared in September 1793, the same month Robespierre and the Jacobins codify the Terror, an operation explicitly framed as sublime. The parallels are plain to see: Schiller and Robespierre alike posit a type of morality that authenticates itself by obliterating the corruption of the empirical world, that stems solely from the rational character of human beings, that is in no way beholden to any form of sense experience or expression. Schiller’s tragic art and Robespierre’s Terror seem to aim at the same thing through antagonistic means: *das Übersinnliche*, moral freedom, revolutionary virtue. I argue we can perceive in Schiller’s turn away from sublime aesthetics a specific form of the anxiety that afflicted Enlightenment intellectuals everywhere as they observed the Terror: as Beiser writes, “it was in the name of reason” that the Jacobins “conceived and executed the Terror... it is reason that sanctions the use of force against those who oppose the Revolution. For reason demands that we use every means necessary to achieve its ends, and the only effective measure against counterrevolutionary force is greater force. Hence even the Terror seemed to receive the blessing of reason itself” (*ERR* 2). The Terror justified itself using Enlightenment reason, and German *Aufklärer* scrambled to defend or modify their principles. For Schiller, circumstances implicated the position of the sublime: Jacobinism staged it for him as a political principle, and the Terror showed him its violent, terrifying potential. But the situation also showed him what Lefort would demonstrate two centuries later: after the death of the king, alternative discursive paradigms—in this case, aesthetics—could be called upon to frame and legitimate political programs. Sublimity had migrated into political life via the Jacobins, and with his subsequent theoretical work, Schiller would present the case for a competing politics of beauty.

Politics of the Beautiful: 1795

The *Ästhetische Erziehung* began to appear in January 1795, in Schiller's new periodical, *Die Horen*. As I've suggested, the treatise is a change of course in Schiller's aesthetic thought: previously preoccupied with the sublime, Schiller now builds a theoretical system around the category of beauty. The chief difference between the two modes involves the relationship between rational and sensible faculties: while beauty harmonizes them, sublimity presents them in conflict, thus setting the stage for the reason's victory over sense.²⁶ This is Schiller's formula of sublime morality. It was also the formula of Robespierre's Terror, and I've claimed Schiller is led to demote sublimity after witnessing the carnage it can occasion as a paradigm of government. After the Terror, Schiller never presented the sublime with quite the same moral rigidity as he did in 1792-93. His last essay on the subject, "Über das Erhabene"—first published in 1801 but probably written in 1794—already describes the need to reconcile sublime and beautiful modes, and by extension, reason and nature: "Nur wenn das Erhabene mit dem Schönen sich gattet und unsre Empfänglichkeit für beides in gleichem Maß ausgebildet worden ist, sind wir vollendete Bürger der Natur, ohne deswegen ihre Sklaven zu sein und ohne unser Bürgerrecht der intelligibeln Welt zu verscherzen" (*TS* 839). This sentence describes a possibility wholly alien to the *Neue Thalia* essays of 1792-93: sublimity and beauty *joining* ("sich gatten") to create a more complete form of belonging in *both* natural and intellectual worlds. This is an important theme in Schiller's aesthetics of beauty: restoring mutuality to categories previously understood to be essentially in conflict. It is also in "Über das Erhabene" that Schiller first calls for a program of aesthetic education by name: "weil es einmal unsre

²⁶ See Beiser, *Schiller as Philosopher*, 257: beauty may provide its own kind of sensory emancipation, but "Schiller stresses [in the sublime period], however, that it is only the sublime that gives us *knowledge* of ourselves as rational beings, as beings belong to a supersensible order that is beyond the causality of the natural and phenomenal world." Original emphasis.

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” (TS 838; original emphasis). Sensibility and spiritual principles (“sinnliche Schranken,” “Gesetzbuch reiner Geister”) are regions Schiller had theorized as antagonistic in his earlier essays, but here they come together, along with the sublime and the beautiful, in order to complete the process of aesthetic education.

The chief task of the 1795 treatise is to recuperate and foreground beauty—having already propounded the sublime in his *Neue Thalia* essays, Schiller can only bring the aesthetic program he envisions “zu einem vollständigen Ganzen” by integrating its counterpart, the beautiful.²⁷ Plus, only beauty retains the category of sense, so far as it harmonizes with reason; sublimity alone consigns sensibility to forceful suppression in the name of moral transcendence—it is strictly an oppositional category to be eliminated or overcome, as it was for Robespierre.²⁸ Schiller needs to retain *Sinnlichkeit* in order to check a specifically sublime form of violence. The way he does that in 1795 is more sophisticated than in 1793, suggesting the *Ästhetische Erziehung* is more than a straightforward elevation of an already-theorized notion of beauty: while in the earlier conception, reason and sense simply enter into harmony, a central innovation of the aesthetic letters is the play-drive (*Spieltrieb*), a third term that brings the conflicting faculties—represented in the vocabulary of the *Ästhetische Erziehung* by respective formal and sensuous drives, *Form-* and *Stofftrieb*—into productive interplay. Some kind of exchange between them is important: *Stofftrieb* alone consigns us to base physicality and pure

²⁷ See, for instance, Andrzej Warminski: aesthetic education proposes a beautiful solution to a sublime problematic. “Returns of the Sublime: Positing and Performative in Kant, Fichte, and Schiller,” *MLN* (2001), 964-978.

²⁸ See Beiser, *Schiller as Philosopher*, 128: for Schiller, any form of education must “have the power to affect our sensibility... because the main source of human action comes from sensibility rather than from reason.” An education that addresses only the intellect is “scientific,” while “aesthetic” education “appeals to sensibility.”

materialistic self-interest, while we need only look to the Terror for the grim terminus of an unqualified *Formtrieb*.

Beauty in 1793 harmonizes form and sense where sublimity holds them in total opposition; alternatively, *Spiel* makes them *reciprocal* (*wechselseitig*). Reciprocity (*Wechselwirkung*) involves conceptual situations like the following: “von dem physischen Charakter die Willkür und von dem moralischen die Freiheit abzusondern—es käme darauf an, den ersten mit Gesetzen übereinstimmend, den letztern von Eindrücken abhängig zu machen” (*ÄE* 3; 5). In this instance, physicality and morality productively exchange properties: our bodily character loses its arbitrariness (“Willkür”) and becomes subject to laws (“mit Gesetzen übereinstimmend”), while our moral character is made open to sense-impressions (“von Eindrücken abhängig”). A similar formulation from the aesthetic letters: “Der sinnliche Trieb... will sein Objekt empfangen; der Formtrieb... will sein Objekt hervorbringen: der Spieltrieb wird also bestrebt sein, so zu empfangen, wie er selbst hervorgebracht hätte, und so hervorzubringen, wie der Sinn es zu empfangen trachtet” (*ÄE* 14; 4). The play-drive makes form- and sense-drives reciprocal by combining their qualities—in this case, the respective needs to *produce* and to *receive* an object.

Wechselwirkung, understood in this way, is more nuanced than harmonious accord. In a condition of play, form and sense start to assume each other’s determinants and qualities: bodies accept the direction of law, while reason takes certain cues from sense-data, and in one nimble operation of the play-drive, the sense-component can receive an object with the impression of active determination, while its formal counterpart can present that same item while appearing to

receive it.²⁹ And while, prior to 1795, the relationship between form and sense is a matter of denotative fiat—beauty: harmony; sublime: opposition—the *Ästhetische Erziehung* inserts an element of contingency: “Wahr ist es, [der Triebe] Tendenzen widersprechen sich, aber, was wohl zu bemerken ist, nicht in denselben Objekten, und was nicht aufeinander trifft, kann nicht gegeneinander stossen” (*ÄE* 13; 2). Fundamentally, form and sense can pursue respective agendas without infringing on one another’s operations; those agendas are not mutually exclusive or zero-sum. And if the two *appear* in contention, “so sind sie es erst geworden durch eine freie Übertretung der Natur, indem sie sich selbst missverstehen und ihre Sphären verwirren” (*ÄE* 13; 2). It is a situational effect and error—not a conceptual inevitability—that form and sense come into conflict. This is Schiller’s diagnosis of the French Revolution: the revolutionary event found a popular base that, by virtue of historical factors like the division of labor and social stratification, suffered from a dangerous imbalance of form and sense.³⁰ As a result, the French were unprepared for their new freedoms, and abused them violently.

The task, then, is to cultivate *internal* conditions that facilitate proper handling of *external* liberties—the *telos* of aesthetic education is first and foremost “wholeness of character” (*Totalität des Charakters*), in which *Wechselwirkung* obtains between inner faculties of form and sense. That *Totalität* is absent in the 1790s neither by accident nor necessity—it is a product of social history.³¹ In other words, Schiller is proposing an anthropology: his chief concern is the developmental trajectory and properties of human beings, under which rubric Schiller interprets

²⁹ The interdetermination of active and passive modes is especially important in Rancière’s reading: “The Revolution turned to Terror, in Schiller’s view, because it still adhered to the model according to which an active intellectual faculty constrains passive sensible materiality.” *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, 32.

³⁰ Alt, “Arbeit,” 108: Schiller attributes the failure to a “fehlende leibseelische Totalität des neuzeitlichen Individuums, [die] die Sinnlichkeit und Geist zusammenführen soll.”

³¹ Ulrich Karthaus: “Dass diese “Totalität des Charakters” fehlt, ist kein Zufall, sondern eine Folge des geschichtlichen Fortschrittes: erst die Arbeitsteilung ermöglichte die Vervollkommung von Fähigkeiten und Kenntnissen in Handwerk und Technik, in Wissenschaften und Künsten.” “Schiller und die Französische Revolution,” *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft* 33 (1989), 221.

the modern malformation of form and sense drives, as well as the resultant political disaster.³²

Consistent with this anthropological understanding, Schiller defines *Spiel*—the crucial innovation that overcomes the drives’ discordance—as human completeness itself: “der Mensch spielt nur, wo er in voller Bedeutung des Worts Mensch ist, und er ist nur da ganz Mensch, wo er spielt” (*ÄE* 15; 9). Elliptical statements like that, together with the anthropological orientation of the work as a whole, have enticed many to conclude the aesthetic letters are Schiller’s flight from difficult political realities into ‘apolitical humanism,’ a commonplace that recent scholarship has helped to dislodge.³³

Exactly the opposite is the case: the *Ästhetische Erziehung* is expressly political, most explicitly when it comes to determining the ends of artistic practice. In letter two, Schiller defines the “most perfect work of art” as the “construction of true political freedom,”³⁴ where, not two years previously in “Über das Pathetische,” he defined art’s “final purpose” (“letzter Zweck”) as the presentation of supersensible morality.³⁵ But Schiller’s politics is indirect, and this is what makes it appear disengaged. Directness is a *problem* for Schiller—in his view it was *the* problem of the Revolution: the revolutionaries went straight from (as they conceived it) tyranny to liberty, and ended at carnage. Schiller’s contribution is the intermediary condition of the aesthetic, a preparatory ground where internal faculties can be reciprocally configured.

³² Alt, “Arbeit,” 107-8: “Das Versagen der politischen Aufklärung lässt sich, so sein Befund, auf die fehlende geistig-sinnliche Durchformung des Individuums zurückführen, ist mithin anthropologisch, nicht aber intellektuell-programmatisch bedingt.”

³³ The prevalent and misguided tendency is traceable to Lukacs—see Alt, “Arbeit,” 109; the political dimension of Schiller’s aesthetics is pronounced in Beiser, *Schiller as Philosopher*; Alt, “Arbeit”; Oellers, “Bürger von Frankreich”; Karthaus, “Schiller und die Französische Revolution”; and was already picked up on by Jameson in *Marxism and Form* (1971; see 89-90), who was writing very much against the Lukacsian grain. Subsequent in-text citations of Jameson as *MF*.

³⁴ “...sich mit dem vollkommensten aller Kunstwerke, mit dem Bau einer wahren politischen Freiheit zu beschäftigen” (*ÄE* 2;1).

³⁵ Alt, “Arbeit,” 116: “Im Erhabenen ist die politische Moral, in der Erfahrung des Schönen die Idee staatlicher Freiheit vermittelt bezeichnet.”

Before being liberated as political subjects, we need to secure a more basic *human* freedom—internal reciprocity of the drives—and we achieve the latter only aesthetically.³⁶ As the passage I quoted in the introduction to this chapter (*ÄE* 2; 5) makes clear, Schiller believes the *only* prospect for political progress is the aesthetic path (“durch das ästhetische den Weg nehmen”), and specifically that of *Schönheit*. Aesthetic education is the far-sighted alternative to the premature immediacy of Revolution,³⁷ and its reciprocal design combats two prevalent forms of political degeneracy, each derived from a specific imbalance: barbarism—the crime of the Jacobins, in which “Grundsätze” destroy “Gefühle”—and savagery, where sense-impulses tyrannize over principle (*ÄE* 4; 6).

Nonetheless, Schiller offers no injunctions, or even instructions of any kind, for politicians. This decision relates to another property that makes *Ästhetische Erziehung* seem apolitical, but is in fact a core component of its politics: the autonomy of art. The Jacobin episode made evident the dark side of state-mandated virtue, which complemented Schiller’s own liberal aversion to any government program of civic education.³⁸ Such a program had to come from citizens themselves—in Schiller’s case, artists, who in keeping themselves separate from the official machinery of the state, are better able to assess, criticize or affirm its operations. Peter-André Alt describes one major boon of this distance: art can disclose freedom in a world that is unfree.

Schiller versteht [gegen Herder] unter der Kunstautonomie die Freiheit von vorgängigen Zwecken und, damit verknüpft, eine Form der funktionalen Selbstbindung... diese Selbstbindung... ermöglicht es der Literatur, sich gegen die Kontingenz eines permanenten

³⁶ Oellers, “Bürger von Frankreich,” 31: “Die menschliche Freiheit als Voraussetzung der politischen sei (und davon handelt die Schillersche Abhandlung ja im wesentlichen) nur durch die Bildung zum Schönen, zur Kunst erreichbar.”

³⁷ Alt, “Arbeit,” 113: die “Idee der ästhetischen Erziehung geht vom Bewusstsein einer Langzeitperspektive aus.”

³⁸ Beiser, *Schiller as Philosopher*, 127: “Either the state must do something without the help of its citizens, or the citizens must do something without the help of the state. Schiller opts for the latter... Schiller’s reservations about the state go beyond his worries about its corruption. Their ultimate source lies with his own liberal principles, according to which the state should not interfere with the activity of its citizens.”

Weltbezugs zu schützen, zugleich jedoch den Vorschein der sozialen Freiheit im freien Spiel ihrer Formen sichtbar zu machen. (“Arbeit,” 116)

Art discloses possibilities—in this instance, emancipatory opportunities occluded in the course of worldly events. Following Alt, we should understand beauty “nicht als Exil des enttäuschten Zeitkritikers [Lukacs et al.], sondern als Erprobungsraum für die Erfahrung gesellschaftlicher Autonomie” (“Arbeit,” 118). The art of the beautiful is an experimental space for the presentation of social forms. Fredric Jameson likens the experience to an “apprenticeship for the real political and social freedom to come. In art, consciousness prepares itself for a change in the world itself and at the same time learns to make demands on the real world which hasten that change” (*MF* 90). Art brings empirical conditions into exchange with an imaginary—we might say hypothetical—mode, and in so doing, constructs a “revolutionary blueprint,” an image of political transformation—such, for Jameson, is the politics of Schiller’s aesthetic program. This is paradoxical autonomy Rancière finds so innovative in Schiller: art engages politics precisely in maintaining some remoteness from the political, in constructing an alternate “sensorium” outside the everyday public rhythms that are the object of politics proper.

The onus of social change is thus on the practitioners of this sensorium—Beiser observes that “on a practical level, [aesthetic education] puts an enormous burden on the artists who would execute it. For they not only have to maintain their integrity throughout the corruptions of the age, but they also have to influence the public. Furthermore, they must achieve all this without the aid of the government” (*SP* 129). The question of how artistic works are supposed to do that—a matter never engaged directly in Schiller’s treatise—occupies the last section of this chapter. As a prelude to that discussion, I want to introduce a relationship that is crucial for my larger argument about Schiller, between approaches to *history* and the concept of *play*.

History and *Spiel*

The Jacobins renounced history as both a fact and a concept. A central conceit of their political program was a radical break from the history of French monarchy and all vestiges of the *ancien régime*. This was the revolutionary imperative of *regeneration*, and it called for far more than a series of institutional corrections: as Furet writes, “the issue was not to reform French society but to reinstitute the social pact on the basis of man’s free will” (“Terror,” 148). Rather than capitulate to tradition, as had their predecessors, the Jacobins proposed to fashion anew the French nation—theirs was a political morality that built from the ground up, in which process the Terror played a crucial role: “If the Republic of free citizens was not yet possible, it was because men, perverted by their past history, were wicked; by means of the Terror, the Revolution—a history without precedent, entirely new—would make a new man” (Furet 148-49). What remained of the past had to be purged—its remnants infected the national body and manifested in a deficit of revolutionary virtue. It was exactly that absence that the Terror was designed to remedy: in eliminating counterrevolutionaries, i.e. adherents of traditional society, it forcefully integrated a national consensus “without precedent.” In other words, the Jacobins could defend trumpeting “the people” of France while killing thousands of those actual people by leveraging a specific conception of history: those still tainted by the past were in fact enemies of “the people,” and the popular cause demanded that they be removed.³⁹

This particular feature of Jacobin revolutionary ideology—its insistence on the absolute newness of the Revolution—was one of the most contrary to Schiller tendencies, and not just because of its programmatic linkage to the Terror. Schiller himself was an academic historian

³⁹Additionally, Bernard Manin has shown that the category “enemy” increasingly displaced other theoretical justifications for revolutionary measures, especially those derived from Rousseau’s work. Effectively, Robespierre used the discourse of “enemies” to further distance the Revolution from any sort of precedent, whether theoretical or empirical. See “Rousseau,” *Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, 837.

who, in the years immediately preceding the appearance of his *Neue Thalia* essays, published studies of the Dutch Revolt, the Thirty-Years War, and other significant episodes in European history. In “Was heißt und zu welchem Ende studiert man Universalgeschichte?”, his inaugural lecture as a history professor at Jena in May 1789, he expounded the merits of universal history as a course of study. Wolfgang Riedel has argued that “the reconciliation of the ideal with the principle of reality can be seen most clearly in Schiller’s relationship to history”—Schiller’s ongoing examination of the historical process led him to question the teleological optimism of his youth, and he continued to revise his (ideal) conception of history as more concrete data came in.⁴⁰ That is to say, while Schiller’s conception of history—his understanding of its properties, implications, and their bearing on the present—may have changed throughout his life, at no point did he wholly abandon the category itself. If he had reservations about the manifest course of history, he nonetheless never approached Robespierre’s conceit of a totally new beginning, outside any antecedent process. But the French Revolution, and especially the Terror, posed a problem for Schiller that concerned precisely this question, i.e. the status of history: the Jacobin phase showed him the danger of a totally ahistorical political ideology, but he could not simply counter Robespierre and unconditionally *affirm* history, because exactly this history had terminated in the Terror. In short, Schiller wanted to adopt a critical distance to history as it had transpired empirically, while retaining it both as a productive category in itself and a check on any potentially barbarous politics of national renewal.

One solution lay in the aesthetic letters: *Spiel*. Schiller could render the opposed terms—in this case, total renunciation and affirmation of history—reciprocal. But first, he had to demonstrate some analogy between those principles and the antagonism between form and sense

⁴⁰ Wolfgang Riedel, “Religion and Violence in Schiller’s Late Tragedies,” *Who is this Schiller Now? Essays on His Reception and Significance* (Rochester: Camden House, 2011), 248.

that is the natural jurisdiction of the play-drive. The evidence was there: in their complete break with history, the Jacobins elevated *reason itself*, the most complete manifestation of formality, as the source of social design; it was only in utterly expunging the past that a *fully rational*—the form-drive demands totality—plan could be imposed. Jacobin governance was invention as pure activity with no external check, unqualified acting-*on*, exactly the one-sided prerogative of the *Formtrieb*. Conversely, the Jacobins consistently framed the concrete history they opposed, the *ancien régime*, in terms of corruption, venality, self-interest, encroachment—the very sins of the *Stofftrieb*.⁴¹ And more generally, empirical history has produced the world as it is (available for our sense experience). It is past, yes, but all that is manifestly present belongs to its trajectory. There is alternatively the category of the possible, history as it could have been. We engage possibility through the imagination—*formally*, in terms of aesthetic education, because possibilities are not available to sense—just as we sensuously experience the path of empirical history in the course of our daily lives. What would it look like to put these categories into play?

Correspondence with Goethe and Körner later in the decade suggests Schiller tries to do exactly that, but in a new context. The letter of July 19, 1799 to Goethe is representative: three months into writing *Maria Stuart* (1800), Schiller reports he is experiencing difficulty, “weil ich den poetischen Kampf mit dem historischen Stoff darinn bestehen mußte und Mühe brauchte, der Phantasie eine Freiheit über die Geschichte zu verschaffen” (*Klassische Dramen* 545). *Maria Stuart* is a history play, and at first glance, it appears Schiller wants to free his active faculty (“Phantasie”) from the bonds of historical “Stoff,” his chosen empirical material. (First note the

⁴¹ It is worth mentioning here that the empirical Robespierre embodied the *Formtrieb* almost uncannily. He was willfully chaste and displayed, as Gueniffey writes, a “total absence of passion... this was the man in whom the spirit of the Revolution was made flesh... this power can be ascribed in part to Robespierre’s personality: beyond the reach of passion, he was fully available to virtue... Robespierre perfected ideological discourse in the highest degree because he was himself ideology incarnate.” “Robespierre,” 299.

use of “Stoff” here already implies semantically the analogy I describe in the last paragraph: *Stoff* is the content of history.⁴²) But why is this even a problem? Why doesn’t he simply write straight from his imagination? That would be to forego *Spiel*, to abandon any reciprocal exchange between history and possibility. There is no reason for Schiller to write the letter, other than that he has imposed this task on himself—he needs both *Phantasie* and *Stoff*, and he is struggling with how to configure them. He knows that he does not want to present either alone: pure fantasy replicates the conceit of the Jacobins, while writing a play that strives to represent the past “as it was” would simply display a problematic empirical history he wants to criticize.

Schiller’s dramatic work at the end of the 1790s attests to the persistence of this problematic. After concluding his theoretical period with *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung* (1795-96), Schiller made a forceful return to playwriting with the *Wallenstein* trilogy (1798-99), *Maria Stuart*, and *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* (1801). The plays follow in rapid succession, and appear to display a common principle: each is explicitly grounded in empirical circumstances—General Wallenstein, Mary Stuart and Joan of Arc are and were well-known, as were the surrounding political conflicts in which they figured—and yet contains marked interventions by Schiller, among them Max Piccolomini in *Wallenstein*, Mortimer in *Maria Stuart*, and in *Die Jungfrau von Orleans*, Johanna’s death in battle versus at the stake. Schiller’s inventions are decisive elements in the dramas; fantasy and history together propel the action, the environment of which is the empirical past. The plays almost seem to advance an historiographic maxim: that one should engage history with both internal faculties—*Form-Phantasie* and *Stoff-Vergangenheit*—in play. The dramas themselves suggest the historical misfortunes they depict result from an imbalance of forces, but that is a discussion I will reserve for chapter two. For the

⁴² This use is consistent in Schiller’s correspondence regarding the history plays. See also January 5, 1801 to Körner on *Jungfrau von Orleans*.

moment, Ulrich Karthaus has a formula that captures well the relationship between history and aesthetic play I've tried to describe here: Schiller is chiefly interested in "den ästhetischen Schein, der allein das Reich der Freiheit darstellen kann. Die Wirklichkeit dient ihm dabei als *Stoff*, der veredelt, gesteigert, womöglich auch getilgt werden muß" ("Französische Revolution," 238; original emphasis).

Drama as Praxis

Schiller's *Ästhetische Erziehung* contains no direct prescriptions for the realization of its program, but that does not mean the practical component of aesthetic education is purely a matter of speculation. I will contend the three dramas I mentioned above—*Wallenstein*, *Maria Stuart*, and *Die Jungfrau von Orleans*, which directly follow the last aesthetic treatises chronologically—are just such a form of praxis, are attempts to instantiate the program of aesthetic education. We know from Schiller this praxis has to be artistic: the French Revolution made clear that direct application of philosophical principles to extant political realities, when people are not prepared to wield those principles, fails catastrophically; Schiller's liberalism forbade his simply relinquishing the task to politicians; and the whole episode of the Revolution displayed a gross impoverishment (to speak modestly) of sensibility. Therefore the alternative had to be indirect, pedagogical, popular, and sensuous. Among the art forms, theater is uniquely suited to those demands.

It is important to remember that the institution of the theater was central to the initial, pre-Jacobin phase of the French Revolution (1789-92). As I describe in the introduction, the *ancien régime* had systematically disenfranchised and degraded most Paris playhouses, banning both spoken language and, finally, the display of any image whatsoever (i.e. actors had to

perform silently behind a veil) in the years leading up to 1789.⁴³ Reversing the *ancien régime* on this count was an organizing priority of the Revolution's first wave, which, to quote Huet,

meant to stage both the erasure of the old regime and the emergence of the new order, using what the *Revolutions de Paris* called "the powerful language of images." The desire for a public revolution was further enhanced by a series of decrees regulating all levels of performance, permitting the unchecked proliferation of theaters, the simultaneous rehabilitation of the actor and the executioner, and the decision, by the Convention, that a selection of patriotic plays be produced, at no cost to the public, for the education and benefit of all citizens. The use of Paris as a stage for the revolutionary project was extraordinarily successful, and observers could not help seeing the events of 1789 and 1792 as a powerful, if mixed, theatrical genre. ("Performing Arts," 136)⁴⁴

In its first few years, the Revolution framed itself as a spectacle, as a *display* of popular renewal. It is thus no surprise that Lefort and Rancière will later characterize the politics of the revolutionary period as theatrical—in fact their language starts to seem much less figurative—nor that the Jacobins, on this particular question, quite resembled the *ancien régime*: theater was the hallmark of the Revolution's moderate phase, its early stage driven by the Girondins. Spectacle, image, sensation, ultimately linguistic representation itself—in Robespierre's vision, these could only stand *between* citizens and revolutionary virtue (Huet 142-3). The trappings of theater diluted the power of the Revolution, and the moderates of 1789-92, who would eventually oppose the king's execution—for Robespierre, an unforgiveable treason—were proof. Robespierre's own espoused sublimity—his intense pursuit of the ineffable, the unrepresentably absolute, virtue so pure it could not even be stated—was more precise than its antecedent philosophical formulations: it had a specifically *anti-theatrical* agenda. Robespierre renounced spectacles, representative statements, and the very notion that works of theater have any productive role in a republic. In the spring of 1794, *ancien*-style censorship was again imposed on the playhouses, this time by the Jacobins (Huet 138).

⁴³ For this whole progression, see my introduction above and Huet, "Performing Arts," 137.

⁴⁴ This as well as the citations of Huet in the following paragraph are also in the discussion of her essay in the introduction.

Aesthetic education is the programmatic counter to Jacobin aesthetics (if we can call it that), and it is not hard to see Schiller's subsequent literary work as its creative extension. Schiller selects the Jacobins' hated genre, theater, and the conceptual touchstones of his late history plays are mediation and representation. He engages his present, but only indirectly, by writing dramas about the political past.⁴⁵ These plays present historical personages, but, consistent with Schiller's own dramatic principles, idealize and elevate them into representative figures in a human typology. As Schiller writes in "Über den Gebrauch des Chors in der Tragödie," his preface to *Die Braut von Messina* (1803), "die tragischen Personen... sind keine wirkliche Wesen, die bloß der Gewalt des Moments gehorchen und bloß ein Individuum darstellen, sondern ideale Personen und Repräsentanten ihrer Gattung, die das Tiefe der Menschheit aussprechen" (KD 289-90). In this way, Schiller's *dramatis personae* embody principles, but that is never the whole story: the plays show these principles in contest not just with each other, but with ambivalent real circumstances and limitations. They thus depict a specific kind of mediation—that experienced by ideality in its contact with material recalcitrance, indifference, confusion, contingency. Hence Riedel's judgment that history is where Schiller reconciles the ideal with the real; and it is no accident Riedel chooses the late dramas as his occasion to profile Schiller the *realist* ("Religion and Violence," 247-48).

All of which is packaged in a theatrical display. Where Robespierre renounced images and words in the name of moral immediacy, aesthetic education takes as its vehicle the live aural

⁴⁵ Alt, "Arbeit," 118-19: "Vergangenheit, wie sie im Wettstreit mit der Antike hervortritt, und Zukunft, die im Entwurf der Ideen von Mensch, Geschichte und Gesellschaft umrissen wird, stehen in Schillers Denkmodell am Beginn, während die Gegenwart gerade das ist, was später zur Erscheinung kommt. Die Freiheit der Kunst, die dem Menschen im Medium ästhetischer Erfahrung Autonomie-Experimente ermöglicht, ist nur dort gegeben, wo die Gegenwart nicht den Stoff für ihre Produkte, sondern den Horizontschirm einer erst zu erreichenden Zukunft darstellt."

and visual representation of an event. Drama belongs to the category *Schein* that is central to the educative capacity of beauty:

Die für die *Briefe* zentrale Lehre vom Spiel als Organ der Freiheit, die in der Rezeption des Schönen erlebbar wird, ist zunächst eine Theorie des Scheins als Medium individueller Erfahrung. Sie schließt das Bewußtsein ein, daß der Mensch durch die Begegnung mit dem Schönen bisher unbekannte Einblicke in seine eigenen Handlungsoptionen gewinne. Das Schöne, so lautet Schillers fundamentale Prämisse, programmiert menschliche Erfahrung und bringt den Menschen im Wortsinn auf den ‘Geschmack der Freiheit’. (Alt, “Arbeit,” 111)

Rather than issue a moral injunction—the *modus operandi* of Jacobin sublimity—the aesthetic image provides a “taste of freedom” by disclosing a range of possibilities for action; beauty opens and hypothesizes where sublimity has always already decided what is right. Unlike Jacobinism, the beautiful image does not impart a moral principle that subjects must obey in order to be “free”; its task is simply to produce an effect conducive to individuals’ *realization* of their (political) freedom, which is less a matter of moral integrity than self-determination: “Freiheit wird hier als die Möglichkeit verstanden, nach eigenem Maß zu leben; die Freiheit des Staatsbürgers ist die Möglichkeit, nach eigenen Vorstellungen und nach eigenem Gutdünken persönliche Ziele zu erstreben” (Karthaus 217). The point of aesthetic education—and the specific duty of what takes place in the arena of aesthetic *Schein*—is to endow those personal *Vorstellungen* and *Ziele* with internal balance, with reciprocity of form and sense.

In its emphasis on individual self-determination, such a concept of freedom evokes classical liberalism, but as Beiser writes, “Schiller’s fundamental principle—that civil freedom must derive from moral character—ultimately derives from the modern *republican* tradition” (*SP* 124-5). For Beiser, straight liberalism is individualistic in the sense that self-interest is the governing principle: according to “modern individualism... to establish a state nothing more is necessary than the self-interest of its citizens”; conversely, “a republic requires that people should participate in the affairs of the state, and that they should restrain their interests for the

sake of the common good” (*SP* 125). Schiller does not endorse self-interest—“moral character,” the product of aesthetic education, displaces it—but neither does he submit wholly to the republican maxim, at least in the statist incarnation of the Jacobins. In the latter case, the hegemonic category “people” (in application, coterminous with the state) obliterates all individuality in the name of popular regeneration. True to the principles of *Spiel*, Schiller retains both individual and collective and brings them into productive exchange: his republicanism is predicated on cultivating an educated character among the people, who realize their freedom individually; individuality here is not self-interest, but rather a sense for one’s position in the shared civic mission of the republic.

For Beiser, Schiller’s distinctive contribution to republican thought is his prioritization of aesthetics (*SP* 126), and I think we can specify that theater, as an instrument of aesthetic education, is ideally suited to initiating the play between individual and collective I just described. Schiller considers this exchange a core task of culture itself,⁴⁶ and the properties of drama, as a form of aesthetic experience, are expeditious. Theater is unique among literary forms in that it convenes a communal space—it is directed toward a *Publikum*.⁴⁷ This component is central to Lefort’s and Rancière’s shared thesis that modern politics is essentially theatrical—politics *qua* theater is codified in the 1790s because that is when a *competitive public sphere* becomes the official scene of politics proper. Once the king *qua* symbolic center is dead, politics is composed of competing representations on display, on a stage. Lefort and Rancière demonstrate well the conceptual affinity between theater and the public, which has its practical

⁴⁶ Beiser, *Schiller as Philosopher*, 140: “Schiller thinks that it is the task of culture to preserve the realm of individuality and variety as much as that of universality and unity.”

⁴⁷ Schiller, “Über den Gebrauch des Chors in der Tragödie,” in *Klassische Dramen*, 290: “[Tragische Personen] stehen gewissermaßen schon auf einem natürlichen Theater, weil sie vor Zuschauern sprechen und handeln, und werden eben deswegen desto tauglicher, von dem Kunsttheater zu einem Publikum zu reden.”

cognate in the fact that drama is a display not for one but many spectators. Yet the effect of a properly constructed aesthetic *Schein*—the reciprocal interplay of internal faculties—is something strictly individual: one person’s form- and sense-drives are differently configured than those of the next, and we can only experience their interplay individually. The point is not that we experience the *same* interior exchange—as though our respective internal constitutions had to somehow perfectly reflect one another (this would be Jacobin virtue)—rather that all of us *do experience* some sensuo-formal interplay. Hence the communal space of the performance: in Rancière’s terms, it is important that we all visit the aesthetic sensorium, not that each of us has precisely the same experience of it. At no point does aesthetic education attempt to erase individual variation, yet its theatrical program is presented to groups. The ambition is to enliven both.

Chapter 2

Politics as *Spiel*:

Schiller's Late Historical Dramas

Schiller's writing career was conspicuously segmented: he published *Die Räuber*, *Die Verschwörung des Fiesco zu Genua*, *Kabale und Liebe*, and *Don Karlos* between 1781 and 1787, then stopped writing plays for a decade; instead he produced histories—*Geschichte des Abfalls der vereinigten Niederlande* in 1788 and *Geschichte des dreißigjährigen Kriegs*, finished in 1792; then came the aesthetic works—theoretical essays on the sublime and the beautiful from 1791, finally the famous 1795 treatises on aesthetic education and naïve and sentimental poetry; he then returned to playwriting with the late, “classical” dramas—the *Wallenstein* trilogy, *Maria Stuart*, *Die Jungfrau von Orleans*, *Die Braut von Messina*, finally *Wilhelm Tell*, the last drama Schiller completed before his death in 1805.

Taken together, we can outline four thematic phases to Schiller's career: the early dramas (1781-1787); the histories (1788-1792); aesthetic theory (1791-1795); and late dramas (1798-1804). Much of Schiller scholarship reflects this periodization. Volumes like *Schiller als Historiker* (1995) and Beiser's *Schiller as Philosopher*, as their titles suggest, focus on Schiller's work within the purview of a specific phase of his career, respectively as an historian and a

theorist.¹ Similarly, with respect to Schiller's dramatic work, two recent studies are structured by the division between his "early" (1780s) and "late" plays (*Wallenstein* and after).² Both are reception histories: David Pugh's *Schiller's Early Dramas: A Critical History* (2000) offers a synopsis of criticism on Schiller's 1780s dramas, while Kathy Saranpa's *Schiller's Wallenstein, Maria Stuart, and Die Jungfrau von Orleans: The Critical Legacy* (2002) traces commentary on Schiller's late plays back to their immediate reception by his contemporaries. Both studies make clear that the distinction between Schiller's early and late dramas is sufficiently long-standing in scholarship for contemporary studies to effectively presume it.

Still, there is an important specification to be made with respect to Saranpa's book: she does not take on Schiller's "classical" dramas as a whole, but instead selects *Wallenstein*, *Maria Stuart*, and *Die Jungfrau von Orleans*. Unlike *Die Braut von Messina* and *Wilhelm Tell*, these are historical dramas (Saranpa 5). The empirical referents for *Wallenstein*, *Maria Stuart*, and *Jungfrau*—respectively General Wallenstein's role in the Thirty Years' War, the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, and the history of Jeanne d'Arc—are and were well documented. Schiller, a former professional academic historian, knew the sources and the stories well, and in the case of *Wallenstein*, had published a book-length historical study on the material. This is another important distinction for Saranpa: though the early plays *Fiesko* and *Don Karlos* are also based on historical sources, they precede Schiller's work as a professional historian (*Schiller's Wallenstein*, 6). As I argue below, Schiller's thinking about history changes significant in the course of this work, with attendant implications for the dramas that follow.

¹ *Schiller als Historiker*. Ed. Otto Dann, Norbert Oellers, Ernst Osterkamp (Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler, 1995). Beiser cited above.

² David Pugh. *Schiller's Early Dramas: A Critical History* (Rochester, Suffolk: Camden House, 2000). And Kathy Saranpa, *Schiller's Wallenstein, Maria Stuart, and Die Jungfrau von Orleans: The Critical Legacy* (Rochester and Suffolk: Camden House, 2002).

Like Saranpa, I choose to focus on these three late history plays. I argue Schiller's sustained engagement with historical material between 1788 and 1792 allows him to introduce a dynamic between history and invention that is critical *Wallenstein*, *Maria Stuart* and *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* alike. Each play is the hybrid product of meticulous historical precision and bold creative intervention. The last chapter began to describe the conceptual basis of this interplay in Schiller's aesthetic theory, and now it is time to address his specific decisions in the dramas: what are the empirical circumstances he chooses—what sort of historical mosaic does he give us? What remains as it was documented, and where does Schiller intervene? And if we consider his inventions together, does any sort of consistent logic or theme emerge?

Three Levels of Play

I suggested in the last chapter that we approach Schiller's late dramas as attempts to instantiate the program of aesthetic education. If we grant that is the case, the prerogative of the works is to produce *Spiel*, the reciprocal mechanism at the heart of the *Ästhetische Erziehung*. In the theoretical treatise, *Spiel* initiates a productive and ultimately emancipatory interplay between the conflictual motive regions of formality (*Formtrieb*)—representing reason, morality, principle—and sensuousness (*Stofftrieb*): the maxims of physicality, sense-immersion, craving, desire. *Spiel* brings these drives into reciprocal exchange, and thus fashions a *Totalität des Charakters* Schiller considers a prerequisite for human freedom. In two signature chiasmi, Schiller logically conjoins this complete humanity with *Spiel*—“der Mensch spielt nur, wo er in voller Bedeutung des Wortes Mensch ist, und er ist nur da ganz Mensch, wo er spielt”—which is itself coterminous with *Schönheit*: “der Mensch soll mit der Schönheit nur spielen, und er soll

nur mit der Schönheit spielen.” The whole unifying procedure takes place under the auspices of beauty.

Such, we can assume, is roughly what takes place in any genuinely aesthetic experience: *Spiel* works its brokerage between form and sense and the subject is that much closer to *Totalität*. Still, this is only the most general formula of aesthetic freedom, and the question remains how to approach distinctions within the expansive terrain of *schöne Kunst*. If a measure of *Spiel* is the product in every case, do separate artistic forms nonetheless package and deliver that modicum differently? Does a drama induce *Spiel* like a painting? The subcategory of interest for this chapter is historical drama, specifically in the form presented by Schiller’s *Wallenstein*, *Maria Stuart*, and *Die Jungfrau von Orleans*, in which well-documented historical episodes are expressed in combination with select inventions. I described in the last chapter the relevance of this dynamic for *Spiel*: especially in the rhetoric of Robespierre and the Jacobins, there was an implicit analogy between empirical history and invention, on the one hand, and sense-corruption and moral transcendence, on the other. A new moral order would overcome the corruption of the past, a degeneracy most evident in the history of politics, which for the Jacobins was simply the history of tyrants and their interests. One use of the aesthetic letters’ conceptual vocabulary is that it allowed Schiller to diagnose this deeply ideological model of political change—I’ve suggested the historical dramas are the response to this one-sided presentation (or non-presentation) of history: Schiller, in the reciprocal spirit of *Spiel*, wants both empirics and imagination, and in some degree, wants them to be evident as such. He wants to treat critical episodes in political history both as they were and could have been. For convenience I will call this type of play *historiographic*; it is one of three levels of *Spiel* operating in Schiller’s historical dramas:

- (1) *Aesthetic Play* itself: the general form of reciprocal exchange between form and sense denotatively present in any work of fine art, by virtue of the fact that it is fine art;
- (2) *Historiographic Play*: exchange between empirical history and creative invention present in the formal construction of a work of fine art, in this case a drama;
- (3) *Substantive Play*, or play at the level of dramatic content: figures or aspects of the drama can embody the constituent elements of aesthetic education—form, sense, even *Spiel* itself.

In what follows, I am chiefly concerned with levels (2) and (3): the historiographic play between empirics and imagination, and the embodiment of form-sense dynamics on the stage. I have already given a brief profile of level (2), and (3) should be fairly straightforward, especially given Schiller's tendency to idealize his characters, to render them into living principles.³ But the three dramas under consideration are teeming with figures—nearly 100 in total. It is not difficult to read *some* traces of form- and sense-logic into most of their expressions: form and sense are, after all, the omnipresent categories of Schillerian psychology. Thus, in the hope of making this study more precise, I come to level (3) only through (2): I first itemize the contrast between history and invention—i.e. what are the empirical circumstances, and what specifically does Schiller invent?—and then explore form-sense relations within that particular dynamic. Do Schiller's inventions resonate with the doctrine of *Spiel*? Is there *Spiel* already present in the empirics, or are these episodes in which history dramatically *failed* to play?

The rough arrangement of the chapter follows the empirics-invention split of level (2): in the next section, I address history—what circumstances and eras does Schiller choose in these three plays, and what, if any, collective picture emerges from the selection of historical

³ See the passage from “Über den Gebrauch des Chors in der Tragödie” (*Klassische Dramen* 289-90) quoted the last chapter.

materials? I'll then turn to the plays themselves, and focus on Schiller's inventions: having chosen his historical episodes, how does he intervene, what (and who) does he make up?

Schiller and European History

If Schiller's late plays are exercises in aesthetic education, and that education is an attempt to diagnose and correct the calamities of the French Revolution, it seems fair to ask why Schiller does not write about the Revolution itself, or even anything historically close to it: the *nearest* events are those of *Wallenstein*, set 150 years before Bastille, and the jump to *Die Jungfrau von Orleans*, set around 1430, more than doubles that historical distance. Alt suggests the reasons are multiform: for one thing, the late 1790s were already flooded with German plays about the French Revolution, especially comedies designed to mock the Jacobin extremists⁴; Schiller worried also that the proximity of his dramatic material to current popular interest would invariably limit his own artistic freedom.⁵ But just as importantly, Schiller wanted that history itself—he did not choose the materials for *Wallenstein*, *Maria Stuart*, and *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* simply because they were temporally remote, rather because they presented *Brennpunkte* of European political history, and in this way illuminated the path to revolutionary France and European geopolitics around 1800. Alt again:

Hinzu kam, daß die machtpolitischen und gesellschaftlichen Spannungsfelder der vornapoleonischen Revolutionsära wesentlich durch die Entwicklungen des frühmodernen Europa von der spanischen Weltherrschaft zum französischen Absolutismus (1550-1700) bestimmt worden waren. Über konfessionelle Tendenzen verstärkte Interessengegensätze (so der

⁴ “Gerade in der Phase um 1800 entsteht eine Flut von Dramen, die direkt auf die französische Zeitereignisse Bezug nehmen... Überaus populär (und dabei der Obrigkeit genehm) waren Jakobinerkomödien, die sich darauf verlegten, die verbreiteten Vorurteile gegen den politischen Radikalismus nach vertrautem Gattungsmuster mit dem Spott über allgemeine menschliche Torheit zu verbinden.” *Schiller: Leben – Werk – Zeit*, Band II (München: Beck, 2000), 376.

⁵ “Da die Möglichkeit der künstlerisch unabhängigen Verfügung über den Gegenstand mit dem Grad seiner Aktualität zu schwinden scheint, besteht für Schiller die Verpflichtung, historisch entlegene Sujets zu wählen. Diese Regel—angedeutet schon in der Schrift zur ästhetischen Erziehung—gilt auch deshalb, weil zeitgeschichtliche Themen das materielle Interesse des Publikums durch modische Sensationen zu fesseln drohen, ohne es, wie geboten, in der Form aufzuheben.” Alt, *Schiller*, 377.

jahrhundertealte dynastische Konflikt Englands mit Frankreich), territorial bedingte Auseinandersetzungen (zwischen Preußen, Österreich, Polen und Rußland) und militärstrategisch veranlaßte Krisen (etwa das von Spanien, den Niederlanden und England geführte Ringen um die Seehoheit) bildeten nicht selten dauerhafte Spannungsfelder, die noch für die europäische Staatenwelt um 1800 Bedeutung besaßen. Hinter Schillers Neigung zu Stoffen aus der Zeit zwischen Reformation und Aufklärung verbirgt sich mithin keine apolitische Haltung, sondern das Bewußtsein, daß sich die Machtverhältnisse der eigenen Epoche nur in Kenntnis ihrer historischen Voraussetzungen begreifen ließen. (*Schiller, 373*)

The point for Schiller is to grasp the Revolution in terms of its long-term historical gestation. In this way, Schiller's may be the most direct possible rebuff to the Jacobin conceit that the Revolution interrupted, radically broke with antecedent political history. It is also perfectly consistent with the principles of aesthetic education, an essentially historical program premised on the large-scale anthropological trajectory of human societies. With respect to early modern Europe, Alt mentions several precedent strands that frame not only Schiller's historiography of that period (and thus his developmental understanding of the French Revolution) but his historical dramas as well: absolutism, which structures the basic power dispute in *Maria Stuart*; the long-standing dynastic conflict between England and France that is the immediate context of *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* and also frames much of *Maria Stuart*; and the convolved network of military and territorial tensions among Austria, Prussia, Spain, the Netherlands, etc., conflicts that drove the Thirty Years' War and determine the circumstances of *Wallenstein*. Together these dynamics compose an historical system in which the French Revolution, far from constituting a radical break, is thoroughly enmeshed: the same *ancien régime* overthrown by the Revolution supported Mary Stuart's claim to the English throne, and the first wave of revolutionary wars, initiated by France against Austria in 1792, reprised the French-Habsburg rivalry that dominated 1618-1648.

Schiller's choice of empirical material in the plays thus showcases a specific, pertinent arc of European political history: the preconditions of the French Revolution. It also allows

Schiller to explore the phenomenon of politics itself in a more conceptual, axiomatic register. That is, Schiller wants his history to be not only relevant (in the sense of illuminating aspects of the Revolution) but also *emblematic*, presenting “typische Modelle politischen Handelns” and “Grundformen politischen Denkens” (Alt, *Schiller*, 373; 375). In this vein, Riedel calls the historical dramas “exemplary histories” aimed at an “essence” behind the events themselves.⁶ The plays depict not only particular, contingent histories—events as they empirically took place—but also the essential forms of political thought and behavior embedded in those histories. I’ve given the basics of the first category; what Schiller understands by political-historical “essences” is still unclear.

I’ll offer hypotheses to that question after addressing the problem of teleology: Schiller’s approach to the Revolution as a historical vanishing point seems to suggest it, even if his ultimate judgment of the event itself is negative. If we accept that early modern European history results in the Revolution, it’s possible to come away with a sense of historical movement as directional, linear, logical. Crucially, this view allows even the harshest criticism of the Revolution to be subsumed under a general optimism centered on the “perfectibility” of history—the Revolution could simply be construed as an unfortunate error, or more clichéd, a learning experience. Schiller himself espouses such overall optimism in the 1789 lecture on universal history, and in his later work this will be an important point of reversal. The presumption that political history somehow inexorably *progresses* disappears in the late dramas, where we get a more raw and agnostic view of power itself.⁷ The historical telos that guided the young Schiller seems only to have waned after it was announced: Elisabeth Krimmer writes,

⁶ Riedel, “Religion and Violence,” 249.

⁷ “Seine [späten] Dramen inszenieren die unwegsame Welt der Macht, ohne daß sie die optimistischen Prognosen der Jenaer Antrittsvorlesung über die Perfektibilität der Universalgeschichte stützen.” Alt, *Schiller*, 375.

“Schiller’s belief in an inherent order in history appears to have decreased over time until, in his later works, any affirmation of a higher meaning is hard to find.”⁸

Accepting that Schiller had and then lost an optimistic belief in historical order, and that his disenchantment took place sometime between the 1789 Jena lecture and *Wallenstein*, it remains to be seen what precisely was involved in that transition, and how Schiller’s late dramas relate to his change in perspective on history. Following Krimmer, Schiller’s cynical turn is datable to the years 1791-92, when he writes *Geschichte des Dreyßigjährigen Kriegs*. Striking with respect to that work, Schiller’s last historical study, is the “distinct discrepancy between beginning and end... the text falls short of the introductory assertion of a higher order (“höhere Ordnung”) in history” (“God’s Warriors,” 224). That is, Schiller begins the work with a teleological commitment—he will demonstrate the coherence of the Thirty Years’ War with a salutary, progressive model of history (Krimmer: “In the beginning, Schiller offered an unqualified assertion of the benefits of the war”)—that he fails to deliver, in which he himself loses faith, by the end. According to Krimmer, two forces are at work on him during this period: the dismal *Realpolitik* of his historical material—he ultimately could *not* reconcile the Thirty Years’ War with any beneficent historical telos—and “contemporary events in France, leading up to a declaration of war in 1792,” which themselves greatly “dampened Schiller’s historical optimism” (“God’s Warriors,” 225).

Still, the twin blows of 1618-48 and 1792 evidently do not lead Schiller to abandon *all* the trappings of teleology: he loses the optimism but keeps the developmental model; history is not a linear progression toward some final perfection but a trajectory of discernible

⁸ Elisabeth Krimmer, “God’s Warriors, Mercenaries, or Freedom Fighters? Politics, Warfare, and Religion in Schiller’s *Geschichte des Dreyßigjährigen Kriegs*.” in *Who is This Schiller Now?* 224.

consequences.⁹ This shift entails accepting a greater interpretive burden: one can no longer summarily conclude what comes later is more perfect, and thus must be prepared to identify not only regression, e.g. the Terror, but also the elision of opportunity, missed chances to build a greater and more redemptive politics, to avoid carnage and degradation. If the progression of history is no longer understood as stalwart necessity, we must become attentive to its moments of contingency, nodal points of possibility that could have been actualized in any number of ways. Schiller wants to provide a dramatic history that makes those points visible.

As such, it is no surprise that he selects episodes of dense and seemingly insuperable conflict, often centered on questions of sovereignty—who or what has final power? With respect to Schiller’s study of the Thirty Years’ War, “instead of the grand plan of historical progress, the text offers the lawlessness of soldiers and the self-interested actions of their leaders” (Krimmer, “God’s Warriors,” 228). Schiller’s material presented him with a vast array of actors and interests—monarchs, dukes, mercenaries, Catholics, Protestants, serving a half-dozen European powers—pursuing agendas hardly explicable in terms of their official allegiances. A picture emerges of the war as a violent aggregate of brute self-interest, straightforward power-aggrandizement, even aggression for its own sake.¹⁰ (It is not incidental that Hobbes publishes *Leviathan* (1651), with its famed “war of all against all,” in the immediate wake of the Thirty Years’ War.) The brutality of the conflict’s more notorious episodes—especially the 1630-31 Sack of Magdeburg—posed insurmountable counter-evidence to Schiller’s initial pretense that the war was inherently progressive, and even the most ostensibly noble axis of contention, the

⁹ In this sense, I am arguing Schiller adopts a kind of historicism reminiscent of Herder. Saranpa, *Schiller’s Wallenstein*, 33: “[Late-18th century] historicists believe in positive progress for mankind and in the ability of historians to understand history and reality, but they reject the notion of a teleological organization of history.”

¹⁰ Schiller coins the term “Gewaltunternehmer”—merchants of war, who profited from the spread of violence. See Krimmer, “God’s Warriors,” 227.

religious dispute between Protestants and Catholics, does not somehow stand apart from the others in Schiller's study, but is just "one element in a complicated mesh of motivations, which also includes the expectation of financial gain and relations of power and dependency" (Krimmer, "God's Warriors," 221). For Krimmer, this is the "most important insight of the text, namely that religion cannot be disentangled from its political, economic, social, and cultural contexts, and that any attempt to analyze religion in isolation is doomed to misunderstand its object" ("God's Warriors," 228). One can imagine why Krimmer places emphasis here: the Thirty Years' War is traditionally construed as a religious conflict and falls officially into the broad historiographic category "European wars of religion" following the Protestant Reformation. Yet as Schiller and Krimmer alike point out, the war was not a conflict driven simply by a denominational dispute, but a multiform web of dependency and influence in which "religion, finance, politics, and warfare are entangled in a combustible mix" ("God's Warriors," 217).

In the traditional reading, the 1648 Peace of Westphalia ended the war and inaugurated the modern system of sovereign nation-states. The second half of the 17th century also saw the flourishing of French absolute monarchy under Louis XIV (reigned 1643-1715), which system met its end with the Revolution and execution of Louis XVI in 1793. France's predecessor in this regard was England, which enjoyed its own golden age of sovereign rule—the reigns of Elizabeth I (until 1603) and James I (until 1625)—subsequent public disillusionment, and the eventual regicide of Charles I in 1649. The theoretical foundation of absolutism was formulated in the 1570s by Jean Bodin, who responded to the major legal issue raised by the religious wars: should a monarchial sovereign be subject to any other human power? Bodin answered in the negative: any stable social order had to be structured and controlled by a supreme will, "an

absolute prince who holds of none and is dependent on none.”¹¹ In Keith Baker’s reading of Bodin, “this will must necessarily be unitary. And to be unitary, it must necessarily be perpetual, indivisible (hence inalienable), and absolute: which is to say that it must be free of any conditions that would make it subject to the judgment of command of others.”¹² “Others,” in this context, refers to any outside human authority, because Bodin recognizes only divine and natural laws as legitimate checks on sovereignty.¹³ That the sovereign is independent from any other human power means, for Baker, it is “above the law in two senses: first, in the sense that the sovereign cannot be brought to judgment before it; and second, in the sense that prior laws cannot bind the sovereign in the free exercise of legislative will” (“Sovereignty,” 844).

In Schiller’s late history plays, this conception of absolutism operates as a theoretical conceit that is continually frustrated in practice.¹⁴ His study of the Thirty Years’ War showed him a conflict in which sovereigns were simply one group of actors among many, separated by quantitative rather than qualitative power differentials; and Charles I of England was tried, convicted, and executed by his subjects for treason—that is, an absolute sovereign was not only judged but executed by the law. For Schiller the historian, the Thirty Years’ War—in its capacity to level all echelons of power in the pursuit of material advantage—belied the very idea of absolutism. The clearest historical contrast he found was the Protestant Reformation, which for Schiller constituted “the most momentous and influential event in recent history,” for the reason that Protestantism emerges as a “transnational force that unites different nationalities in a

¹¹ Jean Bodin, *Six Books of the Commonwealth*, abridged and trans. M.J Tooley (Oxford: Alden Press), 37. Accessed online at http://www.yorku.ca/comminel/courses/3020pdf/six_books.pdf

¹² Keith Baker, “Sovereignty,” *Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, 844.

¹³ Bodin, *Six Books of the Commonwealth*, 27: “sovereign power given to a prince charged with conditions is neither properly sovereign, nor absolute, unless the conditions of appointment are only such as are inherent in the laws of God and of nature.”

¹⁴ See Alt, *Schiller*, 501: especially in *Maria Stuart*, “die unbedingte Souveränität, wie sie die Sozialphilosophie der frühen Neuzeit von Bodin über Lipsius bis zu Hobbes als Geschäftsgrundlage des starken Staates begreift, tritt hier in ein höchst zweifelhaftes Licht.”

common cause... *Religion* defines primary allegiances.”¹⁵ What excites Schiller about the Reformation is religion’s capacity to supersede political divisions, to act as a great unifier. In this way, the Reformation displayed in somewhat more complicated form the basic direction of influence between religion and politics present in late-Medieval monarchy: religion dictates and legitimates politics, not the other way around. A monarch in Medieval Europe is in place as a godly *steward*, and the stability of the monarchy depends on its perceived alignment with divine will (as we saw with Lefort in the previous chapter).

This is precisely the dynamic at work in Schiller’s late-Medieval play, *Die Jungfrau von Orleans*: the monarch Karl lacks the legitimacy and authority to maintain a unified France, and the play hinges on the interpretive question of whether Johanna represents God or the devil. *Maria Stuart* presents an elemental difficulty of absolutism: what happens when two sovereigns clash, when they claim the same throne? The macabre *Realpolitik* and multifarious power-jockeying of the Thirty Years’ War is on full display in *Wallenstein*, which in its framing conflict displays its remoteness from the culture of the absolutism historically preceding it: Wallenstein has determined it suits his interests to betray the Kaiser. This may be what Alt has in mind when he writes of political “Grundformen”: Schiller’s historical dramas are effectively a triptych of European political history, in which Schiller highlights not only separate eras but also, with respect to each one, the animating principle of political authority in various constellations. In the late Middle Ages, as Schiller sees it, the political question is essentially synonymous with the religious one: what does God want? Divine will determines political practice. In Schiller’s view, Protestantism begins to harness the political unifying power of Christianity, but this power is then challenged: theoretically, by the claims of absolute sovereignty; and practically, by the

¹⁵ Krimmer, “God’s Warriors,” 222; original emphasis.

brutal, levelling divisiveness of the Thirty Years' War. This arc of European history, from the 15th to the 17th centuries, was Schiller's chief interest as an academic historian (Alt, *Schiller*, 372), and so it is perhaps no surprise that he returns to dramatic writing with plays set during this period. But as is clear from the dramas themselves, Schiller's goal is hardly a straightforward recapitulation of "history as it was."

Die Jungfrau von Orleans

Today, Joan of Arc is an icon of western culture, but for over 300 years after her death in 1431, her story was relatively obscure. It took a collision of two dramas at the end of the 18th century to catapult her to fame: Voltaire's 1762 Enlightenment satire *La Pucelle d'Orleans* targeted religious traditionalism by way of mocking Joan; the play was still popular around 1800, when Schiller responded with *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* in 1801, and a redeemed protagonist. Schiller's play drew the attention and praise of Michelet, who focused intensely on Joan's story in his subsequent and enormously influential historical work. By the second half of the 19th century, she was a centerpiece of French historiography, "the symbol of French nationalism," and in 1920, canonized a Saint by the same church that, centuries earlier, burned her alive for heresy.¹⁶ So *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* is, in one evident sense, a successful intervention: Schiller redeems Joan and sets her on the path to becoming a French national hero. But this is not Schiller's sole ambition with the play. Françoise Meltzer has suggested that Schiller selects Joan as a dramatic figure not simply, or even primarily, because prior historiography has obscured her and he wants to remedy that, but because he perceives in the *Stoff* of her story an opportunity to

¹⁶ See Françoise Meltzer, *For Fear of the Fire: Joan of Arc and the Limits of Subjectivity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 1; 13: Michelet saw Schiller's play "as the source of Joan's cultural resurrection. After that, the cumulative effect in France was astounding."

advance his own theoretical program: “at the core of the matter lies Schiller’s entire aesthetics. *Die Jungfrau von Orleans*, then, is not merely the rewriting (and reinventing) of Joan’s source story; it is also Schiller’s attempt to put distance between himself and the Enlightenment, and to put reason in the shadow of the heart.”¹⁷ Following Meltzer, the play is Schiller’s attempt to instantiate an aesthetic paradigm, the terrain of which is the relation between reason and sensibility (“the heart”): whereas the Enlightenment tradition (Voltaire’s camp) uncompromisingly privileges reason, Schiller wants to redeem the role of sense.

Meltzer’s thesis aligns well with the trajectory in Schiller’s aesthetic thought I describe in the last chapter. The bulk of Schiller’s aesthetic work can be divided into two thematic groups: essays on tragedy and the sublime published in 1792-93; and the theory of beauty starting with the *Kallias-Briefe* of 1793 and culminating in 1795’s *Ästhetische Erziehung*. The motive anchor of the first group is moral freedom—sublimity in tragedy showcases the triumph of reason over nature and thereby exalts the moral law—whereas the texts on beauty develop a concept of freedom premised on the reciprocal interplay of intellect and *Sinnlichkeit*. Having thus delineated the regions of beauty and sublimity, Schiller proposes in “Über das Erhabene” to unify them in an overall program of aesthetic education. All this we saw above. Worth noting is that “Über das Erhabene,” the text in which Schiller calls for a large-scale reconciliation between the sublime and the beautiful, appears in 1801, the same year as *Die Jungfrau von Orleans*. For Meltzer, Schiller’s *Johanna* is the direct dramatic expression of this unifying ambition, “the harmony of morality and aesthetics... whose every act on stage therefore at once reveals the insistence of ‘theory’, and begins the blurring of fiction and theory itself” (“Rewriting Joan,” 71).

¹⁷ Françoise Meltzer, “Rewriting Joan: Schiller’s *Johanna*,” *Journal of Romance Studies* (2003), 56.

I want to follow but also amplify Meltzer on this count: Schiller advances Johanna as a syncretic figure, embodying the unity of his aesthetic theory. This is a bold but likewise fraught project: Schiller's aesthetics is built on an array of conceptual distinctions—not just beauty and sublimity, but *Form* and *Sinnlichkeit*, *Anmut* and *Wurde*, morality and politics, etc.—distinctions that, if Schiller wants to express or embody his aesthetic thought as a unity, *all must be unified*, or at least brought into some rapprochement. Schiller sees in the figure of Johanna a unique opportunity to do exactly that: her gender allows him to complicate the distinction between grace and dignity; there is a pronounced interpenetration between Johanna's national and religious aims; her death scene seems designed to engineer an aesthetic experience simultaneously sublime *and* beautiful; and Johanna's attraction to Lionel (invented by Schiller) makes her a psychological case-study in the collision of *Formtrieb* and *Stofftrieb*. But the question remains: what exactly does unity entail, at a conceptual level, in each of these cases? Is it a kind of *Wechselwirkung* in the style of the aesthetic letters? Does Schiller's Johanna, at least in ambition, anticipate Hegelian *Aufhebung*? And is there an underside to this quest for unity—is it possible that Schiller, in attempting to make Johanna embody a great reconciliation of categories, simply ends up presenting a different, darker category: the pathological obsession with unity itself?

It is probably not incidental that Schiller chooses a late-Medieval figure to achieve this balancing of aesthetic categories. By selecting a pre-modern heroine, Schiller is able to thematize European society before and after the onset of the *Neuzeit*. According to Schiller's historical diagnostic in letter six of the *Ästhetische Erziehung*, the guiding principle of modernity is division: while the ancients allowed themselves to be oriented by “vereinende Natur,” moderns are in thrall to “trennender Verstand” (*ÄE* 6; 5). Through the early stages of civilization, the

spirit of division not only permeated the world of social organization, but came to affect the constitution of individuals as well:

Die Kultur selbst war es, welche der neuern Menschheit diese Wunde schlug. Sobald auf der einen Seite die erweiterte Erfahrung und das bestimmte Denken eine schärfere Scheidung der Wissenschaften, auf der andern das verwickeltere Uhrwerk der Staaten eine strengere Absonderung der Stände und Geschäfte notwendig machte, so zerriss auch der innere Bund der menschlichen Natur, und ein verderblicher Streit entzweite ihre harmonischen Kräfte. (*ÄE* 6; 6)

A lost harmony at the level of “menschliche Natur,” and a society fractured into multitudinous *Wissenschaften, Stände, Geschäfte*—these result from the division imposed by *Kultur*, and are codified, made “vollkommen und allgemein,” by a specifically modern spirit of government, “der neue Geist der Regierung” (*ÄE* 6; 7). Regarding the new style of government, Schiller cites two illustrative disjunctions: “der Staat und die Kirche, diese Gesetze und die Sitten”—church is split from state, laws from customs. *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* is marked by the interpenetration of these regions: by her own account, Johanna’s vocation is simultaneously religious and national, legal and ethical. At the very least, her self-presentation makes it difficult to disentangle these categories, the stark delineation of which is a hallmark of the *Neuzeit*. So, to follow my hypothesis, Schiller’s move with Johanna is twofold: first, he presents her as an integrated composite of categories derived from his aesthetic thought; second, he positions that composite historically, in the Middle Ages, in a way that conforms with his vision of European modernity as an era of lost unity.

Returning to the categories themselves, independent of Schiller’s particular treatment of Johanna, she blurs two prominent gender prototypes: according to Meltzer, she is, on the one hand, “the peasant girl who sewed and prayed at her mother’s side,” and on the other, “the general who led her troops into battle”—feminine and masculine archetypes, respectively (*Fear* 3). Johanna’s gender-bending acquires an additional dimension with Schiller, who in the 1793 essay “Über Anmut und Würde” builds his distinction between the aesthetic categories grace and

dignity around a gender correspondence: one is more likely to encounter *Anmut* in women, “wovon die Ursache nicht weit zu suchen ist. Zur Anmut muß sowohl der körperliche Bau, als der Charakter beitragen; jener durch seine Biagsamkeit, Eindrücke anzunehmen und ins Spiel gesetzt zu werden, dieser durch die sittliche Harmonie der Gefühle. In beidem war die Natur dem Wiebe günstiger als dem Manne” (*TS* 372). The claim is that women are better endowed than men in two key respects conducive to grace: physical receptivity (“Biagsamkeit, Eindrücke anzunehmen”) and emotional balance (“Harmonie der Gefühle”), qualities Schiller’s Johanna conspicuously lacks. To say she is not receptive—to stimuli, enticements, information, etc.—would be an understatement: as Meltzer remarks, until Johanna falls in love with Lionel (III: 10), “she possesses the single-minded vision of those chosen by God. Indeed, until then she does not seem to *see* anything at all unless it is specific to her mission” (“Rewriting Joan,” 66; original emphasis). Consistent with that mission, when both Dünois and La Hire propose marriage to her in the same scene (III: 4), she rebuffs them with one message:

Berufen bin ich zu ganz anderm Werk,
Die reine Jungfrau nur kann es vollenden.
Ich bin die Kriegerin des höchsten Gottes,
Und keinem Mann kann ich Gattin sein. (2201-2204)

Johanna is staying true to instructions she claims, in the prologue, to have received from God: “Nicht Männerliebe darf dein Herz berühren mit sünd’gen Flammen eitler Erdenlust” (411-412). She is called on to wage holy war (“Ich bin die Kriegerin des höchsten Gottes”) and cannot be constrained: by marriage, by vanity—fundamentally, by anything *wordly*. “God” cautions her away from *Erdenlust*; earlier in the same monologue, she avows, “Mich treibt nicht eitles, *irdisches* Verlangen” (400; my emphasis); near the end of the play (V: 5) she explains to Raimond that the two of them belong to different orders: “Du siehst nur das *Natürliche* der Dinge denn deinen Blick umhüllt das *ird’sche* Band. Ich habe das Unsterbliche mit Augen

Gesehen” (3189-3192; my emphasis). Nature, body, physicality—these are terms and categories of experience Johanna explicitly rejects in favor of *Geist, das Unsterbliche*, etc., in a way that contradicts both stated conditions of *Anmut*: her blanket refusal to participate in *das Natürliche* and *das Irdische* amounts to a doctrinal absence of sense-receptivity (first condition), and her relation to items like *das Unsterbliche* and the Holy Virgin is less commitment than monomania, her obsession so total that it precludes the multiplicity of feeling out of which any *Harmonie der Gefühle* (second condition) would have to arise. And in any case, Johanna would likely assert she does not experience *Gefühle* at all.

All of these dynamics are at play in Johanna’s encounter with Montgomery (II: 7), an English soldier left behind after his army’s defeat in the second act. But here the situation becomes more complicated: we are reminded that Johanna’s peculiarity is not simply to be a woman who defies the principles of grace—in fact, she claims not to be a woman at all. Montgomery, reasoning in line with “Über Anmut und Würde,” begs for his life, calculating that Johanna, being female, is more likely to be forgiving: “Bittend will ich ihre Knie umfassen, um mein Leben flehn, sie ist ein Weib, ob ich vielleicht durch Tränen sie erweichen kann!” (1577-1580) The underlying premise is that she is *receptive*, that she can be softened (“erweichen”), and he again invokes her femininity as she stands over him: “O bei der Milde deines zärtlichen Geschlechts / Fleh ich dich an. Erbarme meiner Jugend dich!” (1606-1607) Johanna’s response:

Nicht mein Geschlecht beschwöre! Nenne mich nicht Weib.
Gleichwie die körperlosen Geister, die nicht frein
Auf ird’sche Weise, schließ ich mich an kein Geschlecht
Der Menschen an, und dieser Panzer deckt kein Herz. (1608-1611)

She denies she has a heart, which on its face sounds absurd, but *Herz* is always Schiller’s shorthand for the arena of emotional and sensuous feeling—Johanna here compares herself to a disembodied spirit (“körperloser Geist”) that does not participate in the “earthly” practice of

gendering. Without *Herz* there is certainly no *Anmut*, but we get the sense there is much more at work in Johanna's self-styling than a simple rebuttal of grace. It seems as though Johanna wants to transcend the very world in which *Anmut* is a factor. What world is that? Two hints from Schiller: the apodictic statement "Alle Anmut ist schön... aber nicht alles Schöne ist Anmut" (*TS* 330); and Johanna's exclamation on slaying Montgomery, "Erhabne Jungfrau, du wirkst mächtiges in mir!" (1677)

The theoretical stakes are higher: *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* and Johanna herself repeatedly engage the conceptual territory of beauty and the sublime. On first glance, everything about Johanna seems to place her under the rubric of the sublime: by her own avowal, she has transcended the arena of sense, self, volition, etc., and exists solely to execute the supra-terrestrial will of God. But already here the question of her motivation is not totally clear: throughout the play, there is a pronounced slippage between *God* and *France* as the object of Johanna's loyalty. Is her mission national or religious? Are they the same? She suggests as much to Montgomery:

Ihr Toren! Frankreichs königliche Wappen hängt
Am Throne Gottes, eher rißt ihr einen Stern
Vom Himmelwagen, als ein Dorf aus diesem Reich,
Dem unzertrennlich ewig einigen! (1644-1647)

Johanna links the integrity of France to that of heaven, and the image of the French royal emblem hanging on the throne of God suggests that her religious and national commitments unproblematically coincide. But there *is* a problem, at least a complication, in terms of Schiller's aesthetic theory: religion, being a form of transcendence, belongs to the terminal zone of the sublime—the sublime mode propels us toward the divine, morality, ineffability, the absolute, etc.; beauty, conversely, leads to politics: as we saw, Schiller states unambiguously in letter two of the *Ästhetische Erziehung* that authentic political freedom is the consummate result of *schöne*

Kunst. Thus to present Johanna as the coincidence of religion and politics is, in some measure, to fuse beauty and sublimity. Conceptually this is an awkward move: as I described in the last chapter, there are basic disagreements between sublime and beautiful modes, especially when it comes to the category of *Sinnlichkeit*—for sublimity, it is simply something to be overcome, while in the doctrine of beauty, it is integral to the sensuo-rational harmony from which aesthetic and political freedom arises. But Schiller seems intent on the combination: once Johanna meets Lionel (III: 10), her position regarding the sensuous is to simultaneously experience and renounce it. The fact that she falls in love with him—again, Schiller’s invention—makes clear that, whatever she may avow, she is subject to desire, susceptible to affection: in some meaningful degree, she is part of the order of *Sinnlichkeit*. Her earlier assertion to Montgomery is belied: she does in fact have a *Herz*, which means that, conceptually, she must find a way to negate that *Herz* if she is to remain in the sublime mode.

She does ultimately renounce Lionel and her love for him, but it is telling that she does so, not in the name of God, but France (V: 9). This is immediately before the end of the play, where Schiller dramatically intervenes into his historical material, and beauty seems finally to overtake the sublime: instead of reproducing the empirical Joan’s burning at the stake, Schiller gives his Johanna a triumphant death on the battlefield. Conceptually, this is a pregnant change. Schiller had rigorously theorized the sublime and must have perceived that, if his goal was to activate sublimity, he simply needed to represent history: Joan suffered an unjust sentence and excruciating public death, inspiring pity and fear, all in the name of a transcendent power. She claimed to represent the divine and was punished as a heretic (in the name of the divine) for the sake of inspiring the public’s fear and awe—of the divine. Schiller’s Johanna dies much closer to the arena of beauty. She does not suffer in either of the ways her empirical counterpart did—that

is, she suffers no external injustice and no extreme visible pain. Already early in the play, Johanna has embraced that her journey will end in her death: “endlich werd’ ich selbst umkommen und erfüllen mein Geschick,” she tells Montgomery (1666-1667). And she dies under the opposite of duress: she breaks miraculously out of her chains in the English camp (V: 11), carries the French army to victory in the following penultimate scenes of the play, and in (V: 14) is presented, mortally wounded, to her king and fellow soldiers. She gives a rousing speech and dies with her personal banner of the Holy Virgin. But crucially, the play ends on a stage direction in which the king orders surrounding soldiers to cover Johanna with French flags. Critics as diverse as Heine, Bernard Shaw, and George Steiner have criticized the overt spectacle of this moment—Steiner even compares it to a “christmas pageant.”¹⁸ But this may be the point: Schiller wants to leave the play on a note that is simultaneously *political and spectacular*, aesthetically triggering the beautiful mode through sheer visual stimulation, and directing the drama’s arc toward political liberty, the terminus of *schöne Kunst*, rather than moral transcendence.

The importance of the national allegiance in *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* also connects to the Kantian concept of enthusiasm, which I discussed in the introduction. In the third *Kritik*, Kant defines enthusiasm as “die Idee des Guten mit Affekt” (B 121). Enthusiasm is directed toward an idea—here, the idea *des Guten*, a moral maxim—but it is *experienced as a feeling* (“mit Affekt”), thus uniting the divided orders of sense and reason. Gailus suggests we think of enthusiasm as “affective transcendence: as a passion for principle—that is, a *transcendent feeling* moved by, and itself sustaining, moral law—enthusiasm brings together for the shortest of

¹⁸ George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961). Regarding Heine and Shaw see Elisabeth Krimmer, “Transcendental Warriors: Warfare in Schiller’s *Wallenstein* and *Die Jungfrau von Orleans*.” *Eighteenth Century Fiction* 19:1-2 (Fall 2006), 99-121.

moments the categorical and the emotional, law and body, the impersonal and the subjective” (57; my emphasis). And it is critical that, as Kant formulates enthusiasm in 1798’s *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, its object is not religious but national—specifically, the assertion of political rights by the first wave of French revolutionaries (Gailus 57). Essentially, enthusiasm, as it is theorized in the late 1790s, involves an idea of *political* liberty, a passion for which is *felt* by political actors. Nonetheless, Kant claims in the third *Kritik* that enthusiasm is sublime aesthetically, “weil er eine Anspannung der Kräfte durch Ideen ist, welche dem Gemüte einen Schwung geben, der weit mächtiger und dauerhafter wirkt, als der Antrieb durch Sinnenvorstellungen” (B 121).

Politics, morality, feeling, sublimity—the great divisions of Schiller’s aesthetics all appear to be overcome in this conception of enthusiasm, and it seems likely that this is how we are supposed to read Johanna: she is a selfless patriot whose transcendence nonetheless has an important worldly component—that is, she *feels* her transcendence (Schiller is sure to establish that Johanna is *sinnlich*), which is itself directed toward the relatively concrete sphere of political freedom. But there is a problem here: as Gailus puts it, “enthusiasm is a drive to action—and thus an engagement with an object in terms of will—that remains suspended at the level of wish owing to its *spectatorial character*” (*Passions*, 61). There is no suspension or spectation to Johanna: she is all action, executing her ideal throughout the drama. Concretely, this means she is prolific on the battlefield—Schiller’s last major invention: his Johanna is violent, even brutal, and thus *not* simply a patriotic enthusiast. Rather, it may be that Schiller, though he hoped for Johanna to embody unifying enthusiasm, combined that drive for unity with active agency and aggression, such that the figure on stage is not an enthusiast, but a fanatic.

Maria Stuart

When I say Schiller's Johanna may be a fanatic, I use this term intentionally to align with the German *Schwärmer*, another concept Schiller theorized before his return to drama. A brief excursus on it will help introduce *Maria Stuart*.

Toward the end of *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung*, Schiller defines *Schwärmerei* as a disorder of the sentimental mode, the dominant feature of which he calls *Überspannung*: a rational conceit is carried beyond the limits of all possible experience, yet nonetheless insists on its own representability within that experience: “daß er den Bedingungen aller möglichen Erfahrung widerstreitet... [aber] sich als darstellbar und dichterisch angekündigt habe” (TS 787). I want to draw attention to three aspects of this definition: first, *Schwärmerei* occurs within Schillerian sentimentality, meaning it presumes the schism between nature and culture and assumes the prerogatives of the latter—autonomy, the status of the ideal, and *Selbsttätigkeit* regarding nature (where *Empfänglichkeit* defines the naïve). This independence from the natural is related to the second element of the definition, namely that *Schwärmerei* concerns the proper limits of reason—more accurately, for Schiller, *Schwärmerei* describes reason *without limits*:

Das sentimentalische Genie hingegen verläßt die Wirklichkeit, um zu Ideen aufzusteigen und mit freier Selbsttätigkeit seinen Stoff zu beherrschen; da aber die Vernunft mit ihrem Gesetze nach immer zum Unbedingten strebt, so wird das sentimentalische Genie nicht immer *nüchtern* genug bleiben, um sich ununterbrochen und gleichförmig innerhalb der Bedingungen zu halten, welche der Begriff einer menschlichen Natur mit sich führt, und an welche die Vernunft auch in ihrem freiesten Wirken hier immer gebunden bleiben muß. (TS 786; original emphasis)

Schiller construes *Schwärmerei* as a loss of sobriety (“nicht nüchtern bleiben”): reason's drive toward the unconditioned (“zum Unbedingten”) is potentially intoxicating—it threatens to depart entirely from reality and confine itself to the enclosed universe of its own laws and ideas. He states categorically that reason *must*, even at its most free, remain bound (“auch in ihrem

freiesten Wirken... gebunden bleiben”)—there must be some source of limitation to keep its operations “nüchtern.” For Schiller, this limitation comes from an object of sensibility, a *Gegenstand* that keeps reason anchored in the sensuous world that *Schwärmerei* leaves behind.¹⁹

But ultimately, of course, the *Schwärmer* returns to make a claim on the world of sense—third important part of the definition: *Schwärmerei* insists its ideals are *darstellbar*—and herein lies the danger: Schiller describes as “gefährlich” the freedom enjoyed by an independent imaginative faculty that is not in some way answerable to sense-experience, a risk pertinent “von der moralischen und religiösen Schwärmerei, und von der exaltierten Freiheits- und Vaterlandsliebe. Da die Gegenstände dieser Empfindungen immer Ideen sind und in der äußeren Erfahrung nicht erscheinen, [kann die Einbildungskraft nicht] durch die sinnliche Gegenwart ihres Objekts in ihre Grenzen zurückgewiesen werden” (*TS* 789). The danger lies in an irresolvable tension: the cognitive faculty advances a precept (e.g. moral freedom) and calls for its presentation in sensible experience, but the nature of that precept is such that it is beyond all sensuous presentation; the *Schwärmer* is distinctive in refusing to recognize this limitation and persisting in the original demand, and the stage is set for a violent reorganization of the sensible in line with the rational precept, which can of course never be satisfied—something like moral freedom is always and essentially *undarstellbar*.

For Kant, whose discussion of *Schwärmerei* in the third *Kritik* has clear resonances in Schiller, this *Undarstellbarkeit* is the point: moral freedom can only ever be presented *negatively*, as a lacuna, the trace of an empirical or cognitive shortcoming that, while substantively unresolvable, is nonetheless *indicative* of a higher vocation: the Kantian

¹⁹ At one point, Schiller gives this concise formulation of *Schwärmerei*: “Die Vernunft zieht bei ihren Schöpfungen die Grenzen der Sinnenwelt viel zu wenig zu Rat und der Gedanke wird immer weiter getrieben, als die Erfahrung ihm folgen kann” (*TS* 787).

Übersinnliche, humanity's capacity to transcend the sensible world. Exactly this indication is the prerogative of sublimity—the sublime *points us to*, but does not *represent*, the transcendent. But here we are very close to the territory of the *Schwärmer*, whose condition, in Alberto Toscano's phrasing, Kant considers a "pathology of transcendence."²⁰ That is, *Schwärmerei* involves a distortion in the process that is supposed to result in the negative presentation of a transcendent ideal. "Schwärmerei, welche ein Wahn ist, über alle Grenze der *Sinnlichkeit* hinaus etwas sehen, d.i. nach Grundsätzen träumen (mit Vernunft rasen) zu wollen"—*Schwärmerei* makes the impossible demand to *see* the ideal, despite Kant's insistence that "die Unerforschlichkeit der Idee der Freiheit schneidet aller positiven Darstellung gänzlich den Weg ab" (*KU*, B 125; original emphasis). In so defining *Schwärmerei*, Kant intervened into contemporaneous theorization of the category: where, previously, the *Schwärmer* was defined as the outside of reason, the very embodiment of irrationality, Kant places it as the heart of reason itself, as a potentiality inherent to reason's process of transcendence—in a word, *Schwärmerei* results from reason's innate universality, its drive for totality. For Toscano, one immediate consequence of this "introjection" of *Schwärmerei* is that Kant must confront its ambivalence, "its disturbing proximity, as an abstract passion, to those forms of action he deems to be politically and morally noble because they are universalizable" (*Fanaticism*, 121).

There are echoes of this ambivalence in Schiller, whose exposition of *Schwärmerei* connects the phenomenon to morality, religion, patriotism: legitimate, even estimable convictions that partake of the universalizing gesture unique to reason, and therefore risk turning their representatives into *Schwärmer*. For Schiller as well as Kant, the decisive step involves choosing to ignore the limitations imposed by sensibility, i.e. to claim or demand an actual

²⁰ Alberto Toscano, *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2010), 120.

sensuous experience of the ideal. This is Johanna's problem: her cause of national liberation is itself hardly reproachable, but she claims intimate knowledge of the divine order that, she insists, legitimates that cause. And it is no accident that in her case, the assertion of transcendent experience coincides with an almost exultant violence against all opponents of God and France. Remove God, and you have the Jacobins (though a form of God is still there: Jacobin ideology is steeped in sublimity and therefore transcendence—see previous chapter). Johanna and Robespierre share the same uncompromising commitment to a political ideal, the idea of a nation, that also serves as a universal stamp of justification for aggressively promoting or violently “defending” that ideal.

It is the same with Mortimer, the doomed conspirator and would-be liberator of *Maria Stuart*. Schiller's sole invented personage in the play, Mortimer is the nephew of Paulet, captive Maria's chief warden, to which circumstance Mortimer attributes great significance:

Um diese Zeit kam mir die Kunde zu,
Daß ihr aus Talbots Schloß hinweggeführt,
Und meinem Oheim übergeben worden –
Des Himmels wundervolle Rettungshand
Glaubt ich in dieser Fügung zu erkennen,
Ein lauter Ruf des Schicksals war sie mir,
Das meinen Arm gewählt, euch zu befreien. (536-542)

Mortimer believes he has been chosen to free Maria, whose execution is looming, and the proof is that she has passed into the care of his uncle at Castle Fotheringhay. It is a logical operation that implies access to the mechanics of *Himmel* and *Schicksal*—Mortimer claims to recognize how these orders manifest themselves empirically, and moreover to have been selected by them. There is a double conceit that brings Mortimer close to the *Schwärmer*: to know (1) a transcendent order's agenda, i.e. Maria's liberation (where the analogue in *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* is the notion that God supports France); and (2) how it empirically pursues that agenda, i.e. choosing Mortimer to rescue her. How does he come to this conviction? The lines quoted

(536-542) are from early in the play (I: 6), when Mortimer reveals himself to Maria as a recent but passionate convert to Catholicism and a double agent in Elisabeth's court. Mortimer learns of Maria's predicament from the Bishop at Rheims, where he has completed his conversion and come under the tutelage of the Cardinal of Lorraine, Maria's uncle. One day ("diese Zeit" of line 536) in the Bishop's apartment he was struck by an image of Maria:

Als ich mich umseh in des Bischofs Wohnung,
Fiel mir ein weiblich Bildnis in die Augen,
Von rührend wundersamem Reiz, gewaltig
Ergriff es mich in meiner tiefsten Seele,
Und des Gefühls nicht mächtig stand ich da. (502-506)

The Bishop tells Mortimer who the woman is and explains the situation in England. This is Mortimer's first knowledge of Maria. Two details of his narration of this moment are worth noting: first, he relates it as an *actual encounter*, not with a picture of Maria but with the woman herself—"Ich sah euch, Königin – Euch selbst! Nicht euer Bild!" (549-550); second, his description is steeped in the language of sensibility: "von rührend wundersamem Reiz," "des Gefühls nicht mächtig." This is not simply lyricism on Mortimer's part: he is giving a faithful report of his own perceptions. He sees an image that he in some way experiences as a real presence (i.e., not a representation), and the register in which the whole event takes place is *Sinnlichkeit*. The sensuous component is not insignificant. We could easily imagine Mortimer's resorting to the negative language of transcendence to describe the force of the image: that it transports him *beyond* himself, *denies* his powers of representation, confronts him with an ideal that he *nonetheless cannot grasp*. (This would be a *sublime* experience.) Instead, Mortimer goes in the opposite direction: presented with an image, he claims to experience directly what it represents. This slippage between different orders of meaning is a hallmark of Mortimer's personality: he encounters Maria herself in her image; he perceives a providential agenda in the circumstances of her imprisonment. In both cases, there is a movement from the relatively

ephemeral to the concrete: image to body, divine to pragmatic. Mortimer claims to see the cohesion, the reflection of one order in the other.

But as with Johanna, Mortimer's overall prerogative is not so eccentric as his reasoning. In terms of his stated intentions, his cause seems just enough, even noble: to depose a usurping, illegitimate monarch and restore England to its rightful sovereign. It is not insignificant that Mortimer's 'vision' of Maria at Rheims is accompanied by a political argument, from the Bishop, for her martyrdom and legitimate claim to the English throne. As Mortimer recounts,

Drauf fing er an, mit herzerschütternder
Beredsamkeit mir euer Märtyrtum
Und eurer Feinde Blutgier abzuschildern.
Auch euern Stammbaum wies er mir, er zeigte
Mir eure Abkunft von dem hohen Hause
Der Tudor, überzeugte mich, daß euch
Allein gebührt in Engelland zu herrschen. (515-521)

The word "überzeugen" is surprising. Following the sequence of Mortimer's own narrative: he (literally) witnesses Maria in the Bishop's apartment; there follows a discussion of English politics with the Bishop; in the end, Mortimer is persuaded of Maria's rightful claim to sovereignty. He jumps between wildly different modes: hallucination one moment, deliberation the next; total sensuous immersion, a kind of rapture ("des Gefühls nicht mächtig") in the image, followed by ratiocination, rhetoric—"Beredsamkeit," "wies er mir, er zeigte mir," "überzeugte mich"—a *rational exchange* related to specific concepts of politics. And it is a political concept, *legitimacy*, that is Mortimer's principal motive anchor throughout the play. Centrally, his is a struggle over the status of the English throne, with two additional axes: the broader power balance between Catholic and Protestant Europe, and his progressive fixation with Maria, not as a martyr or embattled monarch, but a sex object.

Mortimer's erotic interest in Maria is one edge of a love triangle that underlies much of the play's action. The third figure is Leicester, Elisabeth's most trusted counselor, who secretly

piners for Maria, and just as importantly, fears for his position at court. Believing he is plotted against by Elisabeth's other advisors—"Denn Walsingham und Burleigh hassen mich, ich weiß, daß sie mir laured Netze stellen" (1750-1751)—Leicester is looking for a way out, all of which he explains to Mortimer when the two privately confirm their mutual allegiance to Maria, and Mortimer delivers a letter from Maria to Leicester promising him "daß sie verzeiht, sich mir zum Preise schenken will, wenn ich sie rette" (1821-1822). Maria will marry Leicester if he rescues her, allowing him to escape his present situation at court. She also promises *Verzeihung*: we learn that, though romantically committed some years before ("Sie war mir zudedacht seit langen Jahren"), Leicester left Maria out of ambition for a more prestigious marriage, to Elisabeth:

Mein Ehrgeiz war es, der mich gegen Jugend
Und Schönheit fühllos machte. Damals hielt ich
Mariens Hand für mich zu klein, ich hoffte
Auf den Besitz der Königin von England. (1770-1773)

Leicester then bewails 10 years of embarrassing, servile courtship of Elisabeth, all now futile: she has recently become engaged to the French Duke of Anjou; with nothing more to hope for at Westminster, Leicester needs an exit strategy. For him, this means returning to Maria—operating on her behalf, with a marriage to her as his horizon—which hardly seems like a sacrifice for Leicester: by his own account, he has always desired her, and it was simply "der Zwang der Zeiten" (1760-1761) that separated them initially. But we get the sense that, even still, desire itself means rather little to Leicester: he is always reckoning with circumstance, calculating, assessing his relative position, acting ultimately in the interest of that position. In this and other respects, he is a sort of parallel contrast to Mortimer: each desires Maria and elaborately deceives Elisabeth in order to "save and possess"—"retten und besitzen," a phrase used by both men—the imprisoned queen, but their respective attractions and schemes are radically different. We could characterize the split as *passion versus interest*: Mortimer sensuously craves Maria (grimly

evident in their final encounter) and plots a heroic offensive against Fotheringhay, liberating Maria by force—he avows he is prepared to kill Paulet, his own uncle, if necessary—and installing her triumphantly on the throne; Leicester sees in Maria an opportunity to escape his precarious situation at court, and manipulates Elisabeth into granting Maria’s request for a face-to-face meeting (II: 9), calculating that, once she has actually seen Maria in person, Elisabeth will be unable to advance the execution,²¹ and presumably, will allow her rival to leave England (with Leicester).²²

This meeting (III: 4), another invention, is the centerpiece of *Maria Stuart*, both structurally—it occupies the middle act of a symmetrical drama: acts I and V take place at Fotheringhay and Maria is the principal character; likewise for acts II and IV and Elisabeth at Westminster—and substantively: contrary to Leicester’s prediction, the meeting is a disaster, especially for Maria, whose fate is virtually sealed by the end. Why? The meeting seems like an excellent opportunity for reconciliation: Elisabeth and Maria can actually *see* each other, something their historical counterparts never did, for the first time, and therefore experience one another as human beings rather than abstractions or symbolic allegiances. This is what both Leicester and Burleigh, despite wholly different approaches to statecraft, anticipate: the sympathy of proximity. Plus, it is a chance for the two queens to communicate directly, have an exchange about prospects for resolving their political situation. Maria at least begins in this spirit: she throws herself before Elisabeth and effectively disavows any claim to the throne

²¹ A presumption shared by court treasurer Burleigh, the play’s foremost proponent of Maria’s execution: “das Urteil kann nicht mehr vollzogen werden, wenn sich die Königin ihr genahet hat” (1525-1526). Leicester reproduces this language almost exactly in his exchange with Mortimer: “Das Urteil kann nicht mehr vollzogen werden, wenn sie sie gesehn” (1905-1906).

²² As Mortimer and Leicester debate the best way to free Maria, their language is illustrative of this division between passion and interest: Mortimer is visibly impatient and uses words like “großmütig” to describe the prospect of breaking into Fotheringhay by force, and he seems to be *seeking* violence—“Gewaltsam will ich auftun ihren Kerker” (1847)—where Leicester warns against “Wagnis” and dismisses Mortimer’s “Wagestück” as “zu gefährlich,” which Mortimer contests: “Auch das Säumen ist’s!” (1863-1864).

(2244-2256). But Elisabeth is unmoved, “kalt und streng,” granting only “Ihr seid an eurem Platz” (2257). Maria continues to supplicate volubly, repeats her disavowal and asks only for freedom to leave England (2378-2402) when Elisabeth, emotionally remote and relishing her leverage, mocks Maria for her alleged promiscuity: “Der Ruhm war wohfeil zu Erlangen, es kostet nichts, die allgemeine Schönheit zu sein, als die gemeine sein für alle!” (2416-2418) Now Maria is sufficiently provoked to strike back (2421-2432), targeting Elisabeth’s mother, Anne Boleyn—notorious for numerous affairs—and reiterating with special venom the claim she was prepared to relinquish moments before: Elisabeth is an illegitimate child (of infamous Anne Boleyn) with, therefore, no rightful claim to the throne: “Der Thron von England ist durch einen Bastard entweiht, der Briten edelherzig Volk durch eine list’ge Gauklerin betrogen” (2447-2449). Enraged, Elisabeth storms off, and Maria’s execution seems certain.

The meeting is a strange event, in part because its unraveling seems so petty and avoidable. But this feeling of contingency may have a theoretical corollary in Schiller’s concept of reciprocity (*Wechselwirkung*). Recall that, in the *Ästhetische Erziehung*, the play-drive induces reciprocal exchange, and in this way mediates the tension, between formality and sense, the respective faculties of cognition and feeling that together constitute human life. Schiller is emphatic in the treatise: these two regions, though we often find them in contention, *need not be opposed*—it is only through a “transgression of nature” that they destructively collide, “indem sie sich selbst missverstehen und ihre Sphären verwirren” (*ÄE* 13; 2). Misunderstanding and confusion, rather than some Manichean determinism, place form and sense in conflict, and it is the function of *Spiel* to maintain their natural accord, their *Wechselwirkung*. But because there is no determinism, the matter of instantiating reciprocal *Spiel* is one of circumstance—it has to actually be brought about, and in this effort, one can fail.

We might read the queens' meeting as such a failure. Several elements of *Maria Stuart* suggest a connection to the drive theory of the aesthetic letters, especially Schiller's characterization of the queens and their denominational allegiances. On this count, Mortimer's conversion narrative (I: 6) is critical: with little ambiguity, he frames his decision to leave the Protestant church of his youth as an escape from *oppressive intellection*: he rages against "das körperlose Wort," the "enge[s] dumpfe[s] Buch," the "Pflichten" of that belief, one that reviles "der Sinne Reiz." Conversely, Mortimer's path to Catholicism is one of "Begierde," the sensuous ecstasy of Rome, finally sealed with the Cardinal's dictum: "daß grübelnde Vernunft den Menschen ewig in der Irre leitet, daß seine Augen sehen müssen, was das Herz soll glauben, daß ein sichtbar Haupt der Kirche not tut" (477-481). This is a small manifesto of *Sinnlichkeit*, and it should be no surprise that Mortimer's fixation with Maria begins and ends in the physical register: he stands "des Gefühls nicht mächtig" before her image at Rheims, and in their last meeting (III: 6), with Maria still reeling from the encounter with Elisabeth, Mortimer, clearly now unhinged and raving, yields entirely to his sexual craving and tries to rape her.

Consistent with Mortimer's framing of the denominational split in terms of intellect and sense, Schiller places Catholic Maria squarely in the region of the sensuous.²³ He writes to Goethe in June 1799: "ich will [meine Maria] immer als ein physisches Wesen halten, und das pathetische muß mehr eine allgemeine tiefe Rührung, als ein persönlich und individuelles Mitgefühl seyn. Sie empfindet und erregt keine Zärtlichkeit, ihr Schicksal ist nur heftige Paßionen zu erfahren und zu entzünden" (*KD* 544). Two key points are that Maria is an

²³ And frequently, sensual. This too is an intervention into history on Schiller's part. Kari Lokke: "In order to fulfill his poetic aims, Schiller transforms the historical Mary, who, at death, was forty-four years of age, grey-haired and physically broken from eighteen years of captivity into a ravishing young beauty of twenty-five." Kari Lokke, "Schiller's "Maria Stuart": The Historical Sublime and the Aesthetics of Gender," *Monatshefte* 82 (Summer 1990), 128-129. Elsewhere Lokke calls Maria "an emblem of both the beauty and the vulnerability of the sensuous world."

essentially *physical* being in the play, and it is her function to ignite and experience *passions*—Mortimer’s obsession is the clearest example on stage, and the play is full of references to Maria’s well-known powers in the realm of affect, sensation, feeling. On the other side of the divide is Elisabeth: sexless—“the virgin queen”—and, in terms of the emotional profile she presents, barely human.²⁴ It is telling that the sight of Maria is in no way endearing to Elisabeth – if anything the opposite is the case – as Leicester and Burleigh expect. Schiller removes from Elisabeth all vestiges of affective sensitivity while elevating her propensity – evident in the acts at Westminster – to manipulation and self-aggrandizement. Consistent (in the play’s thematic logic) with her Protestantism, Elisabeth gives us the grim, unqualified side of the *Formtrieb*.²⁵

Nonetheless, the attempt at *Wechselwirkung* fails, and given her general disposition, it is not surprising that Elisabeth finally signs the death order (IV: 10), and Maria is executed (V: 10). But there is an interesting ambiguity concerning the ultimate fate of this document, which is in some ways the keystone of the play: Maria has been sentenced by a tribunal shortly before the action begins, and the whole question is whether Elisabeth will finalize the process with her signature. When they first meet, Mortimer explains to Maria with urgency, “Das Haus der Lords und der Gemeinen, die Stadt London bestehen heftig dringend auf des Urteils Vollstreckung, *nur die Königin säumt noch*” (579-582; my emphasis). That is, the play’s central tension must be *resolved by a sovereign decision*, which fact may have a formal, generic component: Franco Moretti has written that “tragedy presents a universe in which *everything has its origin in the*

²⁴ Jeffrey Sammons: “While it was Schiller’s habit to heighten his historical figures and make them more attractive for his dramatic purposes... Elisabeth is positively reduced in size. Vain, erratic, and despotic though she may have been, she was at the same time courageous, resourceful, and often amiable—qualities Schiller denies her.” “Mortimer’s Conversion and Schiller’s Allegiances,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 72:2 (April 1973), 159.

²⁵ During their encounter, Elisabeth’s sensitivities are on display only when Maria attacks her *reputation*, which concern is basically cerebral in nature.

decision of the king... In the world of tragedy the monarch is truly *absolute*.²⁶ Certainly in one respect *Maria Stuart* adheres to that formula: everyone is waiting for Elisabeth to sign the order, to decide. Yet even after she signs toward the end of act IV, she refuses to confirm her decision verbally to Davison (IV: 11), becoming evasive when asked to clarify her intentions. Davison, a minor court official, is afraid to set into motion so massive an event without express confirmation from Elisabeth, and he asks that she simply state out loud her approval of the execution. She will not, becomes angry and storms away, and Burleigh must arrive and tear the order from quaking Davison to deliver it himself. Later Elisabeth will absolve herself of all responsibility and rage against the hastiness of the execution (V: 14-15).

Maria Stuart thus seems to present a twist to Moretti's thesis: it is certainly a tragedy of absolutism—the whole drama is one of sovereign legitimacy; the basic tension is *there can only be one*—that hangs on the monarch's decision, yet Elisabeth finds a way of both deciding and *not* deciding, affecting the event but shielding herself from accountability. She is an absolute sovereign undertaking a major display of power: executing another monarch. Yet she wants to do so with minimal visibility, allowing her order to travel through the institutional machinery surrounding her, and disavowing it after the fact. In this way she is definitively *not* absolutist in the definitional sense (of Bodin), instead anticipating quieter forms of government to come: administration, bureaucracy, the sprawling institutional state.

Wallenstein

Schiller's General Wallenstein and an absolute monarch share an important conceit: each demands unqualified authority over a body of subjects. The difference is that, for Wallenstein,

²⁶ Franco Moretti, "The Great Eclipse: Tragic Form as the Deconsecration of Sovereignty," in *Signs Taken for Wonders: On the Sociology of Literary Forms* (New York: Verso, 1983), 43; original emphasis.

this body is an army, not a state. As he explains to Questenberg—the emperor’s emissary, embattled in Wallenstein’s camp, where he has been sent with a royal directive for the General—absolute authority was Wallenstein’s basic stipulation on assuming command:

Nur auf Bedingung nahm ich dies Kommando;
Und gleich die erste war, daß mir zum Nachteil
Kein Menschenkind, auch selbst der Kaiser nicht,
Bei der Armee zu sagen haben sollte. (*Die Piccolomini*, 1214-1217)²⁷

Wallenstein demands a control so total that not even his sovereign, the Austrian Emperor, is to influence the operations of his (imperial) army. Wallenstein’s formulation—“kein Menschenkind” may limit his authority—resembles Bodin’s definition of absolutist rule: no other human power can check the sovereign. But certainly from Schiller’s perspective as an historian, absolutism is a *theory* of government that no empirical monarch fully realized. Similarly, Wallenstein’s insistence on absolute control of his army only sets up his own downfall and the tragedy of the *Wallenstein* trilogy. On account of his military record, Wallenstein has been enlisted to lead an army in service of Austria’s interests in the Thirty Years’ War, in which capacity he has begun to stray, asserting greater and greater independence, to the Emperor’s discontent—hence Questenberg’s visit, to remind Wallenstein whom he serves, and deliver his latest assignment: to take Regensburg, “denn seine Majestät will Regensburg vor Ostern noch vom Feind gesäubert sehn” (*P* 1188-1189). The Emperor’s attempt to intervene in his command is a problem for Wallenstein, who insists that the strength of their enemy, King Gustav of Sweden, lies in the indivisibility of his authority: “Was machte diesen Gustav unwiderstehlich, unbesiegt auf Erden? Dies: daß er König war in seinem Heer! Ein König aber, einer der es ist, ward nie besiegt noch, als durch seines gleichen” (*P* 1220-1224). Worth noting is that Wallenstein uses a title of political authority (*König*) to refer to a military leader’s function in his

²⁷ Subsequent in-text citations of *Wallensteins Lager* as *WL*; *Die Piccolomini* as *P*; *Wallensteins Tod* as *WT*.

army, and in substance—as well as the context of the argument with Questenberg—that function appears to come straight from the theory of absolutist rule: the leader of an (effective) army is subject to no outside power in conducting its operations, and that army is vulnerable only to another force with an equivalent, unqualified authority at its head.

But if, in line with Moretti's formula of tragedy, *Wallenstein* stages the conceits of absolutism, it does so in order to immediately tear them down. For one, the whole exchange with Questenberg is moot: Wallenstein in fact plans to *join* the Swedes—the plan is to subdue the Emperor with his own army and enforce a continental détente in which Wallenstein himself will enjoy a greater share of the spoils. On several levels, *Wallenstein* is a drama in which *nothing is absolute*, or even really stable: personal allegiance, ideology, nationality, principle—all are subject to the whims of the war, which has developed an autonomous logic and itself become the end. Wallenstein will ultimately succumb to this logic: the 'polity' over which he claims sovereignty—the army—fractures, and he is murdered at the behest of Buttler, his aggrieved commander and former advocate. Such is consistent with the dramatic material: Schiller's own historical treatise on the Thirty Years' War "demonstrated," quoting Krimmer, "that wars develop a dynamic of their own that is no longer subject to political authority and ethical imperative" ("Transcendental Warriors," 103). There is a cluster of questions pertinent to this dynamic debated throughout the play: what is the purpose of the war? Do its combatants really want it to end? Does one wage a war to end a war?

The last suggestion may seem paradoxical or even absurd, but it has an eloquent proponent in the play: Max Piccolomini, who, like Mortimer in *Maria Stuart*, is the sole invented persona in a drama populated—in the case of *Wallenstein*, vastly—by empirical figures. Max is the son of Octavio Piccolomini, Wallenstein's chief advisor, and an officer in Wallenstein's

army. Roughly 20, he has effectively only known war, both as an overall condition—the play takes place in 1634: Max was a young child when the war began—and as his immediate environs: he was raised in military camps, often under the wing of Wallenstein himself (*WT* 2142-2163), to whom Max is fiercely loyal, even as general sentiment begins to tend against him. Max defends Wallenstein against Questenberg in *Die Piccolomini*: “Ihr seid es, die den Frieden hindern, ihr! Der Krieger ist’s, der ihn erzwingen muß” (565-566). *Ihr* refers to the world for which Questenberg is a proxy—the political body of the empire, embodied in the Emperor—while Wallenstein is a *Krieger*, a warrior, and only a warrior can enforce (“erzwingen”) peace. The principle is peace through war—not, presumably, ‘softer’ alternatives, like diplomacy, engagement, compromise, etc.—at the discretion of the *Krieger*. Octavio, party to the exchange, regrets his son’s effusive militarism:

Das Kind des Lagers spricht aus dir, mein Sohn.
 Ein fünfzehnjähr’ger Krieg hat dich erzogen,
 - Du hast den Frieden nie gesehen! Es gibt
 noch höhern Wert, mein Sohn, als kriegerischen,
 Im Kriege selber ist das letzte nicht der Krieg. (*P* 481-485)

That war itself is not the end, that war should answer to something else, is one of two principles animating Octavio. The other is a fundamental loyalty to the Emperor, a commitment that withstands even the challenge of his friend Wallenstein. Father and son collide on this question in the final act of *Die Piccolomini*: Octavio reveals to Max Wallenstein’s plan to betray the Emperor, and pleads with his son not to follow.

Ich klügte nicht, ich tue meine Pflicht,
 Der Kaiser schreibt mir mein Betragen vor.
 Wohl wär’ es besser, überall dem Herzen
 Zu folgen, doch darüber würde man
 Sich manchen guten Zweck versagen müssen.
 Hier gilt’s, mein Sohn, dem Kaiser wohl zu dienen,
 Das Herz mag dazu sprechen, was es will. (2454-2460)

As he puts it, Octavio's position is simple ("ich klügte nicht"): he serves the Emperor, and that is that. It is his duty, and we will see the term *Pflicht* used in the same way by Max later in the play: *Pflicht* lies squarely on the side of the Emperor—duty refers to one's overall political allegiance. *Personal* allegiance, on the other hand, is a matter of the heart, and we see Octavio hedging here against a line of rhetoric Max will exploit and, ultimately, convolute in *Wallensteins Tod*. Twice Octavio mentions *das Herz*: "wohl wär' es besser, überall dem Herzen zu folgen," but this would sacrifice the greater goal; he concludes that, in this particular circumstance, they must serve the Emperor, regardless of what the heart "says"—"das Herz mag dazu sprechen, was es will." Octavio knows there is a powerful emotional bond between Max and Wallenstein—Wallenstein helped raise Max; Max now refers to him as *Freund*—and he anticipates it, hoping to limit its affective appeal, before Max can commit himself to it. In this respect, Octavio is unsuccessful: as Max wavers between loyalties throughout *Wallensteins Tod*, *das Herz* invariably appears as his final seat of justification—until it fails him.

The rhetorical career of Max's heart is worth exploring in some detail. At the close of *Die Piccolomini* (V: 1), Octavio is in disbelief that Max, having learned of Wallenstein's plan, can still support the General: "Ist's möglich? Noch – nach allem, was du weißt, kannst du an seine Unschuld glauben?" Max responds forcefully, "Dein Urteil kann sich irren, nicht mein Herz" (2545-2547). Here the heart is a final arbiter, an intuitive power that pierces through veils of error, and Max plans to entrust himself to it: he will confront Wallenstein himself, and presumably, listen to what his heart tells him. This conversation takes place in *Wallenstein's Tod* (II: 2), where Wallenstein confirms to Max that he plans to turn his army against the Emperor. The time has come for Max to choose sides: "Du mußt Partei ergreifen in dem Krieg, der zwischen deinem Freund und deinem Kaiser sich jetzt entzündet" (725-727). Wallenstein

invokes their friendship, their affective bond—he is speaking to Max’s heart; as such it is strange that Max’s resistance to Wallenstein rests precisely on this figure: “Zum ersten Male heut’ verweist du mich an mich selbst und zwingst mich, eine Wahl zu treffen zwischen dir und meinem Herzen” (716-718). Max’s heart seems somehow to provide a counterweight to both Octavio *and* Wallenstein: it leads him to suspect Octavio’s judgment of Wallenstein, yet also prevents him from joining Wallenstein entirely. In any case, Max remains undecided—tormented may be a better word at this point in the drama—at the end of this exchange with Wallenstein. He returns to Octavio later in the same act (II: 7), continuing to insist he will follow his heart alone: “Verschwende deine Worte nicht vergebens, dem Herzen folg’ ich, denn ich darf ihm trauen” (1246-1247). Octavio questions the wisdom of that principle: “Und trau ich deinem Herzen auch, wird’s immer in deiner Macht auch stehen, ihm zu folgen?” Max replies, “Du hast des Herzens Stimme nicht bezwungen, so wenig wird der Herzog es vermögen” (1260-1263). Max states here what his earlier rhetoric only implied: his heart is an independent authority that will allow him to rightly choose between his father (and loyalty to the Emperor) and Wallenstein.

But it is also in this exchange with Octavio that we are reminded of what Max’s heart really desires: anything but emotionally independent, Max is in love with Wallenstein’s daughter, Thekla, who figures significantly in his conflict of loyalty. In fact Max seems to imagine *her* as his arbiter:

Sie soll mein Leiden sehen, meinen Schmerz,
 Die Klagen hören der zerrissnen Seele...
 Sie wird von gräßlich wütender Verzweiflung
 Die Seele retten, diesen Schmerz des Todes
 Mit sanften Trostesworten klagend lösen. (*WT* 1237-1243)

This is a fresh dynamic in Max’s quest to decide: to trust his heart is not so much to rely on his own intuition as to defer to Thekla, the object of his love. Closer to Max’s own language here, he wants Thekla to comfort him—“die Seele retten,” “Trostesworten”—as he suffers the “Schmerz”

and “Verzweiflung” of his imminent decision. In act III of *Wallenstein’s Tod*, Max finds Thekla and tells her that he must leave Wallenstein’s camp (remember his *Pflicht* is to the Emperor—*müssen* is the verb). “Ich muß, muß dich verlassen, Thekla – muß!”—but he refuses to do so until she grants him sympathy: “Nur einen Blick des Mitleids gönne mir, sag’, daß du mich nicht hassest” (2058-2061). But he is in such a rush to receive Thekla’s blessing that Max fails to notice Wallenstein is standing in the room; Thekla points him to her father, but Max insists his business is with her alone: “Ich hab’ es nur mit ihr allein. Hier will ich, von diesem Herzen freigesprochen sein, an allem andern ist nicht mehr gelegen” (2068-2070). Thekla must “absolve” him of his decision, whatever it is. In either case, the decision no longer seems his alone, and three scenes later, he finally gives up on his own *Herz*:

Das Herz in mir empört sich, es erheben
 Zwei Stimmen streitend sich in meiner Brust,
 In mir ist Nacht, ich weiß das rechte nicht zu wählen.
 O wohl, wohl hast du wahr geredet, Vater,
 Zu viel vertraut’ ich auf das eigne Herz,
 Ich stehe wankend, weiß nicht was ich soll. (2279-2284)

His heart does not simply represent one perspective but is itself internally split (“Zwei Stimmen”) and gives him no firm direction. He regrets he did not heed Octavio and question “das eigne Herz,” bemoaning further “uns alle bewegt der Wunsch, die Leidenschaft”—he calls out for “eine Stimme der Wahrheit... ein Engel” that will descend and vouchsafe to him the right choice (2295-2298). Of course he really means Thekla; he asks her “kannst du mich dann noch lieben, wenn ich bleibe? Erkläre daß du’s kannst und ich bin euer” (2307-2308). In a way, he reverses his initial request: where he first wanted Thekla to grant him sympathy despite his decision to leave and fight against her father—a kind of emotional sanction—he now promises to stay if, so doing, he can be assured of her love. This has become the operative question for Max:

fight for Wallenstein or the Emperor—in which situation will Thekla love him? After much loquacity from Max, she tells him what he wants to hear:

Geh' und erfülle deine Pflicht. Ich würde
Dich immer lieben. Was du auch erwählt,
Du würdest edel stets und deiner würdig
Gehandelt haben – aber Reue soll
Nicht deiner Seele schönen Frieden stören. (2342-2346)

He has received a universal stamp of approval: she will love him no matter what he does. His decision follows immediately: “So muß ich dich verlassen, von dir scheiden!” (2347) There does not seem to have been much internal tension for Max surrounding the basic content of the decision: like Octavio, he is fundamentally loyal to the Emperor—the situation with Wallenstein simply presented a specific and very personally charged challenge to that loyalty. In this way, Thekla seems to have given Max a way out, tipped the scales in favor of the Emperor—their relationship commands enough of Max’s emotional world (his *Herz*) that, once Thekla has approved his *Pflicht* (she uses the term as well), he feels he has not too badly betrayed his emotions in pursuing it.

But despite it all, Max still loses: neither Wallenstein nor any of Max’s former officers will grant him even the smallest parting courtesy before he is sent from the camp in disgrace, and in the next act he is dead in battle. Devastated, Thekla wants to know every detail of the incident. Her witness is a Captain in the Swedish regiment attacked by imperial cavalry troops under Max’s command. As he narrates (*WT IV: 10*), Max’s horsemen caught the Swedes by surprise, but in their haste to advance, left their own infantry reinforcements far behind; the Swedish soldiers were thus able to surround the outnumbered cavalry and wipe them out; Max, thrown from his horse and trampled, was the first to die. He was given a ceremony and mourned by the Swedes themselves, many of whom once considered him a friend:

Denn viele sind bei uns, die seine Großmut
Und seiner Sitten Freundlichkeit erfahren,
Und alle rührte sein Geschick. Gern hätte
Der Rheingraf ihn gerettet, doch er selbst
Vereitelt' es, man sagt, er wollte sterben. (3068-3072)

“Er wollte sterben”—we can imagine why the Swedes reach this conclusion: Max’s assault was a tactical catastrophe. He stranded his cavalymen, consigned them all to slaughter—hardly fitting an experienced military professional, an officer whose natural environment is warfare. From the standpoint of those on the receiving end of the attack, it looked like a suicide mission. The question then is why—did Max not get what he wanted in Thekla’s blessing? Contrary to what his outward relief suggested, was he not internally resolved?

In a certain sense, he was: he was able to honor his basic loyalty to the Emperor. But the fact that this is not enough suggests there is a problem with Max’s loyalty itself, with his faculty of commitment. At the outset, Max is fervently loyal to Wallenstein, making verbal overtures: “Was dank’ ich ihm nicht alles – o! was sprech’ ich nicht alles aus in diesem teuren Namen, Friedland! Zeitlebens soll ich ein Gefangner sein von diesem Namen!” (P 782-786) This kind of language is typical for Max, and as we’ve seen, he’ll go on to speak of his *Herz* with the same emphatic fealty: he will unconditionally follow his heart, though it seems to vacillate between Octavio and Wallenstein, and in the course of the drama he invokes it against both of them. Ultimately he defers utterly to his imperial *Pflicht*. Wallenstein, *Herz*, Kaiser—Max’s commitment is in every instance one-sided and total; he is a figure of constant imbalance. On this count, it is important to recall something from our discussion of *Die Jungfrau von Orleans*: *das Herz* is Schiller’s keyword for the world of *Sinnlichkeit*, affect, feeling. Given Schiller’s insistence in the *Ästhetische Erziehung* on balancing drives (*Wechselwirkung*), Max’s repeated invocations of his *Herz* invite the interpretation that he is trying to let his *Stofftrieb* decide for him, when from the standpoint of Schillerian aesthetics, he should be looking for some way to

balance that drive with his formal impulses. We encounter *Formtrieb* not just in Max's *Pflicht* (duty is an abstract principle) but also in the astrological fortune-telling that pervades the play: Wallenstein himself has a personal astrologer, and Max, somewhat surprisingly, avows that he is also a believer (*P* III: 4). It is hard to imagine a more transcendent (in the sense we've been using the term) mode of reasoning than astrology: it is literally supersensible just as the stars are super-terrestrial; it is all symbolic forms and no concrete bodies. But again, whether it is private emotions or star science, Max seems only to be looking for something to defer to—his loyalty is a form of dependency, his arc in the play a series of one-sided commitments. As such, it is not surprising that there is an element of exhausted surrender to his pointless death: he has spent the whole play wasting his energy.

* * *

I have profiled Schiller's three late histories with emphasis on a select group of elements: in *Die Jungfrau von Orleans*, the heroine's sexuality, violence, and the triumphal spectacle of her death; in *Maria Stuart*, the figure of Mortimer, his love triangle with Maria and Leicester, and the queens' confrontation in act III; and in *Wallenstein* I have focused largely on the trajectory of Max Piccolomini. These are all Schiller's inventions. The historical Jeanne d'Arc was chaste and died a martyr at the stake; Mortimer is a fabrication, the empirical Leicester had no feelings for Mary Stuart, and the actual queens never met; and Max, like Mortimer, is Schiller's creation entirely. I posed the question at the outset: is there any sort of group identity to these inventions? Do they perform common functions in the plays?

A persistent question of Schiller scholarship involves the relationship between the late dramas and the rich body of aesthetic texts preceding them.²⁸ The history plays discussed here help us specify that relationship—these plays are empirically grounded, but Schiller selectively intervenes with invented figures, relations and events that magnify theoretically resonant aspects of the material. *Schönheit, das Erhabene, Anmut, Würde, Spiel, Schwärmerei*—it is a commonplace that these are features of Schiller’s late dramas: they are just as certainly present in his early plays, other writers’ plays, as well as the texture of daily life if Schiller’s aesthetic categories have any general use at all. My claim is more precise: Schiller uses *inventions in the context of history plays* to bring out those theoretical dynamics, to present historical material in such a way that aesthetic concepts play a central role. His rationale is the doctrine of *Spiel*, by which opposed elements are brought into productive interplay. In this case, it is the historiographic *Spiel* I described earlier: empirical history with free invention standing in for *Stofftrieb* and *Formtrieb*, embodying their dominant modes—what is more passive than the past, more active than the creative imagination? For Schiller, *Spiel* calls for a reciprocal exchange, a point of contact between the passive material of empirical history and the inventive capacities of the mind.

History allows Schiller to localize his concepts, to give them more concrete weight: in Mortimer we see how a modern political *Schwärmer* reasons, how a seductive ideal of righteousness can transform a person, a lesson with obvious pertinence following the fervid virtue-politics of the Jacobins. But it is possible the instruction works in the other direction as well, that is, toward an understanding of history: just as the specific historical moment of the late-16th century frames the symbolic options available for Mortimer’s obsessive commitment, so

²⁸ From the beginning, Schiller’s aesthetic writings have influenced reception of his subsequent history plays. See Saranpa’s introduction to *Schiller’s Wallenstein*, 2.

Mortimer and Johanna together form a kind of trans-epochal axis of *Schwärmerei* that allows us to trace the progression of this category from late Medieval to early modern Europe. Consistent with Schiller's diagnosis of modernity as an age of *Zerissenheit*, late-Medieval Johanna's *Schwärmerei* is a claim to grand unity, a total amalgamation of categories that obliterates divisions central to modernity—religion and nation, morality and law, even the distinction between sublimity and beauty that largely defines the aesthetics of modern philosophy—a unifying conceit communicated chiefly, as I've described, through Schiller's inventions. There is no analogous pretense to unity with Mortimer, and his struggle is much more limited and partisan—he fights for *this* monarch with *this* claim to legitimacy—but he partakes in the same berserk search for transcendence as Johanna, the impossible to demand to actually *experience* an ineffable ideal.

Another difference involves our judgment as spectators: it is easier to condemn Mortimer than Johanna, an impression reinforced by scholarship on the plays, which tends to read Johanna as complicated and Mortimer as depraved.²⁹ I believe Schiller invites this assessment, not just of Mortimer, but maybe Max Piccolomini as well. Certainly we would use somewhat different language to describe them—Max hardly seems “crazy” (Sammons) in the way Mortimer does—but they have two important elements in common: they are fictive and suicidal. Duped by Leicester and surrounded by Elisabeth's guard in act IV of *Maria Stuart*, Mortimer stabs himself while raving to an absent Maria. As I described already, Max's death in a tactically botched attack is widely regarded, both by figures in the play and academic commentators, as a suicide mission. It is striking that, in a community of dramatic figures totaling nearly 100 between three plays, Schiller invents only two. Still more striking is that *both* characters commit suicide. This, I

²⁹ Sammons: “Mortimer is crazy.” “Mortimer's Conversion,” 160.

think, is the invitation to judgment, or at least diagnosis: we are left considering what went wrong with Mortimer and Max, what idea Schiller thought worthy of creating an entire personage to express. Worth noting is that Mortimer and Max resemble not just each other in certain ways, but also the typical Jacobin: a man in his 20s with intense political commitments, and we get the sense that perhaps more important than the commitments themselves is the *faculty for feeling* committed, a sort of ongoing passion for some ideal. The lesson with Mortimer and Max involves the one-sidedness of this passion. They are monomaniacs—their principles admit of no compromise or negotiation, a fact which is perhaps most striking in the case of Max, whose faculty for dedication is such that he hyperactively attaches himself to Wallenstein, the Emperor, Tekla, his heart, etc. There is no sense of balance, no impulse to *Wechselwirkung* in Mortimer in Max. It is reasonable to call them *antireciprocal* figures: at any given point, each is responding to a single-entendre principle that, at least for that moment, enjoys total primacy. Mortimer and Max are prognostic cases of imbalance, instructive contrasts to the two-sided dynamic of Schillerian *Spiel*. Schiller gives us their suicides as if to suggest where complete one-sidedness leads: depleted self-annihilation.

In other instances, Schiller seems to invite a judgment of history itself. The fictional meeting of the queens in *Maria Stuart* exemplifies the dramatic material of the late histories: high points of crisis, moments of crystallization in which broad political conflicts jump a level in intensity, become perceptible in immediate collisions. The denominational dispute over the right to rule England condenses into a face-to-face clash between the rival monarchs; in *Wallenstein*, the already fraught world of the Thirty Years' War becomes feverish surrounding the betrayal and assassination of the General; and *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* interprets the most memorable and notorious episode of the Hundred Years' War between England and France. This act of

interpretation, of selective rendering, is critical for Schiller: it is the point at which the plays open political history to judgment, but not in the sense of issuing a simple “right” or “wrong” to the moments he selects—the fictions are too subtle, the whole presentation too attenuated for that. Instead this sort of judgment amounts to a communication of contingency, of non-determinism: Schiller lost his initial teleological optimism to discover that political history, far from the inexorable forward march of enlightened values, is shaped by (often selfish and fallible) human decisions. Two major conclusions follow: first, history could have been different; second, present actors are responsible for shaping its trajectory—they cannot fall back on any sort of determinism. Both principles are on display in the historical dramas, and again, the meeting in *Maria Stuart* is exemplary: we get a sense not only for the contours of the disagreement—and the underlying *Trieb*-dynamics (Schiller’s diagnosis), discussed above—but also its utter reversibility, the glaring opportunity for reconciliation. In this scene it is quite literally an issue of phrasing, of avoiding momentary insult. This is also something traceable to *Spiel*: the imbalance and alienation of the drives—probably *the* governing rubric of these history plays—is itself nothing predetermined, but contingent, a “transgression of nature,” a *mistake*. Therein lies their tragedy: they are missed opportunities for play.

Chapter 3

Sublime Politics:

Fichte's Defense of the French Revolution

In the summer of 1790, 28-year-old tutor and aspiring philosopher J.G. Fichte read Kant and was transformed. He felt he finally had a foundation on which to develop his own theoretical ideas, and he was especially enthusiastic about the moral philosophy Kant had presented in his *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (1785) and *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (1787). Thus the young Fichte, still without a university appointment and eager to prove himself, set an ambitious goal: to apply Kantian moral theory to the world of politics and social order, a world that, in the early 1790s, was fixated on the French Revolution of 1789. So it is no surprise that Fichte's most developed work from this period bears the cumbersome (but very Fichtean) title *Beitrag zur Berichtigung der Urtheile des Publicums über die französische Revolution*.¹ The *Beitrag* is not a famous work: it is Fichte's only book-length treatise not translated into English, and his pre-Jena (1794) writings as a whole are frequently overlooked.² On the rare occasion that the *Beitrag* is engaged in scholarship on Fichte, it is usually in passing, along the way to more

¹ For a helpful overview of Fichte's early development and political philosophy see Frederick Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism*, 75-82.

² The third chapter of Slavoj Žižek's goliath *Less than Nothing* (2012) is illustrative: at 60 pages devoted to Fichte, it is an example of uncommonly sustained and rigorous Fichte scholarship in English. It also operates on an inherited distinction between "early" (Jena, 1794-1799) and "late" Fichte (Berlin, 1799-1814) that gives no place to early texts like the *Beitrag*.

significant works, and Fichte is taken at his word in the form of an “application” thesis: namely, that the *Beitrag* is Fichte’s straightforward attempt to apply Kantian moral principles to European politics after the French Revolution. In essence, this is an intertextual thesis: Fichte writes his text (the *Beitrag*) with one or several specific other texts in mind (Kant’s second *Kritik*, usually Rousseau’s *Social Contract* is mentioned here as well) and brings them to bear on a new object of concern (the Revolution).

I am not saying this thesis is *wrong*—only that it may have the wrong texts. Underneath its moral exterior the *Beitrag* is fundamentally *aesthetic* in nature, advancing a critique of European politics indebted more to the Kantian sublime of the third *Kritik* (1790) than the categorical imperative. In fact I will call the *Beitrag* a hidden manifesto of the *political sublime*, hidden even from Fichte himself, who set out to write a treatise on political morality, and produced a document of aesthetic politics that rivals Schiller’s *Ästhetische Erziehung* as a specimen of these two orders’ conceptual interplay. And if the latter is Schiller’s defense of political moderatism from the standpoint of beauty and harmony, the *Beitrag* sees Fichte actualizing the radical political potential of the Kantian sublime in defense of revolutionary upheaval. One result for Fichte was the aspersive title “German Jacobin,” a burden throughout his years at Jena (1794-1799),³ though we’ll see there is some justice to the charge: if anything, the aesthetic politics of the *Beitrag* help to ground it.

When I say the *Beitrag* embodies “aesthetic politics,” I do not mean this in the commonplace sense of an “art of statecraft” or the artistic-symbolic properties of state iconography; rather I am saying that an aesthetic concept, concealing itself as a moral concept, structures a theory of politics. Because my argument concerns the basic theoretical architecture

³ See Daniel Breazeale, introduction to *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings* (Cornell University Press, 1988).

of the *Beitrag*, I've chosen to limit myself to roughly the first third of the text (about 50 pages), in which Fichte presents the conceptual underpinnings of the treatise. The centerpiece of this first section is a chapter titled “Hat überhaupt ein Volk das Recht, seine Staatsverfassung abzuändern?” (*Beitrag* 33-50) The short version of my argument is that the concept of the sublime allows Fichte to answer *yes* to this question in the precise and emphatic way that he does in that chapter, the “Vorrede” and the “Einleitung” to the book.⁴ The remaining chapters—one on social contract theory and three largely sociological sections on the nobility, privileged classes and the church—I leave for another occasion.

Fichte and Aesthetics

Like Kant, Schelling and Hegel, Fichte is a philosophical systems-builder: he attempts to construct a unified theoretical edifice that comprehensively accounts for the world in its multiplicity. This synthetic ambition lends the systems-builder the appearance of trying to talk about everything: nature, politics, science, ethics, religion, history, and for every German Idealist *but* Fichte, art. Kant has the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, which David Wellbery calls the “Gründungsdokument” of philosophical aesthetics⁵; Schelling’s *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* (1800) famously culminates in the claim that art is the “one true and eternal organon” of philosophy; and Hegel’s *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* from the 1820s, though denying art the primacy it enjoys in Kant and Schelling, nonetheless remain a mainstay of modern aesthetic theory. Among the grand philosophical systems of German Idealism, Fichte’s alone is silent on art—there is no official “Fichtean aesthetics.”

⁴ The “Vorrede” and “Einleitung” are respectively pages 4-10 and 10-33 of the edition I cite throughout.

⁵ David E. Wellbery, “Die Enden des Menschen: Anthropologie und Einbildungskraft im Bildungsroman (Wieland, Goethe, Novalis),” In *Das Ende: Poetik und Hermeneutik XVI*, ed. K. Stierle and R. Warning (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1996), 601.

Such at least is the rough critical consensus Paul Gordon disputes in *Art as the Absolute* (2015), a recent monograph on the role of aesthetics in German philosophies of the “absolute” between 1790 and 1830.⁶ While he acknowledges that Fichte’s philosophical system—conventionally synonymous with the *Wissenschaftslehre* first presented in 1794 and reformulated over the next two decades—contains no explicit theorization of aesthetics, Gordon nonetheless directs our attention to a piece Fichte submitted (unsuccessfully) to Schiller’s journal *Die Horen* in 1795, “Briefe über Geist und Buchstaben in der Philosophie.” Schiller rejected Fichte’s essay in part because, while the title refers to philosophy, the content is largely a discussion of art. This is only a problem, Gordon argues, if one conceives of philosophy and art as innately distinct, a commonplace Gordon contests with his idea of an “aesthetic absolute,” a kind of symbiotic exchange between art and aesthetics and the philosophical category *das Absolute* between 1790 and 1830. For Gordon, that link is on display in Fichte’s letters on the spirit and letter in philosophy, and though this isn’t the place to walk through Gordon’s exposition in detail, I want to emphasize two points: first, Gordon draws “Fichtean aesthetics” out of an early and somewhat marginal essay; second, in Fichte et al., Gordon connects art and aesthetics to a philosophical category of *transcendence*: the absolute, super-sensible, a grand final state that absorbs and effaces all limitation and division.⁷

I’d like to follow Gordon in developing an aesthetic interpretation of Fichte around a lesser-known, early text; but while Gordon discusses an essay that is clearly aesthetic in substance, I address a text that is only latently so, while masquerading as straight political

⁶ Gordon devotes chapters to Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel and Schopenhauer, with framing sections on Plato and Nietzsche. What I quote here comes from chapter 3 on Fichte unless otherwise noted.

⁷ Discussing Fichte’s “Briefe” Gordon writes “The artwork is thus here defined as the immersion in something absolute in which the subject/spectator becomes lost in the reality of an object/work that is the reality of the subject/spectator,” and later “This is why the absolute—which can only refer to a synthesis of subject and object, thought and reality (nature), is synonymous with being alive, and why art, which stands in relation to the merely organic as a kind of death, is nonetheless a death which is paradoxically the very essence of human life.”

philosophy. But I need to define what I mean by “aesthetic” in this context, and this involves the second point I take from Gordon, on transcendence. As we’ve seen, largely due to the influence of Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, German aesthetic theory in the 1790s is dominated by the concepts of beauty (*Schönheit*) and the sublime (*das Erhabene*). To do “aesthetics” in this milieu is to theorize these two poles and their relationship. As I described in chapters one and two, Schiller develops a theory of politics with aesthetic beauty as a conceptual nucleus, and here I argue Fichte’s *Beitrag* presents the other side, a politics framed by the aesthetic concept of the sublime. This is challenging, in part because the sublime is trickier than beauty: it can easily seem to negate the whole discursive field that gives rise to it, especially because true sublimity opposes bodies, pleasure, delightful images and most other things conventionally associated with the term “aesthetics.” But precisely that is the world sublimity is designed to *transcend*—while beauty is the mode in which opposites are unified and a pleasant accord prevails among differences, in sublimity, all that prevents our spiritual and moral elevation is obliterated. If the ethos of beauty is harmony, for the sublime it is conflict and victory.

Typical for the time is to transpose the scene of this conflict to the philosophical debate about faculties of cognition: reason, understanding, desire, imagination, etc. In this context, beauty harmonizes intellectual and sensuous faculties, as is apparent in Schiller. But sublimity attempts to secure the primacy of the mind—meaning together reason, spirit, morality—and physical powers, unlike in Schiller’s politics of beauty, have no rightful claim to circumscribe the work of rationality, or really a claim to anything at all. Limiting the encroachments of sense, physicality, bodily faculties—this is perhaps the central prerogative of the *Beitrag*, where the tension between noble minds and deceitful bodies recurs in Fichte’s portrayal of European politics.

The Sublime Occasion

David James has already drawn attention to a central peculiarity of the *Beitrag*: it is a 200-page treatise devoted to justifying the French Revolution—with little sustained discussion of the French Revolution.⁸ Fichte is aware of the dissonance, which he not only confirms but avows in the opening sentences of the “Vorrede”: “Die französische Revolution scheint mir wichtig für die gesammte Menschheit. *Ich rede nicht von den politischen Folgen*, die sie sowohl für jenes Land, als für benachbarte Staaten gehabt... Das alles ist an sich viel, aber es ist gegen das *ungleich Wichtigere* immer wenig” (*Beitrag* 4; my emphasis). Fichte proposes to assess the French Revolution *independent of its political consequences*: the empirical course of events in France, though “an sich viel,” is meaningless next to what makes the Revolution really significant (its moral consequences). The *Beitrag* was written and published in 1793—the year Louis XVI was executed, the Jacobins came to power and the Reign of Terror began—so Fichte’s move to dismiss the “politischen Folgen” probably seemed politically outrageous, if not insane. At the very least, it likely confirmed his conservative critics in their equivalence of revolutionary politics and intellectual depravity: ignoring violence can easily seem like advocating it.⁹ In fact Fichte’s gesture here is programmatic: the *Beitrag* is a protean work, and one of its many faces is an attack on empiricism, whose practitioners (per Fichte) obsess over historical particulars at the expense of more significant theoretical questions. The critique of empiricism is part of the

⁸ David James, *Fichte’s Republic: Idealism, History and Naturalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 72-73.

⁹ “Given the counterrevolutionary mood prevailing in Germany at the time, the publication of such controversial views [in the *Beitrag*] could be seen by some only as an act of provocation and defiance... From the moment he was first considered a candidate for an appointment at Jena, his political sympathies were seen as grounds for suspicion... Much of the opposition Fichte was to encounter at Jena... had more to do with his reputation as a dangerous Jacobin than with the actual contents of the works he published during his years at Jena.” Breazeale, introduction, 10-11.

Beitrag's broader polemic against (in James' apt phrasing) "historical objectivity" in favor of "moral subjectivity."¹⁰ From the standpoint of moral subjectivity, history is useful only to the extent that it contributes to the moral enrichment of the subject. (Which makes Fichte's dismissal of violence all the more remarkable, though as we'll see, destruction is an important facet of sublime-political morality.) The study of history is simply an *occasion* for the subject's development, i.e. the realization of its moral powers, so there is no point in attempting to most accurately comprehend history for its own sake—that is empiricism, and in the world of the *Beitrag*, complicit in egoism, monarchism, and various related evils Fichte's political thought is designed to combat.

Nonetheless, it seems counterintuitive that Fichte would launch an attack on the empiricism of the concrete using something empirically concrete, the manifest event of the Revolution, as his point of departure. If the point is to inculcate moral impulses in his readers, why doesn't Fichte just state moral principles? Why does he need something empirical at all, let alone as his starting point? This choice—to expound a moral position as the *second, resultant* point of a movement beginning in the arena of empirical experience—is our first major indicator that sublimity is doing conceptual work in the *Beitrag*: this double movement is precisely the structure of the sublime, in which we convert a harrowing experience into our own subjective transcendence via supra-experiential principles. In the sublime situation, experiential "objectivity" yields to James' "moral subjectivity": encountering something overwhelming or terrifying in the world, we take recourse to our own internal subjective foundation in moral reason; self-subjectivizing in that way, we elevate ourselves above what previously threatened us, and the concomitant rush of "negative pleasure" is what Kant calls the sublime. The pleasure

¹⁰ James, *Fichte's Republic*, 65-66.

is “negative” because indirect, secondary: *we need the initial displeasure* in order to set the sublime process in motion. We can’t simply auto-transcend and get the sublime feeling without first passing through a corresponding moment of vulnerability. In other words, sublimity is a conceptual process that denotatively requires a first experience: something must happen that enables sublime elevation as a possible response. Fichte’s *Beitrag* replicates this two-part structure: the precise moral instruction he offers is possible only after a specific event, the Revolution. Seen in this light, it is understandable that Fichte ignores the “politischen Folgen” of the event: they are simply part of its empirical manifestation, the first, concretely historical moment of the Revolution; Fichte is interested in its second moment, the moral elevation all of Europe can experience in properly *judging* the Revolution.

An implicitly sublime logic seems to be a way for Fichte to bypass consideration of the Revolution’s empirical details. But even so, for the situation as a whole to qualify as sublime, some of those details are relevant: not just any experience can induce the sublime process. The Revolution must be threatening in such a way that it is an opportunity for moral elevation. We know from Kant that the initial, experiential moment of the sublime falls into two categories: the *mathematical* sublime confronts us with something so enormous that our powers of representation break down trying to grasp it, while the *dynamic* sublime manifests in a danger so immediate and immense that we experience an overwhelming sense of frailty and fear.¹¹ The most obvious connection between the French Revolution and sublimity involves the second type. Certainly among critical perspectives on the Revolution, the dynamic sublime has a strong

¹¹ In *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, the basic tension driving the mathematical sublime is reason’s demand that the mind’s representative powers—imagination, understanding, intuition—present something *infinite* as an object of positive knowledge; when it becomes clear that this is impossible, the mind exalts in its own “supersensible faculty” (*übersinnliches Vermögen*) (KU B 85). The operative element of dynamic sublimity is *Furcht* and the mind’s ability to separate itself from the concerns of physical safety (KU B 102-103).

presence: the Revolution is imagined as an encroaching danger that threatens to engulf the entire European political order, and especially in 1793, after the execution of Louis and the rise of the Jacobins, the unrepentantly violent nature of that danger becomes clear—it is easy to picture beheadings across the continent. Already in 1790, Edmund Burke writes, “many parts of Europe are in open disorder. In many others there is a hollow murmuring under the ground; a confused movement is felt, that threatens a general earthquake in the political world.”¹² It is telling that Burke’s metaphor of choice for political instability, an earthquake, is a threatening natural event much like those Kant uses to illustrate the dynamic sublime (volcanoes, hurricanes, crashing oceans, etc.).

For Burke, it is not just any political turmoil, but especially the “popular commotion” of revolution that seems comparable to an earthquake (*Reflections* 112). He is not alone in using this trope, and by 1793 there is a well-established tendency to characterize the Revolution in terms redolent of the dynamically sublime.¹³ But there is also a mathematically sublime element to the event that is central to Fichte’s argument in the *Beitrag*: very simply, the Revolution is something we cannot understand. Or more precisely, the analytical procedure we have been applying to politics—empiricism grounded in values derived from historical precedent—is completely incapable of grasping or even signifying the Revolution: it is a total break, not only in political history, but also in the basic structure and possibilities of knowledge. Fichte advances the example of Rousseau, who, though once dismissed by the empiricists as a *Träumer*, has come

¹² Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 156.

¹³ See the introduction and chapter on Burke, Paine, and Wollstonecraft in Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution (1789-1820)* (1983). Something interesting happens to the figure of *light*, obviously the chief image of the Enlightenment and, as Jean Starobinski describes in *1789, The Emblems of Reason* (1973), the metaphor of choice for French revolutionaries promoting their movement (Starobinski 41-52; trans. Barbara Bray 1982). But in Burke’s *Reflections*, the Revolution is characterized as a *blinding* light: like direct sunlight on the eyes it overwhelms sensuous experience and comprehension, and thus fits the category of the sublime (Paulson 59). In terms of the Kantian sublimities, this sort of physical obliteration belongs to the dynamic.

to inspire a generation of “junge kraftvolle Männer, die seinen Einfluss in das System des menschlichen Wissens nach allen seinen Theilen, die *die gänzliche neue Schöpfung der menschlichen Denkungsart*, die jenes Werk bewirken muss, ahnden, bis sie sie darstellen werden” (*Beitrag 27*; my emphasis). Creating a *new form of thought*—nothing less, for Fichte, is the task of the young revolutionaries, and it is part of the reason the empirical traditionalists are so fiercely opposed to the whole process: the core of what is happening in France, what the Revolution is really about, cannot be integrated into their manner of signifying and understanding the world. Fichte addresses them directly: “durch Rousseau geweckt, hat der menschliche Geist ein Werk vollendet, das ihr für die unmöglichste aller Unmöglichkeiten würdet erklärt haben, wenn ihr fähig gewesen wäret, die Idee desselben zu fassen.” And later: “Ihr werdet noch oft nöthig haben, euch die Augen zu reiben, um euch zu überzeugen, ob ihr recht seht, wenn wieder eine eurer Unmöglichkeiten wirklich geworden ist” (*Beitrag 27*). The empiricist confronts the Revolution not just as something to oppose—i.e. as something that simply conflicts with the empiricist’s interest or desire¹⁴—but as the *impossible*, something outside the horizon of available knowledge, an object of disbelief. This is exactly where the mathematical sublime puts us: cognitive breakdown, in which our productive faculties of knowledge have nothing to tell us.

Part of this effect, for Fichte, is the way the Revolution poses fundamental questions about the values that underlie political life. The hallmark of empiricism, of course, is to answer *all* questions with reference to tradition: what has worked before? What precedents have remained strongest? What conventions can we rely on? The Revolution (in Fichte’s presentation)

¹⁴ If the Revolution is overwhelming to me because I oppose it and fear that it will spread, I am in the ambit of the dynamic sublime, which for Kant corresponds to the faculty of desire (*Begehrungsvermögen*), while the mathematical sublime corresponds to that of cognition (*Erkenntnisvermögen*) (*KU B 80*). In the former case, the Revolution is something I do not *want*; in the latter, something I cannot *understand*.

dismisses experience entirely, instead asking what is *just, right, true*—all without any sort of contextual or experiential qualifier. The Revolution communicates at the level of the philosophical *a priori*. For Fichte, this manner of questioning, as well as a kind of political activity that genuinely accords with it, is unprecedented in European history: again addressing empiricists directly, he asks “wie, wenn ihr auf einen Fall kommt, der in eurer Geschichte noch nicht da gewesen ist, was macht ihr dann? Ich fürchte sehr, dass das bei der Frage von den Mitteln, den einzig wahren Zweck einer Staatsverbindung zu erreichen, wirklich der Fall sey” (*Beitrag* 23). Fichte knows this is empiricism’s weak spot: what can an analytical practice grounded on experience possibly say about something that has no precedent in experience? Such, he suggests here, is the case concerning the basic question of the Revolution: what is the “one true purpose” of the political order, and how do we achieve it?

Fichte’s claim is that this question, properly understood, lies outside the analytical purview of empiricism. And if we accept Fichte’s portrayal of pre-revolutionary political thought as, effectively, entirely empiricist,¹⁵ the moment in which the Revolution poses its question—that of the purpose of the state—should produce an effect equivalent to the mathematical sublime: before 1789, our cognition of history is essentially empirical, *a posteriori*, and because it is unassimilable into that cognitive scheme, the Revolution effectively obliterates it. There is now space for a “*gänzliche neue Schöpfung der menschlichen Denkungsart,*” one that is adequate to the enormous and unprecedented reality of the Revolution.

None of which is to discount the dynamically sublime aspect of the Revolution: instead, the immediate threat of uncontrolled destruction *combines* with the Revolution’s unique cognitive pressures to make it a kind of total package of sublime trauma—it simultaneously

¹⁵ Though it would be worth asking whether figures like Hobbes and Machiavelli are really empiricists.

threatens our lives and embarrasses our intellectual forms.¹⁶ In David Martyn’s reading of the sublime, it is something we fail to both “see” *and* “think”: there is sensuous as well as cognitive breakdown, physical and mental powerlessness at once.¹⁷ From the standpoint of the whole sublime process—both moments—this makes the Revolution an ideal specimen: it threatens to overpower our bodies and minds, we cannot “see” or “think” it, and the greater the initial void, terror, desperation of the first moment, the more exultant the release in the sublime elevation of the second.¹⁸ We are unburdened of the anxieties that induced the process, which in this case are formidable: an ongoing threat of death at any time (anyone could be an “enemy of the people”); an unprecedented political phenomenon that defies our empirical categories of understanding; and a provocation—“why does the state exist?”—that brings those categories to the point of collapse. Fichte claims this question is the conceptual core of the Revolution, and it is worth pursuing further.

The Purpose of the State

The *Beitrag* is a critique of a certain political status quo: 18th century European monarchy, an institution that, according to Fichte, promotes neither the livelihood of its subjects nor any real civic ideal, but only *itself*: “*Die Tendenz aller Monarchien ist nach Innen uneingeschränkte Alleinherrschaft, und nach Aussen Universalmonarchie*” (*Beitrag* 43; original emphasis). Fichte claims this is both the *a priori* and experiential truth of monarchy (“eine durch Gründe *a priori*

¹⁶ There is no reason to believe the mathematical and dynamic sublimines are mutually exclusive, and in fact they have been fruitfully connected, e.g. in Paul de Man’s argument that there is a passage from mathematical to dynamic sublimity on the model of tropological language passing over into the performative mode. See “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant” and “Kant and Schiller” in *Aesthetic Ideology*.

¹⁷ David Martyn, *Sublime Failures: The Ethics of Kant and Sade* (Wayne State University Press, 2002), 164.

¹⁸ While beauty is tied to a “Gegenstand des Wohlgefallens,” Kantian sublimity derives from “das, was in uns, ohne zu vernünfteln, bloß in der Auffassung, das Gefühl des Erhabenen erregt, der Form nach *zwar* zweckwidrig für unsere Urteilskraft, unangemessen unserm Darstellungsvermögen, und gleichsam gewalttätig für die Einbildungskraft erscheinene mag, *aber* dennoch nur um *desto erhabener* zu sein geurteilt wird” (*KU B 76*; original emphasis).

und durch die ganze Geschichte bestätigte Wahrheit“): monarchy *wills only itself*, in (internally) absolute and (externally) universal form. Fichte equates monarchy with power for the sake of power, and its *program* (we would say its “policy”) is simply extension, consolidation and maintenance of that power. In this view, all political authority emanates from the person of the monarch and a state’s internal politics are determined accordingly; but the drive for total authority also pushes outward, and Fichte’s absolute monarch has a systemic and unavoidable craving for new territory, resources and populations to rule. “*Alleinherrschaft eures Willens im Innern, Verbreitung eurer Grenzen von Aussen*” (*Beitrag* 41; original emphasis)—this paradigm has brought Europe to an uncomfortable *détente* that, for Fichte, represents the “letzter Endzweck” of the pre-revolutionary political order: continental balance of power, “das Gleichgewicht von Europa” (*Beitrag* 42). Of course, each monarchy’s innate drive to expand and conquer conflicts with its stated commitment to maintain continental equanimity, with the result that all praise and indulge the “community of European states” while biding time and amassing enough strength to overtake the others (*Beitrag* 43).

In Fichte’s portrayal, the ideational anchors of pre-revolutionary European politics are grim indeed: a shallow equilibrium, monarchial integrity, momentarily checked ambition. Principles like freedom and equality have no place in this kind of *Realpolitik*, which Fichte diagnoses with reference to a philosophical doctrine of faculties: 18th century Europe is dominated by “*sinnlicher Genuss*” (*Beitrag* 41), sense-pleasure. Fichte is hardly alone in this characterization, but what makes the *Beitrag* distinctive is just how rigorously and systematically it expounds the evils of pleasure. Fichte sees it at work in the smallest acts of avarice, all the way up to the very framework of international politics. (*Realpolitikal* competition is the result of states pursuing pleasure in the form of national interest). In the world of the *Beitrag*, *Genuss* as a

general principle commands that we simply do what we want, what is gratifying, pleasurable, what satisfies immediate appetites, never that we engage a more ideal register and ask what is *right*, what we *should* do. Fichte takes the strong inverse position: *only* what is right matters, and “Genuss hat an sich gar keinen Werth; er bekommt einen, höchstens als Mittel zur Belebung und Erneuerung unserer Kräfte für Cultur.” Sense-pleasure itself has value only as an expedient for *culture*, which Fichte here defines as “Uebung aller Kräfte auf den Zweck der völligen Freiheit, der völligen Unabhängigkeit von allem, was nicht wir selbst, unser reines Selbst ist” (*Beitrag* 37). *Complete freedom*—this is Fichte’s political purpose, his banner against morally and civically denuded monarchism.

For Fichte, freedom is the task and telos of the state, and cultural activity is the instrument for its development. It is important to emphasize the relationship between culture and sensibility in Fichte’s conception here: though he cannot deny there is a certain sensuous aspect to human life—indeed he sees it as the determining element of European monarchy—he circumscribes it entirely with the realm of culture. “Nichts in der Sinnenwelt, nichts von unserem Treiben, Thun oder Leiden, als Erscheinung betrachtet, hat einen Werth, als insofern es auf Cultur wirkt,” which is a more specific way of saying that sensuousness can only be a means and never an end: “alles, was uns zu sinnlichen Wesen macht [ist] nicht selbst Zweck, sondern bloss Mittel für unseren höheren geistigen Zweck” (*Beitrag* 37). As part of this general program, Fichte prescribes a two-tiered campaign against *Sinnlichkeit*: first, it must be “tamed and subjugated” (“bezähmt und unterjocht”), no longer giving commands, as he says it does in the world of monarchy, but obeying ours (“sie soll nicht mehr gebieten, sondern dienen; sie soll sich nicht mehr anmaassen, uns unsere Zwecke vorzuschreiben, oder sie zu bedingen”); second, having been “bezähmt,” *Sinnlichkeit* should be useful for humanity’s enrichment: “Dazu gehört,

dass man alle ihre Kräfte aufsuche, sie auf alle Art bilde, und ins unendliche erhöhe und verstärke” (*Beitrag* 38). This Fichte calls *Cultur der Sinnlichkeit*, and together with *Bezähmung* it forms the overall procedure by which we become free: “Durch die höchste Ausübung dieser beiden Rechte des Ueberwinders über die Sinnlichkeit nun würde der Mensch *frei*, d.i. bloss von sich, von seinem reinen ich abhängig werden” (*Beitrag* 39; Fichte’s emphasis).

Freedom through the overcoming of *Sinnlichkeit*—this is also the model of freedom at work in the sublime, the hallmark of which is reason’s victory over sense. And this is indeed where Fichte is headed with his notion of *Cultur*:

Diese Cultur zur Freiheit nun ist der einzig – mögliche Endzweck des Menschen, *insofern er ein Theil der Sinnenwelt ist*; welcher höchste sinnliche Endzweck aber wieder nicht Endzweck des Menschen an sich, sondern letztes Mittel für Erreichung seines höheren geistigen Endzwecks ist, der *völligen Uebereinstimmung seines Willens mit dem Gesetze der Vernunft*. Alles, was Menschen thun und treiben, muss sich als Mittel für diesen letzten Endzweck in der Sinnenwelt betrachten lassen, oder es ist ein Treiben ohne Zweck, ein unvernünftiges Treiben. (*Beitrag* 39; my emphasis)

Sensibility, though naturally unfree, can nonetheless be *used*, up to a point, in the service of freedom: this is culture, which can then take us a certain distance toward our ultimate human purpose (“Endzweck des Menschen”), the coincidence of our will and the rational law (“Uebereinstimmung seines Willens mit dem Gesetze der Vernunft”). It is a sequence of means and ends: *Sinnlichkeit* is overcome and provides material for *Cultur*, exercise of which helps us approximate freedom; the consummate stage of *Cultur* is not an end in itself, but simply the final means (“letztes Mittel”) on the path to the total rational will. The process is homologous with that of sublimity, in which we begin sensuously moored in a way that is limiting, threatening or both (*Sinnlichkeit*), do some sort of *work* on that material situation (*Cultur*), and end up contentedly and triumphantly embodying the moral-rational law (*Uebereinstimmung*). Important to note is that the first stage, *Sinnlichkeit*, has value *only as something to be overcome*: this is the

critical factor differentiating sublimity from beauty, in which sensuousness, worthwhile in its own right, enters into mutual exchange with reason.

This sublime template structures Fichte's interpretation of human civilizational history: pre-revolutionary European politics is still caught in the *sinnlich* phase, but this is not to say there has been *no* progress in controlling sensibility¹⁹—intensely Protestant Fichte singles out “Jesus und Luther, heilige Schutzgeister der Freiheit” for special praise in this respect, prophesying “bald wird der Dritte, der euer Werk vollendete... zu euch versammelt werden” (*Beitrag* 50). This “third” is presumably Kant, whose critical philosophy completes the work of freedom (*Cultur*) carried out in earlier eras by Jesus and Martin Luther. And Fichte's choice of the verb *vollenden* here suggests we may not just be at another stage, but the final stepping-off point, where *Sinnlichkeit* disappears and culture yields to the moral law. This entails a radical break with the 18th century monarchial order, which may have advanced us somewhat beyond the Middle Ages (when there was no Protestantism), but is nonetheless bound to a political spirit of privilege, interest and ignorance that Fichte considers thoroughly *sinnlich*. The final step is to embrace a politics of unqualified freedom and moral idealism. For Fichte, the simultaneous event of the French Revolution and Kantian philosophy means that world-historical moment has come. It is a decisive elevation-point, the terminus of a history that has steadily un-mired itself from *Sinnlichkeit* through culture and is ready to jump into morality—which is to say, a history conceived as sublime.

There is more to say about this developmental—later I will call it “asymptotic”—component of Fichte's sublime politics, but first I need to address a conceptual problem related

¹⁹ “Aber ein solcher Fortschritt zeigt sich wirklich, und das war denn auch von der Natur des Menschen, die schlechterdings nicht stille stehen kann, nicht anders zu erwarten. Die sinnlichen Kräfte der Menschheit sind allerdings, seitdem wir ihrem Gange nachschauen können, auf mannigfaltige Art gebildet und gestärkt worden” (*Beitrag* 41).

to morality and aesthetics. As I've said, I am arguing that aesthetics, rather than morality, is the discourse that underlies Fichte's *Beitrag*. The problem is that, in Kant—the reference point for both Fichte's moral theory and the concept of the sublime—morality and sublimity overlap considerably, most obviously in the fact that the sublime process terminates in the moral law, which stands as the transcendent end-point of our elevation above sensuous existence that is the essence of sublimity. Moreover, the two properties in the *Beitrag* I've so far connected to the sublime—(1) an experiential occasion for moral transcendence and (2) the processual overcoming of *Sinnlichkeit*—hardly contradict Kantian moral theory. My argument is only worth making if there is some substantive difference between political morality and an aesthetic politics grounded on the sublime; if “morality” and “the sublime” are effectively the same thing, this chapter is a long-winded paraphrase. I need to present some element of Fichte's politics in the *Beitrag* left undiscovered by a straight moral reading. Another way to pose the question is this: is there an important difference between morality itself and an aesthetics that *leads to* morality?

Judgment and Universality

The crucial factor turns out to be *judgment*. Morality and aesthetics involve distinct procedures of judging, and those procedures in turn correspond to separate models of human universality. Less abstractly, “one *should* X” as a judgment construes what it means to be human in a different way than “X is *sublime*.” This is Alenka Zupančič's argument in *Ethics of the Real* (2000): “When we are judging an aesthetic phenomenon, we do not, according to Kant, *postulate* everyone's agreement [as with morality] – rather, we *require* agreement from everyone”; this is

an (aesthetic) “universality other than the universality of law.”²⁰ Judgment in line with the moral law postulates (“postulieren”) universal agreement while aesthetic judgment requires it (“ansinnen”); Kant himself describes the first process as “logisch” and the second as predicated on securing the “Beitritt” of others.²¹ That is to say, moral judgment issues from the hermetic, conceptual space of the categorical imperative: universality is a logical precondition any maxim has to meet if it would accede to the level of moral law—this is what it means to “postulate” universal agreement. Conversely, aesthetic judgment does not presuppose this agreement, whether logically or otherwise: it must *construct* or, as Zupančič prefers, “constitute” it: aesthetic judgment “constitutes its own universality... in our judgment we constitute the ‘universe’ within which this judgment is universally valid” (*Ethics* 155).

Whereas moral law is axiomatically universal, aesthetic judgment must “constitute its own universality,” i.e. foster consensus around its pronouncement. In the world of the third *Kritik*, that pronouncement will take one of two basic forms: “X is beautiful” or “X is sublime.” In either case, aesthetic judgment needs to seek out some unifying ground, some element shared by all judging subjects around which universal *Beitritt* can congeal. If the judgment is “X is beautiful,” that unifying ground is pleasure in the harmonious free play of cognitive faculties; in the case of a sublime judgment, per Zupančič, it is “precisely moral agency,”²² by which she means the formal capacity of moral determination and action. Sublime judgments are a sub-class

²⁰ Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2000), 155. It should be pointed out that *Ethics of the Real* is hardly a neutral exegesis of Kant, nor does it purport to be. I believe Zupančič’s psychoanalytic reading keeps the question of cognitive faculties in full view while also addressing the sort of *satisfaction* involved in processes like the sublime.

²¹ The relevant section is § 8 of *Kritik der Urteilskraft*: “Das Geschmacksurteil postuliert nicht jedermann Einstimmung (denn das kann nur ein logisches allgemeines, weil es Gründe anführen kann, tun); es sinnet nur jedermann diese Einstimmung an, als einen Fall der Regel, in Ansehung dessen er die Bestätigung nicht von Begriffen, sondern von anderer Beitritt erwartet.” (B 26).

²² “Yet by thus requiring [as aesthetic judgment does] agreement from everyone, we are forced to rely on something else, and this ‘something else’ is, in the case of the sublime, precisely moral agency.” Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, 155-56.

of aesthetic judgments that ground their own universality on the universality of moral agency. This is the link between sublimity and morality that was difficult to understand at the end of the last section: in Fichte's *Beitrag*, sublimity employs morality to establish its own universal validity. But this does not mean they amount to the same thing, and Zupančič's reading helps us understand more clearly the stakes of the difference between morality itself and an aesthetic position that terminates in (or universalizes itself through) the moral law.

The critical distinction is that between moral *law* and moral *agency*. The former is a concrete prescription, the tangible output of the categorical imperative's moral-analytical procedure. This law simply tells me what or what not to do; moral *agency* is my power to do it. For Zupančič, this agential power, rather than any specific maxim, is the moral dimension of the sublime. Kant writes in *Kritik der Urteilskraft* that sublimity "hat seine Grundlage in der menschlichen Natur, und zwar demjenigen, was man mit dem gesunden Verstande zugleich jedermann ansinnen und von ihm fordern kann, nämlich in der Anlage zum Gefühl für (praktische) Ideen, d.i. zu dem moralischen" (B 111-112). Here Kant is distinguishing between beauty, the sense for which he regards as contingent on cultural conventions,²³ and the sublime, which rests on a predisposition ("Anlage") to moral ideas that is part of human nature ("menschliche Natur"). Nowhere does Kant say that sublimity has anything to do with *actually acting morally*—rather, the point is that the sublime activates this inclination toward moral ideas; it stimulates moral *feeling* ("Gefühl").

This feeling, this capacity for moral determination, is related to the overarching symmetry of the sublime process, i.e. that the final moral elevation I experience is proportional in degree to the severity of the initial stimulus (*KU* B 76). In Zupančič's reading, a result of this

²³ "...von der Kultur zuerst erzeugt, und etwa bloß konventionsmäßig in der Gesellschaft eingeführt" (*KU* B 111).

linkage is that the moral agency awakened in sublimity can be imposing and even horrific in its power:

a confrontation with something that is terrifying ‘in itself’... strikes the subject as a kind of bodying forth of the cruel, unbridled and menacing superego – the ‘real or reverse side’ of the moral law (in us) ... the devastating force ‘above me’ easily evokes a devastating force ‘within me’. The feeling of the sublime develops through this metonymy. It is clear that the ‘devastating force within me’ cannot really refer to the moral law in the strict sense, but it corresponds very well to the agency of the superego, that is, to the law equipped with the gaze and voice which can ‘make even the boldest sinner tremble’. (*Ethics* 156)

Again we have the distinction between “moral law in the strict sense” and a more general moral “agency” at work in the sublime. Note that Zupančič refers to the moral law “in us”: whereas the moral law of the categorical imperative terminates in a pattern of morally correct behavior—in this way it is *externally* oriented—the kind of morality operative in the sublime concerns an internal force, the subjective capacity to formulate and impose the law.

In the next section, we will see why this “devastating force within me” is of particular concern in the case of the French Revolution (and the aesthetic politics of the *Beitrag*), but for the moment it is worth exploring in some detail just how well Fichte’s text aligns with Zupančič’s argument about moral agency and the sublime. To begin: for a polemical work, the *Beitrag* contains remarkably few prescriptions. Fichte rails against monarchy and empiricism but does not oppose them with his own set of commandments. Instead, the *Beitrag* is designed to expedite a process of *Selbstdenken*:

...denn ich wollte nicht, dass [der Leser] auf mein Wort meine Behauptungen annehmen, sondern dass er mit mir über die Gegenstände derselben nach denken sollte... Was *für mich* freilich Wahrheit wäre, weil ich mich davon überzeugt hätte, wäre für ihn doch nur Meinung, Wahn, Vorurtheil, weil er nicht *geurteilt* hätte... Alles unser Lehren muss auf Erweckung des Selbstdenkens abzielen. (*Beitrag* 7; my emphasis)

Rather than telling his readers what is right, Fichte wants to bring them a certain distance so that they are better able to judge (“urteilen”) for themselves. The verb here is not incidental: the full title of the *Beitrag* makes clear that Fichte is invested in how people judge the Revolution, and

though he obviously wants to bring them to his line of thinking (in favor of the Revolution), it is telling that he attempts to do so not by giving intellectual or behavioral prescriptions, but by appealing to an *inner moral law*:

Wir begehren demnach nach einem Gesetze zu *beurtheilen*, das von keinen Thatsachen entlehnt, und in keinen enthalten seyn kann... Wo denken wir es aufzufinden? Ohne Zweifel *in unserem Selbst*, da es ausser uns nicht anzutreffen ist: und zwar in unserem Selbst, insofern es nicht durch äussere Dinge vermittelt der Erfahrung, geformt und gebildet wird... sondern in der *reinen, ursprünglichen* Form desselben; - in unserem Selbst, wie es ohne alle Erfahrung seyn würde... So etwas finden wir, nun wirklich an jenem *Gesetze des Sollens*. (*Beitrag* 18; my emphasis)

The major tension running through the *Beitrag* concerns standards of judgment: what criteria, what principles should we use to orient ourselves in political history? The book is a polemic against laws of experience (“Erfahrungsgrundsätze”), mired in falsehood and interest as they are, and in favor of precisely this moral law (“Gesetz des Sollens,” elsewhere “Sittengesetz”) Fichte claims any of us can locate, not in some general moral-philosophical apparatus (e.g. the categorical imperative), but *in ourselves* as moral agents. Fichte describes it as a *fact* of inner experience (“innere Erfahrung”) that this law is there, exactly the presupposition involved in the Kantian sublime: moral agency is part of human nature; it is the motive core animating every rational subject. Which is not to say that moral core cannot be obscured—that it is *customary* in politics to do so is the whole polemical standpoint of the *Beitrag*. But Fichte’s corrective is not to formulate the moral law and state it for his readers, but to foster affirmative consensus surrounding the French Revolution by appealing to their innate moral agency—which is to say, following Zupančič, he offers a sublime judgment in favor of the Revolution.

Also evident in the last passage is Fichte’s commitment to a model of selfhood that is split between empirical (“durch äussere Dinge vermittelt der Erfahrung, geformt und gebildet”) and “pure, primordial” manifestations, which deepens the resonance with Zupančič’s reading of the Kantian sublime: “the feeling of the sublime, the reverse side of which is always a kind of

anxiety, requires the subject to regard a part of herself as a foreign body, as something that belongs not to her but to the ‘outer world’—this is the empirical self that Fichte, consistent with Zupančič’s description, calls “fremdartiger Zusatz” (*Beitrag* 18), whereas the “pure” self (Zupančič again) “is already situated in a place of safety, from which we can enunciate this kind of elevated judgment and even renounce that part of ourselves that we find small and insignificant” (*Ethics* 152). Part of what makes the sublime pleasurable is the sense that we have overcome our “everyday needs” and awakened some greater (and in some way “truer”) power in ourselves. This is exactly what Fichte wants from Europe after 1789; in fact it is the very point of studying (and more importantly *judging*) history: “wir werden in der ganzen Weltgeschichte nie etwas finden, was wir nicht selbst erst hineinlegten: sondern dass [die Menschheit] durch *Beurtheilung wirklicher Begebenheiten* auf eine leichtere Art aus sich selbst entwickle, was in ihr selbst liegt” (*Beitrag* 4; my emphasis).

We judge history in order to *become* the moral agents we only *potentially* are in a world corrupted by empiricism. That becoming-moral involves a move toward the (specifically aesthetic) universal and away from the particular. Again, while morality simply *postulates* the universal validity of a maxim, aesthetic judgment *requires* that a universe of subjects overcome multitudinous conflicting standards and reach *consensus*. In this respect, Fichte’s bitter vituperations against cultural relativism (*Beitrag* 13-15) seem like an appeal for aesthetic judgment: Fichte claims urgently we need to locate “ewige Gesetze” (*Beitrag* 11), “allgemeingültige Grundsätze” (*Beitrag* 14), *eternal and universal* principles to guide our lives and structure human society. (Fichte is hardly alone in this respect, but the *Beitrag* does not simply posit or abstractly “support” moral universality—his sublime politics offers a more precise platform of *creating* universal moral order.) He is unequivocal in his diagnosis of the

problem: relativism results from *Sinnlichkeit* as a cultural paradigm. For Fichte, sense and experience localize and atomize phenomena, tastes, conceptual distinctions, standards of right and wrong—no universal claim is possible if our judgments derive solely from empirical data and tradition. Instead we should employ a non-empirical faculty of judgment that abstracts from cultural differences and activates the one true human universal: moral agency. Fichte sees the French Revolution as an opportunity to judge without prescriptive, particularizing content, to aim at eternal laws and ignite a universal power of moral action that overcomes the fractured quasi-subjectivity of the empirical present. This is exactly the prerogative of sublime judgment.

In brief review, I've described three important points of concurrence between the *Beitrag* and Zupančič's reading of the sublime: (1) instead of offering concrete maxims à la the direct moral law, Fichte seeks to constitute a community of judging subjects by appealing to moral agency; (2) the form of universality involved in that process is not the analytic generality of the categorical imperative, but consensus-building with reference to eternal rational laws; (3) a model of subjectivity split between the empirical, everyday self and the pure, moral self which must overcome it. The first two points especially help explain how the *Beitrag* can engage Kantian morality as a conceptual register without in fact emerging from Kant's moral philosophy proper: morality has a specific position in the sublime process, but as internal agency (not external law) and consensual (not logical) universality. But this raises an important question: if the sublime compels us to constitute a universal community via moral consensus, what happens to those who do not consent?

Violence

Could the categorical imperative compel us to be violent, even to kill? Almost certainly not: universalizing the maxim "kill" would wipe out the community of moral subjects—it fails the

test of logical universality, and thus cannot rise to the status of moral law. But if the issue is rousing and consolidating moral *agency*, violence can play a central, even indispensable part, and in this respect the *Beitrag* and the Terror converge.

It is important to note that, if the *Beitrag* were simply an application of the moral law to politics, violence would be inconceivable in its program, because the moral law terminates in a pattern of logically universalizable behavior. As I've said, it is impossible to universalize a violent maxim, because it logically eliminates all subjects. So if the argument of the *Beitrag* is in fact structured in line with the moral law, Fichte should regard the very prospect of politically useful violence as absurd. We find this is not the case: in the "Vorrede," Fichte writes "gewaltsame Revolutionen zu verhindern, giebt es ein sehr sicheres [Mittel]; aber es ist das einzige: das Volk gründlich über seine Rechte und Pflichten zu unterrichten. Die französische Revolution giebt uns dazu die Weisung und die Farben zur Erleuchtung des Gemäldes für blöde Augen" (*Beitrag* 5). Taking the statement in reverse: the French Revolution is an occasion to educate the people on its rights and duties, and that education is the only certain means of preventing violent revolution. Fichte acknowledges that some revolutions are violent, and while he is suggesting a way to avoid that eventuality, he hardly takes a stand against it. In fact, the logic of his claim suggests that, unless the people is sufficiently educated, there *will* be violent revolution. Why should this be the case? Is it that politically uneducated people become violent in times of upheaval? *Or* are politically uneducated people more likely to *resist* truly emancipatory change, so much so that they have to be forcefully brought into line in the name of what is politically right?

There is reason to believe Fichte has the second case in mind: later in the treatise, while discussing the need to judge the actions of others ("Über die Handlung eines anderen zu

urtheilen”), Fichte bemoans that, while many readily incline to generosity, few are prepared to be *righteous*: “O, es ist ein tiefer, verborgener, unaustilgbarer Zug des menschlichen Verderbens, dass sie immer lieber gütig, als gerecht seyn... Aber *wir* sind grossmüthig, *wir* suchen sein eigenes Beste, und wollen ihn auf den Weg desselben, *sey es auch durch gewaltsame Mittel*, zurückführen” (*Beitrag* 29; my emphasis). This is a significant statement: Fichte is leaving the door open for violence, *for the sake of those receiving it*. The aggressors “suchen sein eigenes Beste,” and their willingness to secure that “Beste” violently reflects, not savagery or bloodlust, but “Grossmut,” magnanimity. Note the pronouns: Fichte is part of a collective first-person *wir* that comprehends justice and has the large-hearted courage to compel (violently, if necessary) the wayward *ihn* to the path of righteousness.

This should sound grimly familiar in 1793, and even conceivably *sarcastic*—that is, if Fichte’s treatise did not make overwhelmingly clear his allegiance to the ongoing course of the French Revolution. It is apparent that Fichte is not being ironic if we return to the “Vorrede,” where he argues “das aufgestellte Gemälde,” repeating his aesthetic metaphor for the Revolution, “dient nicht bloss zum Unterrichte; es wird zugleich zu einer scharfen *Prüfung* der Köpfe und der Herzen” (*Beitrag* 5; my emphasis). The notion of a social “test” is baleful in any era, uniquely so in the year the Terror began. And if the call for a *Prüfung* makes modern readers uneasy, Fichte does not disabuse them: developing his position, he claims some people are simply egoists who fear the entry of truth into collective life; further, “gegen das letztere Uebel giebt es kein Mittel. Wer die Wahrheit fürchtet, als seine Feindin, der wird sich immer vor ihr zu verwehren wissen” (*Beitrag* 6). These people are unrecoverable: enemies of the truth always find a way to hide from it. Fichte becomes still more forceful: “So lange du dich nicht zu dieser Liebe der Wahrheit, weil sie Wahrheit ist, bildest, bist du *uns überhaupt zu nichts nütze*, denn sie ist die

erste Vorbereitung zur Liebe der Gerechtigkeit um ihrer selbst willen; sie ist der erste Schritt zur reinen Güte des Charakters” (*Beitrag* 6; my emphasis). Another moment in the *Beitrag*’s drama of pronouns: you (individual) are useless to *us* (the revolutionary *Volk*, including Fichte), unless you display “Liebe der Wahrheit.” The Revolution is a *Prüfung* in the sense that it reveals to us who loves and who does not love truth. The test is only necessary because, as Fichte asserts, there are a significant number of people in the second category, and (again as Fichte asserts) these people are useless to the revolutionary cause. So if the *Prüfung* proceeds smoothly and we know who can and cannot be integrated into the cause, what happens to those who can’t? Obviously the Jacobins have an answer, and there is little in the *Beitrag* that contradicts that answer.

Quite the reverse: for one thing, Fichte and the Jacobins alike are fixated on *internal character*. Fichte’s *Prüfung* shows us those with “Güte des Charakters”; the Jacobins relentlessly politicize virtue and vice themselves. Note that neither interest really concerns, or at least *has to* concern, an observable pattern of behavior: at stake, instead, is the state of a person’s internal subjectivity. In this sense, both align perfectly with Zupančič’s reading of the sublime: the point is consolidating a community of moral subjects, awakening in each person a power of moral self-determination. What is unique in Fichte and the Jacobins is the shared presumption that some people won’t make the cut, either because they cannot or refuse to be moral agents. This schism has a basis in the concept of the sublime itself: sublimity is premised on a rational, moral realm transcending an order of quotidian everydayness. Fichte as well as the Jacobins might say some are simply too ingrained in that everyday, in things as they are, to be viable candidates for transcendence. After all, the status quo is as entrenched as it is because of the manifold enticements and pleasures it offers, all of which fall under the rubric of *sense, self-interest,*

immediate pleasure—which in sum makes the situation easy to deduce for Fichte (and Robespierre), who equate any defense of the present order with egoism and other low-order commitments. In any case, the operative distinction here, between the empirically given and the morally transcendent, is also what drives the sublime.

Fichte takes the additional step of connecting these categories to different social groups: there are “empirical world” people and revolutionaries. But that large-scale social division is at best a necessary and not a sufficient condition for political violence. There must be some additional impetus to target and attack a group, in this case the “empirical world” people. We find that impetus, or at least a mechanism that constantly stokes and renews it, in a distinctive *asymptotic logic* present in both Fichte and the Terror. For Fichte, universal moral subjectivity is an *Endzweck* that can never in fact be materially realized: “Lasst euch doch diese erquickende Aussicht nicht durch den misgünstigen Gedanken verleiden, dass das doch nie in Erfüllung gehen werde. Freilich, ganz wird es nie in Erfüllung gehen... der sichere Grund beruht auf dem nothwendigen Fortgange der Menschheit – sie soll, sie wird, sie muss diesem Ziele immer näher kommen” (*Beitrag* 49). The point is not that we ultimately fulfill the *Endzweck*, only that we *continually strive* (while never fully succeeding) to fulfill it. Fichte thinks this constant striving is what makes humans unique—“das einzige Vorrecht, welches ihre Thierheit vor anderen Thieren auszeichnet, das Vorrecht der Vervollkommnung ins unendliche” (*Beitrag* 49)—but in the context of forming a political community, especially in 1793, it is easy to see the dark side of this conviction. Keep in mind that, for Fichte, the *Endzweck* itself has to do with formation of a univocal political body, in which one and all exhibit “Uebereinstimmung seines Willens mit dem Gesetze der Vernunft.” Fichte’s *Prüfung* makes unambiguous that the idea is to constitute this body through exclusion, by defining itself against those unsusceptible or resistant to moral

subjectivity. But as became clear in France as Fichte was writing the *Beitrag*, this distinction is unsustainable as such: when universality and unity are the maxims of a group in power, there can be no simple coexistence with separate groups, even if they are outwardly peaceful; difference itself is a threat and, in the name of the governing unity-impulse, must be eliminated. Those outside the moral community become *enemies*, and part of the drama of the Terror involved the flexibility of that designation: depending on how those in power construe themselves and their outside, anyone could be an enemy.²⁴

This was an ongoing process of classification and elimination determined by the Jacobins' own asymptotic commitment: the community of the virtuous had always to be further perfected and purified of political degeneracy; true unity in virtue could only ever be infinitely approximated. As Keith Baker describes, the Jacobins' governing paradigm of popular sovereignty demanded not only unity among public officials, but in the overall community of political subjects as well.²⁵ The result was a "constant impetus to achieve unity by way of exclusion" of newly designated "counter-revolutionary" groups; "successive denunciations, purges within the popular movement, and demands for revolutionary justice against the enemies of the nation lengthened the list of distinguishing characteristics of suspects indefinitely" (Baker 856). The "essential logic of the Terror" was to "impose unity on the other whenever it was found lacking" (Baker), and what was especially frightening was that the Jacobins could always find a lack, even in active revolutionaries like Danton. This model is asymptotic: the Jacobins will guillotine people until the political community was unified in virtue; but because "unity in

²⁴ Bernard Manin: "the political system of the Terror was based on two things: treatment of political adversaries as enemies and a fluid definition of the word *enemy*... The Terror was in essence nothing but a system of classification whose categories were completely fluid and manipulable at will by those in power." "Rousseau," *Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, 837; original emphasis.

²⁵ "The will of the sovereign nation had to be as unitary as it was inalienable: the body of the people had to bear the same unity it sought to impose upon its deputies; difference simply could not be held to exist within it." "Sovereignty," *Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, 855-56.

virtue” is an ideal that can only be infinitely approximated—at what point could we definitively say it exists?—reality is never quite adequate to it, and in the case of the Terror, there are always more people to kill. Likewise, the work of building a universal moral community per Fichte’s *Beitrag* is never complete (“geht nie in Erfüllung”), yet humanity “muss diesem Ziele immer näher kommen.”

The asymptotic form is also a hallmark of sublimity. In § 27 of *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Kant describes the feeling of the sublime as a pleasure awakened by the failure of sensuous faculties to measure up to the ideas of reason. Kant calls this an ongoing process of “Bestrebung” that, though the “Übereinstimmung” it aims for is constitutively impossible to reach, “doch für uns Gesetz ist” (*KU B 97*). Significantly, in the same section, Kant describes sublime feeling as a kind of violence (*Gewalt*): sublimity exposes to the subject to reason’s demand that it produce a totality, not just in thought, but in intuition (“Zusammenfassung der Vielheit in die Einheit, nicht des Gedankens, sondern der Anschauung”); the impossibility of this demand is form of violence against that subject’s powers of representation that, though clearly “zweckwidrig” to the subject itself, “für die ganze Bestimmung des Gemüts als zweckmäßig beurteilt wird” (*KU B 100*). That is, harming the subject serves a higher-order end; it is pardonable violence pursuant to a commandment of reason.

We get two important points from this exposition in § 27: a model of infinite approximation and a justification for violence. Zupančič connects each aspect to a respective mode of Kantian sublimity: “If the dynamically sublime embodies the cruelly inexorable and lethal aspect of Kantian moral agency, the mathematically sublime, which aims at infinity and eternity, brings forth the dimension of the ‘infinite task’ imposed upon the subject of the moral law, the fact that all we can do is approach *in infinitum* the pure moral act” (*Ethics 157*). In this

formulation, the mathematically sublime is explicitly asymptotic: we infinitely approach the “pure moral act,” and my argument, extending Zupančič somewhat, is that the dynamically sublime effectively acts as the engine of this asymptotic approach. I mean that the *Bestrebung* and *Gewalt* Kant describes in § 27 are connected, are part of the same process, and this connection is on display in the Terror. I argued earlier that the French Revolution triggers both types of sublimity: in provoking widespread fear and panic, it engages the dynamic sublime; in overwhelming empirical modes of understanding politics, the mathematical. Zupančič claims the first corresponds to the “cruelly inexorable and lethal aspect” of moral agency, the second to the never-ending task pure moral action. Are these not exactly the stated means and ends of Jacobin political ideology? Such is Robespierre’s basic position throughout his mid-Terror orations: the work of making the polity (purely) virtuous demands the stringency of violent measures, that we overcome any natural leniency—or, be “cruelly inexorable”—and do what we must in the name of political morality. This is what I mean when I say the dynamically sublime is the “engine of the asymptotic approach”: operating in the mode of the dynamic—per Zupančič, being cruel and lethal—is *how we get closer* to completing the task imposed by the mathematical sublime. In this case, violent purges bring the community ever closer to virtue. But because this process is essentially asymptotic in nature—the task can only be approximated and never achieved—there is always additional space for the dynamically sublime to operate, i.e. more demand for cruel, lethal moral agency. In this way sublimity guarantees the structural perpetuity of the Terror.

In a word, the sublime, the Terror, and Fichte’s *Beitrag* all involve asymptotic processes with an impossible *Übereinstimmung* at the end: in the sublime, between faculties of sensuous representation and an idea of reason; in the Terror, between the actually existing people and an ideal “People” unified in virtue; in the *Beitrag*, between the popular will and the law of reason.

Fichte's political vision takes its basic imperative from the sublime: to make something materially real, the will of his fellow citizens, adequate to a rational ideal. The same ambition structures the Terror. How unjust, then, is the epithet "German Jacobin" for Fichte?

Sublime Politics

Regardless of the *Beitrag's* exact proximity to Jacobinism, the slightest flirtation with political violence means Fichte has departed irreconcilably from Kant. The *Gewalt* of the third *Kritik* is highly figurative, a sort of discomfort or strain imposed on the normal functioning of cognitive faculties, and Kant's revulsion at the violent excesses of 1793-94 is well documented.²⁶ This is part of the peculiarity of the *Beitrag*: expressly, devotedly Kantian in its framing, it ultimately aligns with the phase of the French Revolution Kant most detested. It is a way of giving political mass murder a Kantian dress, ostensibly via the moral law, but really through the sublime.

This is sublime politics, and Fichte's *Beitrag* is its first systematic (though implicit) expression in German thought. The issue of violence helps us further define its intellectual-historical moment: sublime politics emerges as an extension and partial reversal, maybe *perversion*, of Kantian philosophy. One possibility is that Fichte, who writes the *Beitrag* when he is still young and has not been familiar with Kant for all that long, does not yet know how to negotiate the architectonic. He makes a category error: he professes to work from the moral law of practical reason, but instead operates with a model of moral agency derived from Kant's concept of the sublime. *Sublime politics* emerges when this category mistake is made with political and social order as the object of consideration. Here is the second major contextual element: the French Revolution and the question it raised—pertinent in any revolution but

²⁶ An important part of Kant's suggestion that the Revolution *symbolized* freedom and progress was that, as of the 1793, it had failed to materially embody that progress.

especially so in 1793-94—of whether violence is a justifiable part of political change. The episode of the Jacobins made the terms of the question even more onerous: can political ideals justify violence, even against non-combatants, even *en masse*? At the very least, the *Beitrag* errs on the side of *yes*, against Kant.

In the case of Fichte's sublime politics, a purportedly Kantian enterprise contains two important points of tension with Kant himself: first, mistaking an aesthetic concept for a moral concept (third *Kritik* for second *Kritik*); second, using that aesthetic concept as a theoretical defense for violence. Which brings us to the first crucial point I want to propose regarding sublime politics as a paradigm: it is a form of political thinking—and in the case of the Jacobins, action—that is especially amenable to violence; and relatedly, violence in sublime politics is not just an acceptable *means*, but can easily be an *end*.

This process begins by projecting a philosophical debate onto the social body in the form of a *popular test*. In the *Beitrag*, it is a test to distinguish “lovers of truth” from those cravenly beholden to the present order. In sublime politics generally, I submit (and Fichte's treatise eventually takes us here) the popular tests reveals two classes of people: one affiliated with morality and the faculty of reason; the other embedded in sense-experience and only really “knowing” via Kantian *Anschauung* and *Verstand*, both of which fail the test as faculties of knowledge because they are empirically grounded. The popular test of sublime politics is either/or: you are either rationally moral or not. Recall sublimity's prerogative of community-formation: the point is not to *represent* the social body in its multiplicity, but to *constitute* a body of moral agents. Sublime politics attempts to build a political community *around* these agents, and the popular test is its means of identifying them. Right away, we can see several lines of divergence with Schiller's politics of the beautiful, a guiding premise of which is that no person

is either morally virtuous or sensuously degenerate, but at least potentially *both*, and the point is to configure these opposed tendencies in such a way that the person becomes free. For Schiller, there is a spectrum of conflict and reciprocity between sense and reason, rather than some logically prior Manichean choice between them. The task of aesthetic education is to work on behalf of reciprocity, to facilitate the mutual enlivening of the categories. But proponents of sublime politics would dispute the premise that sense can in any way enliven reason: they would insist this is an absolute conflict and a necessary choice.

Making the right choice is sublime politics' conception of freedom: autonomy, independence from the sensory. In the Kantian sublime, an individual separates itself from a threatening natural world via recourse to the faculty of reason; likewise, sublime political subjects break from a social situation they consider degenerate by calling on their shared moral agency. This break makes them independent of that situation and free to reckon by their own laws, i.e. the laws of reason. Fichte's lovers of truth have invoked eternal principles and no longer participate in the epistemic or cultural world of empirical traditionalists. The Jacobins claimed to have severed utterly French history from its antecedent arc. A radical break and a new start, governed by reason alone—this is the pretense in Fichte's *Beitrag*, the Jacobin government, and sublime politics alike. I want to call this its *transcendent* character, in contrast to a certain *immanent* disposition in Schiller's aesthetic education, in which the terms of a conflict—here, between formality and sense—are granted and then reworked, reconfigured such that, ultimately, the poles reinforce one another. This is freedom for the politics of the beautiful: negotiating division, a higher accord via reconciled positions. Schiller wants to avoid one-sidedness at all costs, but sublime politics insists *one side is in fact correct*, and freedom *qua* rational-moral autonomy is the only freedom worth pursuing. In the sublime political outlook, a radical new

social order must come to conquer the present one, while a politics of beauty would insist on gradualism, negotiation, cultivation, deliberation. To use a dramatic metaphor: progress in the politics of the beautiful is a long one-act play in which, through a series of exchanges and encounters, the characters move past their differences, come together and build a better world; in sublime politics there are two acts: unambiguous depravity in the first, courageous moral order in the second.

In 1919's *Politische Romantik*, Carl Schmitt criticizes what he calls romantic "occasionalism," the view by which any event is simply an *occasion* for awakening the romantic artist's creative powers.²⁷ Sublime politics is occasional as well: it requires an external event to induce a process of subjective awakening. Sublimity itself begins with trauma from the outside world, and Fichte's *Beitrag* loses its anchor without the event of the French Revolution. At first glance, this would seem to dilute the political sublime, to make it externally dependent. But sublime politics converts this dependency into *urgency*: its evental, occasional structure makes it a politics of the *moment*.²⁸ Crucially, this is an unprecedented, *exceptional* moment—central to Fichte's account of the French Revolution is that it lies *constitutively outside* the epistemic parameters of antecedent history. The sublime political moment suspends the status quo. In the tabula rasa that results, it imposes the principles of reason. If those principles appear to call for violence, so be it: it is after all an exceptional circumstance and this does not amount to a permanent justification for violence. But the necessity of the moment provides its own justificatory paradigm, one that may well praise and even demand violence as a sign of

²⁷ See Schmitt, *Politische Romantik*, 74-108.

²⁸ The clearest analogue in contemporary theory is Badiou's notion of fidelity to an event: that true politics fixes itself to an evental rupture and seeks to give it duration. The successful result he calls a "political sequence." The Jacobin phase of the French Revolution is one example, proletarian organizing from 1848-1871 another. See *Metapolitics*, 39-42.

commitment, a security measure, an attempt to unify and purify the populace. All of these are present in the Terror. In contrast, aesthetic education works in long developmental arcs, vast networks of effects that intertwine over centuries. Schiller hopes to prepare the ground for freedom long in the future; sublime politics seizes an occasion and demands that freedom now.

Occasionalism, transcendence, a popular test—three conceptual anchors that help us understand the violent tendency, if not *essence*, of the political sublime. The test divides the political body; the logic of transcendence construes that division as an irreconcilable conflict in which the right side must prevail; and the radical occasion justifies the exceptional, the doctrine *by any means necessary*. In this framework there is a chosen group and a problem group: Jacobins and conservatives, truth-lovers and empiricists, but these hardly exhaust the possibilities. The chosen group must elevate itself, somehow realize its rational-moral vocation, and due to the exceptional *occasion*, there are no conventional restrictions on how it chooses to do that. We can see how well violent elimination of the problem group satisfies these situational demands: materially, the problem group can no longer interfere with the moral transformation of public life; moreover, the chosen group now has clearer *symbolic* evidence of their commitment to principle—the more extreme an action, the greater the proof it offers. The image of sublime politics is pure moral agency in action, the *immediate* social execution of *Vernunft*. Violence becomes a token of this purity, this immediacy, this unqualified service to the needs of the moment.

Finally, it seems difficult, given the way I've described sublime politics here, to imagine an actual sustainable *government* designed around the political sublime. In part, I think this is the point. Sublime politics is not politics as usual and has no interest in administration, governance, infrastructure, etc. All of this belongs to the empirical and quotidian—it is *policy*, and the true

political sublime materializes only in moral-agential action. In this way, we can say that sublime politics is *anti-representational*. Just as the Kantian sublime involves the breakdown of all powers of positive representation, in the world of the political sublime, nothing can *stand for* or even *figure* the popular moral will.²⁹ The notion of representative bodies of government, with politicians speaking for popular constituencies, is dead in the water if sublimity is the operating concept of politics. Instead we get a kind of hyperactive model of direct democracy, with a roaming, embattled popular will constantly seeking occasions for its moral enactment. How “democratic” this arrangement is can be debated. What is *less* debatable, I think, is that it will be violent.

* * *

A last issue involves the specificity of what I’ve called “sublime politics” in Fichte. At first glance, the political principle of the *Beitrag*—overcoming a corrupt material world by creating a higher moral community—may not seem terribly unique. Platonism, stoicism, asceticism, Christianity—any number of “higher-world” discourses might generate a similar vision of politics. What makes Fichte’s *Beitrag* “sublime” and not simply “transcendent” or generally anti-sensuous in the manner of these other worldviews?

To begin, the argument of the *Beitrag* is much more localized and precise. Fichte will go on later in his career to become a philosophical systems-builder, but for the purposes of the *Beitrag*, he limits himself to the event of the French Revolution. Of course, the symbolic and moral consequences he draws from this event are immense, but the text itself is nonetheless

²⁹ See especially Huet, “Performing Arts.” Anti-representational from the start, the Terror progressed into an obsessive, paranoid war on all conceivable modes of representations, ultimately even the most straightforward linguistic statements.

inextricable from its immediate circumstances—Fichte writes and publishes the *Beitrag* in 1793, in real time as the Revolution enters its violent phase—in a way that, for instance, the *Wissenschaftslehre* is not. As we saw in the “Vorrede,” Fichte frames the *Beitrag*, not so much as the introduction of a system of thought, but as an intervention into a specific ongoing debate, and more precisely, as an *occasion to judge an event*. The *Beitrag* is a judgment, not a system—an assessment of a specific object, rather than an encompassing worldview. Fichte opens the *Wissenschaftslehre* with the internal self-examination of the *Ich*—something that can, and indeed must, happen independent of external circumstances³⁰—but the *Beitrag* is inseparable from the *occasion* of the French Revolution, which it uses to advance general moral principles.

This occasionalism is a core element of sublimity. If Fichte wanted to write a manifesto against *Sinnlichkeit*, he could easily do that directly, i.e. he could present his principles as universally valid statements. But as we’ve seen in the *Beitrag*, whatever political universality Fichte arrives at in this text lies at the end of a distinct *process*, the first moment of which is the occasion of the Revolution. Fichte’s argument is that the occasion must be properly registered: while the event initially seems traumatic for European society, both as a physical threat and an epistemic challenge to previous conceptions of politics, Fichte insists the Revolution is the jumping-off point for Europe’s moral elevation. It is a matter of properly *converting* the occasion of the Revolution, grasping and responding to it in a way that captures its transcendent potential. Thus the urgency of Fichte’s text: as he makes clear in the “Vorrede,” he hopes the public at large, not just academics, will pass around the *Beitrag* and discuss its conclusions (*Beitrag* 4-5). Constituting a community of morally like-minded subjects is how the *Beitrag* arrives at

³⁰ Fichte’s “Erste Einleitung in die Wissenschaftslehre” begins: “Merke auf dich selbst: kehre deinen Blick von allem, was dich umgiebt, ab, und in dein Inneres – ist die erste Forderung, welche die Philosophie an ihren Lehrling thut. Es ist von nichts, was ausser dir ist, die Rede, sondern lediglich, von dir selbst.” Fichte, *Werke*, 422.

universality—put another way, Fichte imagines the process of properly responding to the Revolution will put people in touch with the universal moral principles that, according to his view of human nature, lie innately within them.

But again, he conceives this as the result of a sequence of steps: occasion; trauma; conversion; moral transcendence. This is much more precise than a broad metaphysical or theological opposition to the material world; it is a specific scheme that aligns squarely with the Kantian sublime. The Revolution threatens both the physical safety of Europeans and the integrity of their political-theoretical categories, i.e. it is both dynamically and mathematically sublime. But true to the calculus of sublime aesthetics, the severity of the initial threat is directly proportional to the ultimate moral payoff: the Revolution is uniquely promising precisely because of the unprecedented challenge it poses to European society. Much like the subject of the Kantian sublime rises above an immediate fear and thus consolidates its own moral autonomy, so Fichte hopes Europe will overcome its counterrevolutionary impulses and accede to a higher social order, a universal moral community governed solely by eternal laws of reason.

Chapter 4

Büchner's Critique of Aesthetic-Political Idealism:

Der Hessische Landbote and Dantons Tod

It is a truism that Büchner is a *materialist* contra *idealists* like Schiller and Fichte. This statement alone says very little. My basic argument in this chapter is that Büchner's departure has less to do with "idealism" as a large-scale intellectual-historical category than the specific forms of idealism at work in Schiller and Fichte. What these respective idealisms share is the connection between aesthetics and politics. That is, Schiller and Fichte elevate conceptuality over materiality in ways that are inseparable from specific aesthetic-political commitments: in Schiller's case, the failings of European political history are diagnosed under the rubric of *Schönheit*, which also frames their idealized dramatic representation in Schiller's late history plays; for Fichte, the empirical moment of the French Revolution is the final jumping-off point for humanity's transition to pure morality—an argument that presumes the processual logic of the sublime. The "ideal" category is, in the first instance, an aesthetic representation; in the second, a moral condition derived from an aesthetic concept. In both cases, empirical political history—the history of European politics as it has taken place—is the "problem" category, a condition to be overcome. Schiller's dramatic rendition of European history and Fichte's transcendence of it both stand against the facts of this history, as its elevated, transfigured, *idealized* version.

This is Büchner's first point of departure: empirical history does not need to be transformed or signified in some way that makes it ramify on a higher register. There is no supervening order determining the course of history, nor is there a deeper logic—there is no *concept* or *scheme* at work. I claim this commitment is on display in *Der Hessische Landbote*, which, rather than engaging a large-scale teleological arc of history à la Schiller and Fichte, confines itself to the previous 45 years, and the fate of European monarchy in this period. There is a marked lack of *interpretation* in Büchner's recounting of European politics since 1789. Where Schiller and Fichte signify this politics, Büchner reports on it. Rather than pointing to some higher (or lower) order, *Der Hessische Landbote* presents history as an observable sequence of events that terminates in the political present: the attempt to consolidate a democratic resistance against French and German monarchies after 1830. As it stands in Büchner's pamphlet, the goal of this resistance is to instate genuine representative democracy in Europe. Two other principles from *Der Hessische Landbote* are important for us here as well: first, the maxim that revolution is justifiable only as a *means*, not an end; and second, a conception of "the people" very much at odds with the aesthetic-political idealisms of Schiller and Fichte. For the latter (and the Jacobins) "the people" refers to an abstract political entity, a conceptual construction, a unity that stands (ideally) above the variegated mass of actual human beings making up a polity. But *Der Hessische Landbote* is directed at precisely this multiform mass of people as such—adduced in their material individuality but constituting a larger political body. I call this a conception of the people as a *concrete multiplicity*, versus the abstract unity "people" underlying, Schiller, Fichte, Robespierre—virtually all of antecedent political thought.

Non-idealized history, a critique of revolution as a political end, the people as a concrete multiplicity—all elements are at work, not just in *Der Hessische Landbote*, but also in Büchner's

first drama, *Dantons Tod*. The first section below addresses the play from the standpoint of historical representation, where Büchner makes his clearest interventions in the aesthetic-dramaturgical legacy embodied (in Büchner's own account) by Schiller. Like Schiller, Büchner incorporates empirical history as well as invented content in *Dantons Tod*, but there are important differences on both counts. First, Büchner's representation of "history as it was" is magnified by his then-revolutionary use of citation: Büchner quotes transcripts of speeches by Robespierre and Danton at length, adding a level of empirical reality unprecedented in literary representations of history.¹ But Büchner does not hesitate to intervene freely alongside this historical exactitude: some speeches (St. Just) and figures (Marion) are wholesale inventions, the effect of which, rather than *conceptualizing* the empirical material (like Schiller), is, I argue, to create a profusion of discourses, and thus to emphasize the wider intellectual and ideological resonance of the French Revolution. Büchner uses invented material to *write in* logics like eroticism, theodicy, even idealism itself, without ever suggesting any of these is a kind of master key to understanding the play. Other formal techniques in *Dantons Tod*, especially its episodic structure and Büchner's use of montage, only heighten the sense of the historical material's malleability, its capacity to be reconfigured and positioned in new relationships.

Section two focuses on *Der Hessische Landbote* and highlights the political principles I mention above. With these and the aesthetic-technical themes from section one in mind, the final section returns to *Dantons Tod*. Ultimately, I approach the play as the site of a specific aesthetic politics that criticizes Schiller's politics of beauty and Fichte's sublime politics alike. Beauty and sublimity are aesthetic concepts Schiller and Fichte use to idealize political history, a process Büchner critically stages in *Dantons Tod* via (1) the titular figure, whose (ultimately futile)

¹ See Rüdiger Campe, "Zitat," in *Büchner Handbuch* (Weimarn: Metzler, 2009), 274-75.

attempts to balance radical politics and sensual comforts, ambition and pleasure, align well with principles of *Spiel* and *Wechselwirkung* that are the core of Schiller's politics of beauty; and (2) the Jacobins, whose oratorical and practical justification of the Terror consistently invokes the category of the sublime, which in *Dantons Tod* is inextricable from the idealist conception of history as the progressive overcoming of material by thought. This is the double critique of aesthetic-political idealism in *Danton Tod*. After reconstructing it, I conclude with the long-standing scholarly question of whether the play itself has a politics.² I suggest it does, and the way it engages in dramatic polemic against Schiller and Fichte gives us a clue to drawing this politics out. The key is starting with the aesthetics of the play. Büchner's critique of aesthetic-political idealism in *Dantons Tod* traces a political situation, the Terror, back to principles of idealist aesthetics and historicism, i.e. it imagines these principles at work in politics. We are presented with a form of politics caught between the disengaged pleasure of *Spiel* and the moral fanaticism of the sublime, the two poles of what I call "idealist aesthetics," and that is subsumed at all points under the macrohistorical grand arc of rational political progress, which I subsequently refer to as "idealist historicism."³ But if we start from a different set of principles, deriving from Büchner's aesthetic and historiographic decisions in *Dantons Tod*, what kind of politics can we construct?

² Rüdiger Campe: [es gibt] "keinen Konsens darüber, welche Position im Drama die des Autors ist. Einigkeit besteht auch nicht, ob dem Stück eine solche Stellungnahme überhaupt zuzuschreiben ist." "Dantons Tod," in *Büchner Handbuch*, 19.

³ By this term, I do not mean to include the historicism of Ranke, which developed in large measure *against* Hegel's philosophy of history. While both schools adopt periodic segmentation of history, for idealist historicism, these periods are not so much separable and unique, as they are for Ranke, but *integrated as progressive phases* into one universal history. I claim this latter view is Büchner's target in *Dantons Tod*, which, in its use of historical documents and primary sources, adopts some of the methods of Ranke's historicism.

Dantons Tod: Aesthetics

Dantons Tod takes place over roughly ten days in spring 1794. It is the radical phase of the French Revolution: the Jacobins are in power, led by Robespierre and St. Just; the Constitution has been suspended; Terror has been the prerogative of government under the Committee of Public Safety since the previous summer; mass political killings will continue until the deposition and execution of Robespierre, St. Just, and the remaining Jacobin leadership in late July 1794. The play begins immediately following the execution of the Hébertist sect on March 24 and concludes with the guillotining of the Dantonists on April 5. We follow the fate of Danton and his supporters from initial speculation and suspicion to arrest, imprisonment, trial and death, alongside which we also witness the internal dynamics of the Jacobin club as its members determine their old allies—Danton is a revolutionary hero for his role in the September 1792 massacres—should go the same way as the Hébertists.

When it comes to the play's representation of history, there are two ostensibly opposed aesthetic principles at work: on the one hand, there is what we might call a *mimetic* principle with respect to historical content, pursuant to which Büchner reproduces this material with unprecedented precision via citation; but there is simultaneously a *non-mimetic* principle with respect to dramatic form and invented content—the episodic, non-integrated structure of the play, as well as material Büchner simply creates. The prerogative of this second principle is to manipulate and reconfigure empirical history, rather than reproduce it. Schiller's historical dramas are also simultaneously mimetic and non-mimetic in this sense. But as we saw in chapter two, for Schiller, dramatic representation of history is framed at the outset by concepts from the *Ästhetische Erziehung*, especially *Spiel*. Thus, empirical and invented material enter into mutual exchange to produce a larger, integrated unity (the drama) that is itself part of Schiller's overall

vision of European history as the interplay of drives. As I argued there, one function of these historical dramas is diagnostic, to show an imbalance of forces at work behind the tragedies (so to speak) of political history, and thus to indicate a hypothetical, a possibility, how things could and perhaps should have been. Büchner has nothing but contempt for this conceit: “Wenn man mir übrigens noch sagen wollte, der Dichter müsse die Welt nicht zeigen wie sie ist, sondern wie sie sein solle, so artworte ich, daß ich es nicht besser Machen will, als der liebe Gott, der die Welt gewiß gemacht hat, wie sie sein soll” (*WB* 272). This is from the famous letter of July 28, 1835 to his family, where Büchner identifies Schiller by name as the representative of “Idealdichter” who write plays populated by “Marionetten” with “affektiertem Pathos,” not real people “von Fleisch und Blut” (*WB* 272-73).⁴ The non-idealist writer represents people and the world as they are, not as they should be, nor subsumed under some other concept. This also holds for dramatic representation of history:

[D]er dramatische Dichter ist in meinen Augen nichts, als ein Geschichtsschreiber, steht aber *über* Letzterem dadurch, daß er uns die Geschichte zum zweiten Mal erschafft und uns gleich unmittelbar, statt eine trockne Erzählung zu geben, in das Leben einer Zeit hinein versetzt, uns statt Charakteristiken Charaktere, und statt Beschreibungen Gestalten gibt. Seine höchste Aufgabe ist, der Geschichte, wie sie sich wirklich begeben, so nahe als möglich zu kommen. Sein Buch darf weder *sittlicher* noch *unsittlicher* sein, als die *Geschichte* selbst. (*WB* 272; original emphasis)

These are famous lines, but it is easy to miss the complexity of what Büchner is describing here. On the one hand, he stays true to his maxim that the dramatist represents the world as it is (or in this case, was); but what that means is not simply to give “dry narration” (“trockne Erzählung”) or descriptions (“Beschreibungen”) of some historical episode, but to deliver the *life, characters and forms* behind it (“das Leben einer Zeit,” “Charaktere,” “Gestalten”). These elements—life,

⁴ The case against aesthetic idealism stated here appears again, famously, in Büchner’s novella, *Lenz*: “Da wolle man idealistische Gestalten, aber Alles, was ich davon gesehn, sind Holzpuppen. Dieser Idealismus ist die schmähhlichste Verachtung der menschlichen Natur” (*WB* 76), holds forth Büchner’s *Lenz*. In this passage, argues Paul Celan in his “Meridian” speech, “Büchner’s aesthetics finds expression.” In Celan, *Collected Prose*, 41.

character, form—make history and the world what it is, and in giving us history a “second time” via drama (“uns die Geschichte zum Zweiten Mal erschaffen”), the playwright aims at this cluster of forces, not simply an external description of it. This principle opens the door to formal invention, to experimenting with the configuration of his historical material—not, like Schiller, under the rubric of a concept like *Schönheit*, but to more fully express the *Leben*, *Charaktere* and *Gestalten* of a period.

The immediate context of Büchner’s letter is criticism of *Dantons Tod*, which he had finished five months earlier.⁵ Many were scandalized by the play’s vulgarity and apparent amorality, to which Büchner responded that the French revolutionaries were themselves vulgar and amoral: “Ich kann doch aus einem Danton und den Banditen der Revolution nicht Tugendhelden machen!” (*WB* 272) And as we already saw, Büchner insists a history play can only be as moral or amoral (“darf weder *sittlicher* noch *unsittlicher* sein”) as the times it depicts. But as we also saw, Büchner does give himself allowance to go beyond simply “narrating” or “describing” this time—in fact he would likely argue those techniques do not touch the *Leben* of history he is trying to locate. Nonetheless, at first glance, Büchner’s *Leben* seems close to Schiller’s *Schönheit*—isn’t it just another conceptual rubric for organizing the text? The question in either case is whether the material exists for the sake of the concept, or vice versa. Put another way: is the point of a history play to provide a kind of historical experience, or is the content a means to some other end? For Schiller, it is the latter: even though he is interested in disseminating historical knowledge, *what is relevant* in this history, as well as the *way it is framed* are equally conditioned by the prior, overriding conceptual apparatus of aesthetic education. In this framework, history plays are a means of promoting Schillerian *Totalität des*

⁵ See Campe, “Dantons Tod,” *Büchner Handbuch*, 19-20.

Charakters and a more integrated future moral community. But Büchner insists the “Dichter ist kein Lehrer der Moral, er erfindet und schafft Gestalten, er macht vergangene Zeiten wieder aufleben, und die Leute mögen dann daraus lernen, so gut, wie aus dem Studium der Geschichte und der Beobachtung dessen, was im menschlichen Leben um sie herum vorgeht” (*WB* 272). Here we get a sense for how Büchner’s *Leben* is different than *Schönheit* or *Spiel* in Schiller: the latter are essentially tests for relevance or guides for manipulating historical material, while when Büchner talks about “reviving past ages” (“er macht vergangene Zeiten wieder aufleben”), he does not mean for the sake of some external idea, but so that people can more clearly experience history itself. He likens the literary work’s effect to *Studium* or *Beobachtung* of history, which here takes precedence over any conceptual or moral program.

With this idea in mind, we can more easily understand Büchner’s departures from historical record and the narrative conventions of drama alike. As Harro Müller reminds us, for all its rich and precise empirical content, *Dantons Tod* is decidedly “poetic/metapoetic” in its structure and form.⁶ For Müller, the play is above all “*ästhetische Arbeit am Revolutionsbegriff und den damit verbundenen anthropologischen Fragestellungen*” (“Relektüre,” 61.; my emphasis). Schiller would certainly be amenable to this formulation, but again, the point for Büchner is to aesthetically represent the Revolution itself, not represent it for the sake of morality, beauty, etc. But the difficulty here is with the term “Revolution itself.” Recall Büchner is not interested in presenting a straightforward narration or description of the Revolution—instead he structures his portrayal aesthetically, and radically so, with a “schwindelerregende, verwirrende” (Müller) montage of empirical and invented materials, and a non-linear, episodic

⁶ “Büchner [mischt] dokumentarische, mimetisch-repräsentative mit poetischen Verfahren, verknüpft also vorgefundene mit erfundenen Texten... deren Gesamtzusammenhang wiederum poetisch/metapoetisch strukturiert wird.” “*Dantons Tod: Eine Relektüre*,” in *Commitment and Compassion*, 61.

narrative shape. But this aestheticization is different from that of an *Idealdichter*, does not introduce a distortion of history, but instead reproduces its *Leben*. In Campe's formulation, *Dantons Tod* is supposed to achieve "den paradoxen Zusammenfall von künstlerischer Schöpfung und reiner Wiedergabe" ("*Dantons Tod*," 25). Somehow, creation and reproduction coincide.

Fundamentally, the issue concerns *what* is being reproduced—what specifically constitutes "history"? Important to remember is that Büchner's conception of history is drastically different than, even consciously opposed to Schiller's.⁷ As Silke-Maria Weineck points out, the kind of idealist drama Schiller writes "implies a corresponding integrative theory of history" ("Sex and History," 353), in which historical events can be intelligibly configured in logical relation to one another, and an overarching macro-historical picture emerges. This is indeed what we saw in chapter two. In Büchner, there is no macrohistory, there are no unambiguous trajectories—there is no linearity. Instead, *Dantons Tod* almost inverts this maxim: dispensing with any synoptic pretense of showing large swaths of political history, Büchner's play focuses on a precise moment—the execution of the Dantonists—and all the discursive richness involved in that moment. The drama foregoes historical breadth for depth of detail in reproducing the concrete, everyday, personal, political, sexual, linguistic, representational nuances at work during two weeks of the Terror. All these elements are not only present, but positioned in relationship to the events that will later be written up as "history"—in this sense, the play shows us the network of discourses at work behind the historical record. This ambition is related to the episodic structure of the play, which Müller prefers to call a "Zustandsdrama,"

⁷ In *Dantons Tod*, Büchner "noticeably departs from the organic model that underlies Aristotle, and by extension the classicist, Schillerian, or idealist historical drama that calls for the integration of its elements into a coherent, linear order." Silke-Maria Weineck, "Sex and History," *The German Quarterly* (2000), 353.

composed of a series of moments rather than a linear narrative. In the case of *Dantons Tod*, we notice “Büchners dramaturgische Technik, Figuren nur in einer Szene auftreten zu lassen, obwohl sie im Diskursuniversum des Stückes wichtige Positionen markieren” (“Relektüre,” 61). That is, figures that appear only once nonetheless make significant contributions to the “discursive universe” of the drama. Especially significant are the prostitute Marion (I: 5), who advocates a kind of de-individuated eroticism that not only complements the epicureanism of the Dantonists but also, as Weineck has shown, entails its own (anti-idealist) conception of history; and also Payne (III: 1), whose prison dialogues bring in debates on theodicy and the role of evil in history.

Eroticism and theodicy are influential discourses in relation to the French Revolution, and Büchner’s strategy is to write them in via stand-alone scenes. It is worth remembering also that, though Payne is based on the empirical Thomas Paine, who was in fact imprisoned by the Jacobins, Marion is a wholesale invention on Büchner’s part, as is St. Just’s speech to the National Convention (II: 7), where idealist historicism is most expressly written into *Dantons Tod*. We’ll consider the speech in more detail in section three, but for the moment, it bears mentioning that St. Just justifies the Terror with reference to the term *Weltgeist*, a “codeword” (Weineck) allusion to Hegelian philosophy, and therefore an anachronism. Similarly, Campe detects traces of Heine’s *Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland*, published the year before Büchner wrote *Dantons Tod*, in the counter positioning of Danton and Robespierre.⁸ That is, Büchner retrojects to fill out the discursive universe of the play, incorporating elements of its ideational legacy in Hegel and Heine. Where Büchner is at his most inventive, both formally and in terms of the content he creates, it is in service of this universe: we see a system

⁸ The operative distinction is Heine’s between *Spiritualismus* and *Sensualismus*, embodied respectively by Robespierre and Danton, whose political positions Büchner’s text “verschärft.” Campe, “*Dantons Tod*,” 26-27.

of ideas comprising politics, sexuality, religion, history, etc. with a point of concentration in a specific moment of the Terror. It is a larger window of intellectual and political history condensed, via specific aesthetic techniques, into the unfolding—itsself represented via discontinuous montage—of two weeks. But again, we are not dealing with grand arcs à la Schiller and Fichte: in terms of the theoretical and discursive environment of the play, the window is effectively Rousseau to Heine, with some elements of Spinoza via Payne; and when it comes to the more concrete system of political history evoked by the drama, we can start in 1789 and continue to 1834, when Büchner started work on it. This particular span of history—the 45 years separating the beginning of the French Revolution and attempts to mobilize against French and German monarchies in the early 1830s—is crucial not only for *Danton Tod*⁹ but also *Der Hessische Landbote*, written and disseminated in 1834, where Büchner reconstructs his own century as the aftermath of 1789. We'll turn there now for a clearer sense of the substance of Büchner's politics.

Der Hessische Landbote: Politics

Büchner completed the first version of *Der Hessische Landbote* in March 1834, and the highly incendiary pamphlet was distributed in two instantiations in July and November.¹⁰ As a result, Bücher was pursued by the authorities of the Grand Duchy and took refuge in Darmstadt toward the end of the year. There he dedicated himself to studying historical sources on the French Revolution, and in January-February 1835, completed *Dantons Tod*. Even if, as Dietmar Till suggests, “für die Büchner-Forschung ist der *Hessische Landbote* kein zentrales Werk”

⁹ Campe, “*Dantons Tod*,” 18: “Büchners Darstellung dieser Episode der Revolution ist bestimmt durch die Lage der Entstehungszeit des Dramas (1834/1835). Die Julirevolution von 1830 in Frankreich in ihre Auswirkungen auf die deutschen Staate beeinflussten die Sicht Büchners und seiner Zeitgenossen auf die Revolution von 1789 nachhaltig.”

¹⁰ Dietmar Till, “‘Deutschland ist jetzt ein Leichenfeld, bald wird es ein Paradies seyn’: Die Rhetork der Revolution im *Hessischen Landboten*,” *Georg Büchner Jahrbuch* (2012), 9.

(“Rhetorik,” 6), I claim it nonetheless has an important relationship to *Dantons Tod*: first, as the drama’s immediate predecessor, not just in Büchner written corpus, but also as the *act* that makes him a fugitive, the condition in which he writes *Dantons Tod*; second, as a statement of political principles that are worked through aesthetically in the play. These principles relate to Büchner’s immediate situation: the 1830 deposition of Charles X in France by Louis-Philippe and the attendant geopolitical consequences for Europe.¹¹ Though billed as a Revolution, 1830 is a false victory for radicals. As Büchner writes in *Der Hessische Landbote*, with Charles removed from the throne, “da wendete dennoch das befreite Frankreich sich abermals zur *halberblichen* Königsherrschaft und band sich in dem Heuchler Louis Philipp eine neue Zuchtrute auf” (*WB* 225; original emphasis).¹² Büchner’s point of departure in the pamphlet is that 1830 simply exchanged one tyranny for another; all the latter had to do was make itself seem palatable by comparison to the people:

In Deutschland und ganz Europa aber war große Freude, als der zehnte Karl vom Thron gestürzt ward, und die unterdrückten deutschen Länder richteten sich zum Kampf für die Freiheit. Da ratschlagten die Fürsten, wie sie dem Grimm des Volkes entgehen sollten und die listigen unter ihnen sagten: Laßt uns einen Teil unserer Gewalt abgeben, daß wir das Übrige behalten. Und sie traten vor das Volk und sprachen: Wir wollen euch die Freiheit schenken, um die ihr kämpfen wollt. – Und zitternd vor Furcht warfen sie einige Brokken hin und sprachen von ihrer Gnade. Das Volk traute ihnen leider und legte sich zur Ruhe. – Und so ward Deutschland betrogen wie Frankreich. (*WB* 225)

In Büchner’s account, the deposition of Charles in France nearly becomes a flashpoint for the rest of Europe, an occasion to overthrow a whole host of monarchies, including a number of especially repressive German principalities. That is, in 1830, there is a significant revolutionary

¹¹ Till, “Rhetorik,” 4-5: “Im Juli 1830 wird in Paris der Bourbonenkönig Karl X. gestürzt (der zuvor die Pressefreiheit aufgehoben, die eben gewählte Abgeordnetenkammer aufgelöst und das Zensuswahlrecht verschärft hatte) und durch den Bürgerkönig Louis-Philippe ersetzt. Diese Vorgänge sind heute als Julirevolution von 1830 bekannt. Sie hatte in ganz Europa heftige Nachwirkungen, die im Kontext des repressiven politischen Klimas der Restaurationszeit gesehen werden müssen: Es gab Aufstände, unter anderem in Polen, aber auch im Großherzogtum Hessen-Darmstadt, wo sie im März 1833 im sog. “Frankfurter Wachensturm” kulminierten.”

¹² I cite from the “November-Fassung” of *Der Hessische Landbote* in *Werke und Briefe* throughout.

force comprising disenfranchised peoples across Europe, and corresponding potential for a major reconfiguration of European politics. Monarchy could be decisively on its way out. Instead, the revolutionary body is essentially tricked, led to believe that a *better* monarchy is preferable to a more radical alternative. As Büchner tells it, the princely caste of Europe makes a series of piecemeal concessions with no wide-ranging structural changes to political life, and the masses are placated. Thus the situation in Büchner's Germany: constitutional government in which the constitutions are nothing but "leeres Stroh" obfuscating a political order no less exploitative and unequal than before the Revolution of 1830. Among the various iniquities Büchner identifies in his own principality of Hessen-Darmstadt is the *legally codified* unaccountability of the Grand Duke, Ludwig II: "Nach den Artikeln [der Verfassung des Großherzogtums] ist der Großherzog unverletzlich, heilig und unverantwortlich. Seine Würde ist erblich in seiner Familie" (*WB* 225). What good is a constitution when it simply enshrines the privileges of monarchy? This is the situation in Hessen-Darmstadt: political power is hereditary, not determined democratically, and the head of state is in no way meaningfully answerable to the people. As *Der Hessische Landbote* lays out in vivid (and famously, statistical) detail, one result of this arrangement is a brutal system of taxation that keeps the citizens of Hessen-Darmstadt poor, with no recourse inside the political order. Thus the need for a revolutionary uprising, the end to which Büchner writes *Der Hessische Landbote*.

So stated, the situation behind *Der Hessische Landbote* is not so difficult to understand. But as I've mentioned, it is important to be clear about the principles at work here: first, Büchner advocates revolutionary action *for the sake of instating a representative democracy*—that is, revolution is not an end in itself; second, Büchner's conception of "the people" is a distinctive one, in which this term does not refer to an abstract, univocal entity (in the manner of most

political though preceding Büchner) but rather to what I've called a concrete multiplicity of tangible human beings. Both ideas become clear toward the end of the pamphlet, where Büchner's voice enters the predictive mode, foretelling a great insurrection and one democracy finally replacing Germany's 34 small monarchies. Büchner's vision for that future government is as follows: "Die besten Männer aller Stämme des großen deutschen Vaterlandes werden, berufen durch die freie Wahl ihrer Mitbürger, im Herzen von Deutschland zu einem großen Reichs- und Volkstage sich versammeln, um da... christlich über Brüder zu regieren" (*WB* 231). He is describing a representative democracy: localities elect representatives to make decisions on their behalf in a national assembly. In bringing this kind of government about, Büchner writes, the revolution exchanges the interests of 34 "idols" ("Götzen") for the will of the people and the common good.¹³ What is striking is that Büchner, unlike Fichte and the Jacobins, aligns revolution with *representative* rather than direct democracy. And not just revolution: programmatic mainstays of Jacobinism like "der allgemeine Wille" and "das allgemeine Wohl" are, in Büchner's vision, best served by a system of representative assembly, rather than spontaneous, direct exertions of popular volition.

In advocating revolution as a means for instating representative democracy, Büchner diverges from Fichte and the Jacobins, who, though also politically radical, reject political representation altogether. Not incidentally, as we've seen, Fichte and the Jacobins also reject *aesthetic* representation (favoring, in their respective ways, sublimity); conversely, Büchner's next writing project after *Der Hessische Landbote* is a literary work. But it is not simply that Büchner and the other radicals fall on different sides concerning the question of representation—the very idea that true political progress can be *institutionalized* appears to separate them as well.

¹³ "Dann wird statt des Eigenwillens der 34 Götzen der allgemeine Wille, statt der Eigensucht einer Rotte von Götzendienern dass allgemeine Wohl im deutschen Vaterlande walten." Büchner, *Werke und Briefe*, 231-33.

To revisit chapter three, Fichte's *Beitrag* prophesies an anarchic state of pure morality, where no governing apparatus is necessary to direct to the people, who, having wholly incorporated the moral instruction of the French Revolution, need no external constraint. Likewise, the Jacobins come during their time in power to advocate a state of *permanent revolution*, rejecting the idea that eventually, the radical phase of their movement must be codified into a more stable and everyday political structure. This discrepancy between revolution as an ongoing condition versus a transition to a different form of institutionalized government is a core issue in *Dantons Tod*. We can see where Büchner falls in *Der Hessische Landbote*, which is simultaneously a call to armed insurrection and a defense of structured, representative government. Finally, it is worth pointing out that this also means Büchner clashes with Schiller (and Kant), who oppose revolutionary praxis entirely, regardless of its end. Büchner advocates representative democracy, but he is not a gradualist, and his approach is in no way "top-down." It is up to the German people to secure its own freedom: "Das ganze deutsche Volk muß sich die Freiheit erringen" (*WB* 227).

At first glance, this statement could easily be made by Fichte or a Jacobin. But when Büchner says *Volk*, he means something very different, i.e. he is referring to something completely non-abstract. Rather than some trans-historical, primal political entity (like *le peuple* for Robespierre and St. Just), Büchner's *deutsches Volk* is the concrete, empirical community of people living in Germany. And still more concretely, the primary addressee of *Der Hessische Landbote* is an oft-overlooked section of the *Volk* of Hessen-Darmstadt: its farmers. As Till writes, Büchner's rhetorical strategy in *Der Hessische Landbote* is unprecedented among the many incendiary *Flugschriften* of the *Vormärz* era: rather than addressing fellow revolutionaries, opponents, or engaging in legal-constitutional debates, Büchner's pamphlet addresses the

farmers themselves—“setzt unmittelbar bei den notleidenden Bauern selbst an”—avoiding the pitfalls of previous pamphlets that were too elevated, abstract or indirect, “anstatt sich den drängenden Problemen der Bauern zuzuwenden” (“Rhetorik,” 11). *Der Hessische Landbote* discusses less the theoretical rights of Hessian citizens than the manifest conditions of Hessian farmers and laborers. Especially heinous among these conditions are farmers’ taxes: the pamphlet is famously rich and precise in statistical detail on annual amounts paid in direct and indirect taxation, fines, fees, etc., by Hessen-Darmstadt’s poorest members to its corrupt and wholly undemocratic government. Büchner even identifies how much of that money goes to which ministries, administrative functions and bodies.¹⁴ That is, Büchner’s approach is to be *as precise as possible* about the economic circumstances of the *Volk*, which, for the rhetorical purposes of *Der Hessische Landbote*, are those materially disadvantaged by the standing order in Hessen-Darmstadt, especially farmers.

This understanding of “the people” is directly at odds with Fichte and the Jacobins, who approach *das Volk* and *le peuple* respectively as categories that one *qualifies* for by passing a certain moral-political test. When Robespierre and St. Just talk about the people of France, they do not mean the concrete living citizens of France, but an idealized polity possessed of revolutionary virtue. Similarly, Fichte does not shy away from advocating a social *Prüfung* to determine which members of the community have the requisite moral integrity to truly advance the movement. Even Schiller’s aesthetically integrated *Menschheit* is still a superior, projective version of humanity as it now is. But this latter humanity is exactly what Büchner aims for: as with his representation of history, Büchner does not proceed from the question of how the people of Hessen-Darmstadt *should* be, but rather where they *are*. In this case, the matter is largely one

¹⁴ “Für das Ministerium der Finanzen 1,551,502 fl.”; “Für das Militär wird bezahlt 914,820 Gulden”; “Für das Staatsministerium und den Staatsrat 174,600 Gulden,” etc. Büchner, *Werke und Briefe*, 215-17.

of socio-economic degradation—the enormity of the Grand Duchy’s material exploitation of its people is Büchner’s point of departure. That is, *Der Hessische Landbote* starts with a present circumstance, rather than positing an ideal. After its famous opening motto—“Friede den Hütten! Krieg den Palästen!”—and a brief introductory paragraph in which “das Volk” is synonymous with “Bauern und Handwerker,” Büchner starts immediately in with figures: “Im Großherzogtum Hessen sind 718,373 Einwohner, die geben an den Staat jährlich an 6,363,364 Gulden,” a total Büchner then breaks down into several categories of payment (*WB* 211). Statistical representation of Hessen-Darmstadt’s exorbitant socio-economic disparities is the red thread through *Der Hessische Landbote*—Büchner’s task is to organize and display numerically the present situation of Hessian farmers and laborers. Significant among these disparities is that of population: “Ihrer sind vielleicht 10,000 im Großherzogtum und Eurer sind es 700,000 und so verhält sich die Zahl des Volkes zu seinen Pressern auch im übrigen Deutschland” (*WB* 233). This figure is at the beginning of the pamphlet as well: relevant for the *Volk* of Hessen-Darmstadt is its number, roughly 700,000. Büchner mentions the population not just to clarify the ratio of “Bauern und Handwerker” to “Fürsten” and “Beamte” (70 to 1, thus driving home his point about economic inequality) but also as a raw number: a specific quantity of people (718,373) paying a specific amount of taxes (6,363,364 Gulden). He approaches the *Volk* as a population, an aggregate of individuals.

This is what I mean when I say Büchner conceives of the people as a “concrete multiplicity.” *Der Hessische Landbote* addresses itself to a manifest, empirical community of individuals that does not resolve into a theoretical “One”: it is not really *the people* but *people*, plural—in this case, just over 700,000. For Fichte, Schiller and Robespierre alike, any given farmer or worker counts politically as a member of *one* popular body—at some level, each

system of idealism terminates in a conception of “the people” as an abstract unity. Whether political virtue, moral transcendence or aesthetic equilibrium, some conceptual mechanism integrates a multitude of individuals into *The People*, singular. It is this unifying trait that signals their membership in the political community. But Büchner takes that differentiation as a starting point. Affirming concrete multiplicity means apprehending the people (1) in terms of their present material conditions (not possible, ideal conditions); and (2) as a collective, multitudinous body that does not resolve into a conceptual unity. In this instance, it is a discrete population of German farmers and laborers experiencing political and economic exploitation at the hands of the Grand Duchy. Looking at the polity in this way is incompatible with approaching it as a unified entity in the manner of Fichte, Schiller or the Jacobins. At least Büchner’s texts suggest as much: we’ll see in *Dantons Tod* that efforts to impose unity on the people, the guiding idea of the Terror, tend to either disengage from or militate against the differentiated reality of citizens’ everyday lives. That is, people as they carry their daily existence—or in the case of the Büchner’s play, as they try to find something to eat—are often simply a distraction, if not a political problem to be eliminated, when the task at hand is to consolidate an abstract community.

We’ll turn in detail to *Dantons Tod* in a moment. A last note on *Der Hessische Landbote*: Büchner assesses the situation in Hessen-Darmstadt after the Revolution of 1830 as part of a trajectory—not a grand arc of history in the style of Fichte or Schiller, but a discrete series of geopolitical events. The point of origin is the outbreak of the first French Revolution 45 years earlier. Halfway through the pamphlet, having spelled out in detail present-day conditions in Hessen-Darmstadt, Büchner pivots from 1834 to 1789: “Im Jahr 1789 war das Volk in Frankreich müde, länger die Schindmähre seines Königs zu sein” (*WB* 223) begins a condensed

narrative of recent European history, in which Büchner traces a progression from the initial, representative phase of the French Revolution through to its culminating perversion in Napoleon, the Bourbon restoration, and finally the illusory upheavals of 1830. This is the political context of *Der Hessische Landbote* and Büchner's political activity as whole: the very tangible struggle between monarchy and the forces that resist it. The various phases of the French Revolution of 1789, the Napoleonic wars and subsequent European monarchies of the early 19th century are all respective stages of this larger conflict. In this view, the role of 1789 is more consequential than symbolic: Büchner does not *signify* the French Revolution, but rather traces its immediate afterlife. *Der Hessische Landbote* describes the enclosed historical system of 1789-1834. In Büchner's work, we can think of this as the window of resonance of the French Revolution. While the events of this period are identified explicitly and politically in *Der Hessische Landbote*, *Dantons Tod* evokes them—as we've seen, though confined to a handful of days in 1794, the play still manages to integrate much of the French Revolution's subsequent echo in early 19th-century European politics and culture. The next and final section explores at greater length Büchner's conversion of political principles into aesthetic representations in *Dantons Tod*.

Dantons Tod (II): Aesthetics and Politics

Dantons Tod is, on the one hand, a critique of idealism and the specific aesthetic politics at work in figures like Schiller and Fichte; simultaneously, it is a platform to creatively develop a number of political ideas from *Der Hessische Landbote*. Büchner's innovative formal techniques, especially citation and montage, help these and other prerogatives coexist smoothly in the play. Section one above has given us a sense of how this is accomplished at the level of the drama's form. It is also important to consider how these specific priorities and polemics manifest

themselves in the events and statements from 1794 Büchner chooses to depict (or invent). Again, the aesthetic-political idealism Büchner targets has two faces: Schiller's politics of beauty and the political sublime that animates Fichte and the Jacobins, each of which receives a separate critique in *Dantons Tod*. Likewise with the political principles Büchner lays out in *Der Hessische Landbote*: as we'll see, the play is an opportunity to very directly depict the people as a "concrete multiplicity" rather than some abstractly unified will, and the whole drama revolves around the question of whether revolution is a *means* to creating a future democratic society, or itself is already the *permanent incarnation* of that society.

At the beginning of the play the Hébertist faction has just been guillotined (March 24, 1794), and the question among the remaining revolutionaries is whether the Revolution—understood as the radical phase, marked by violence since the September massacres of 1792 and now mid-Terror—is ever supposed to end. Is the goal to finally stop guillotining people and begin the work of constructing institutions necessary to long-term governance? Or *are* the guillotine and radical virtue precisely these institutions? It is a question that would have seemed abstract and hardly urgent in the immediate wake of revolutionary triumphs like September 1792, for which Danton is recognized as a hero, but the situation is different now that the Revolution has entered what Ulrich Port calls its "Katzenjammer."¹⁵ That is, the "Ekstase" of early revolutionary victories has entered its hangover phase, a "Depressionspunkt" from which *Dantons Tod* begins. The splintering of the revolutionary movement is one effect of this depression. The play opens on the Dantonists leisurely gambling and processing the fate of the Hébertists, fellow revolutionaries whose execution was precipitated by their tension with the Jacobins. It is clear immediately where the Dantonists fall on the question of permanent

¹⁵ Ulrich Port, "Vom 'erhabenen Drama der Revolution' zum 'Selbstgefühl' ihrer Opfer: Pathosformeln und Affektdramaturgie in Büchner's *Dantons Tod*," *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* (2003), 213.

revolution: Philippeau insists “Wir müssen vorwärts,” asking rhetorically “Wie lange sollen wir noch schmutzig und blutig sein wie neugeborne Kinder, Säрге zur Wiege haben und mit Köpfen spielen?” (*WB* 9) Less graphically, Hérault claims “Die Revolution ist in das Stadium der Reorganisation gelangt. Die Revolution muß aufhören und die Republik muß anfangen” (*WB* 9). This is the basic position of the Dantonists, and their most consequential for the course of the play: the revolutionary phase of political change in France is at an end; it is time to institutionalize the French republic. Philippeau expresses more affectedly part of what is driving this sentiment: the Revolution has devolved into wild bloodshed, and the Dantonists want the violence to stop. This is the perspective Danton himself brings to Robespierre later in the first act (I: 6): “Wo die Notwehr aufhört fängt der Mord an, ich sehe keinen Grund, der uns länger zum Töten zwänge” (*WB* 24). In other words, conditions in France no longer call for extraordinary measures—without any clear external threat and thus no immediate need for self-defense (“Notwehr”), the guillotine is simply murder (“Mord”). Robespierre disagrees: “Die soziale Revolution ist noch nicht fertig, wer eine Revolution zur Hälfte vollendet, gräbst sich selbst sein Grab” (*WB* 24). Unlike the Dantonists, Robespierre considers the Revolution only half-finished: the monarchy may be toppled, but the “social revolution” is ongoing. What this means is that revolutionary values, specifically political virtue (*Tugend*, a ubiquitous term for Robespierre), have not yet permeated the populace. “Das Laster muß bestraft werden, die Tugend muß durch den Schrecken herrschen” (*WB* 24)—the Revolution is now about eradicating *vice* from the people, for which terror is the means.

Where Danton and his followers want to start constructing the French republic, Robespierre insists the Revolution must continue to impose virtue on the people. We could say the political focus of the Dantonists is *institutional* while for the Jacobins it is *moral*. As

Robespierre makes clear in his speech to the Jacobin club (I: 3), in a revolutionary republic, the vice of the aristocracy is simultaneously moral and political: “Das Laster ist das Kainszeichen des Aristokratismus. In einer Republik ist es nicht nur ein moralisches sondern auch ein politisches Verbrechen; der Lasterhafte ist der politische Feind der Freiheit” (*WB* 17). There is a blending of categories: political freedom, as the Jacobins understand it, is synonymous with a specific conception of *virtue*, and thus directly threatened by *vice*. Recall Frederick Beiser’s definition of republicanism as model of politics that ties liberty to the people’s moral character. The Jacobins in *Dantons Tod* approach their own infantile republic in much the same way. A thoroughgoing “social revolution,” in which the citizen becomes uniformly *tugendhaft*, is a necessary element of the government they want to build. And it is significant that Beiser introduces the concept of republicanism in order to clarify the political thought of Schiller, one of our aesthetic-political idealists. Though, as I’ll argue, the specific moral-political conflation of Büchner’s Jacobins is more reminiscent of Fichte, they share a basic conceit with Schiller as well: the project of morally improving the people. This idea manifests itself with certain differences in Fichte, Schiller and the Jacobins—who respectively elevate the *Volk* with sublime transcendence, aesthetic education and virtuous terror—but in all cases the fundamental principle, that this elevation does in fact have to take place, is the same.

The connection between the Jacobins of Büchner’s play and Fichte deserves more comment, if only because Büchner draws attention to the centrality of the sublime in Jacobin rhetoric. Today, it is easy to see on casual survey of Robespierre’s speeches that he insistently referred to and framed the Revolution as a sublime event—the term is a mainstay of his oratory—but this is something Büchner would have uncovered in Thiers or another source on the French Revolution. That is, sublimity enters *Dantons Tod* chiefly via citation, especially in the

speech to the Jacobin club I just mentioned, which includes Robespierre’s famous phrase “das erhabne Drama der Revolution” (*WB* 16). This is an important illustration of how Büchner presents political history in the play: he *shows* the ideas at work—in this case, aesthetic-political ideas. *Dantons Tod* confronts us with the aesthetic politics of sublimity as a concrete practice in the empirical course of the French Revolution. As we saw (implicitly) in Fichte, the concept of the sublime operates as a justification and a frame for political violence.¹⁶ Fichte’s idea of a social *Prüfung* is perfectly consistent with Robespierre’s insistence on a continuous social revolution—the *Lasterhafte* have to be rooted out. And there is an additional level to the sublime “test” at work in Büchner’s depiction of the Jacobins: it is not simply a test in the sense of sorting virtuous and non-virtuous citizens, but also a test of *conviction*, of *commitment* to radical political change at all costs. (Recall the fashionable “whatever-it-takes” mentality of Žižek and Badiou.) As Robespierre remarks to Danton, the Revolution is only half complete, and what kind of revolutionary wouldn’t want to complete it? This is the core of the Jacobins (stated) case against the Dantonists in the play—in giving up on the *total completion* of the Revolution, they are traitors against it. This premise allows the Jacobins to flip their opponents’ critique of the Terror: mass guillotining is *righteous*, not only as a substantive means to eliminate aristocratic vice, but also as an external sign of commitment to a higher political purpose—again, at all costs. In this sense, violence constitutes a not only good but *necessary* phase, insofar as it is the decisive indicator of commitment, in radical political change.

The specific affirmation of violence (not just its defense) is stated succinctly by the Jacobin representative from Lyon just before Robespierre’s speech: “Barmherzigkeit mordet die

¹⁶ As Müller remarks of St. Just in the play: “An dieser Figur werden die mörderischen Konsequenzen gezeigt, die materiale Geschichtsphilosophie und idealistische Erhabenheitsästhetik erzielen können, wenn sie im Ausnahmezustand auf politischem Felde praktisch werden” “Relektüre,” 53.

Revolution. Der Atemzug eines Aristokraten ist das Röcheln der Freiheit. Nur ein Feigling stirbt für die Republik, ein Jakobiner tötet für sie” (*WB* 15). Note the paradoxical reversal: *mercy is murder*—of the Revolution. The test of a true radical (a Jacobin) is not just to sacrifice oneself for the cause, but specifically to kill for it. To *not kill* in the name of the Revolution *is to kill* the Revolution. This conclusion involves the important corollary that the very physical existence (“Atemzug”—simply drawing breath) of enemies of the Revolution is the “death knell” (“Röcheln”) of radical freedom. Aristocrats constitute an existential rather than a substantive threat.¹⁷ That is, they need to be killed rather than simply removed from power. And what, in the eye of a Jacobin, is the mark of an aristocrat? How does one pick out *Laster*?

There is a consistent theme through *Dantons Tod*, expressed well by Lacroix to Danton (I: 6), as they try to parse Robespierre’s remarks in the Jacobin club: “Und außerdem Danton, sind wir lasterhaft, wie Robespierre sagt d.h. *wir genießen*, und das Volk ist tugendhaft d.h. es *genießt nicht*” (*WB* 23; my emphasis). *Laster* is *pleasure*: enjoyment, luxury, e.g. the drinking and carousing for which the Dantonists have become known (and resented) in Paris, where most of the citizens are too poor to feed their families, let alone gamble in brothels. Not that widespread poverty is the fault of Danton’s group, nor that the Jacobins know what to do about it. Rather, as Müller points out, a grounding reality against which the play unfolds is that no one—“weder Robespierre noch Danton oder das Volk selbst”—has a solution to Paris’ economic misery, from which the guillotine acts as a popular distraction and “Instrument zur Kontrolle des Volkszorns” (“Relektüre,” 55). We see this principle on vivid display in the second scene of act I, where several starving Parisians clamor for more beheadings. In the words of one citizen: “Die

¹⁷ Müller draws attention to the “either/or” nature of Robespierre’s logic: “Seine Lehre ist die folgende: Das politische System wird streng gemäß dem Code revolutionär/konterrevolutionär, tugendhaft/lasterhaft durchmoralisiert und anschließend gemäß der Logik des Entweder/Oder, der Freund/Feind-Konzeption (C. Schmitt) sortiert und guillotiniert.” “Relektüre,” 54.

paar Tropfen Bluts vom August und September haben dem Volk die Backen nicht rot gemacht. Die Guillotine ist zu langsam. Wir brauchen einen Platzregen” (*WB* 13). “August und September” refer to the Insurrection of August 10 and the September Massacres, major upheavals of 1792 still regarded as important symbolic victories by revolutionaries in 1794. They were also very visible instances of political violence by advocates of the Revolution against their political enemies, roughly 2,000 of whom were killed between August 10 and September 7, 1792. But as we see in *Dantons Tod*, those body counts are likened to mere drops of blood that failed to sufficiently nourish the people. The present pace of guillotining is “zu langsam,” when what’s needed is a “downpour” (“Platzregen”). It is not incidental that Büchner’s “Dritter Bürger” uses a dietary figure here: the guillotine has become a stand-in for the people’s real issue, hunger. Or as the “Erster Bürger” puts it, in a word: “Unsere Weiber und Kinder schreien nach Brot, wir wollen sie mit Aristokratenfleisch füttern” (*WB* 13). That is, the starving citizens have internalized the revolutionary government’s recourse to the symbolic nourishment of the Terror—their leaders cannot literally feed them, so it provides the ersatz satisfaction of killing aristocrats.

But there is an additional dimension here: remember that those carrying out the Terror define virtue as *non-enjoyment*: where the vice-ridden indulge their appetites, the abject retain their civic integrity. The question then arises: if by some economic miracle the starving members of the *Volk* were suddenly able to eat well and enjoy their lives, could they still be virtuous? Or is civic virtue, as the Jacobins understand it, inextricable from some degree of suffering, or at least physical denial? Famously prudent Robespierre, nicknamed “the incorruptible,” suggests as much, as does the fate of the Dantonists in Büchner’s play. After all, they are undeniably members of the revolutionary movement, and Danton is considered a hero for his role in the

September Massacres. But in the new political environment of the Terror, their *Genuß* condemns them. This is an important coincidence between the Jacobins and Fichte, who, like Robespierre, fixates on enjoyment as a cardinal political evil. In Fichte's sublime politics, pleasure binds political subjects to earthly reality and thus inhibits moral transcendence. This is a model of transcendence in which pain and violence are necessary stages: sublime elevation follows a *collision* and an *overcoming* of material by morality. As we saw in chapter three, sublimity as a paradigm of politics requires a violent confrontation between "moral" and "extra-moral" groups, in which violence is a technique of purification, or as Büchner's St. Just has it, rebirth and "Verjüngung" (II: 7). As Müller argues, framing the Terror is this way is directly consistent with sublime aesthetics: "Das äußerst blutige Geschäft der Menschheitsverjüngung wird innerhalb des Tragödienkonzepts zugleich ästhetisch legitimiert. Dazu dient das Konzept der Erhabenheit" ("Relektüre," 53).

Again, Büchner presents political history as a consequence of specific aesthetic-political ideas: in not only understanding but conducting their revolutionary government, the Jacobins apply the aesthetic rubric of sublimity, framing the Revolution as a tragic drama that terminates in moral transcendence, i.e. the civic rebirth of the French people. What is distinctive about *Dantons Tod* is that it shows the act of framing itself: we see the Jacobins at work situating the Revolution discursively, deciding in real (dramatic) time what values it aligns with and what it condemns. We see also that these decisions have a foundation in concrete power struggles, in division and competition within the revolutionary movement. That is, we witness the fine-grained and often dubious *process* of positioning the Revolution in a wider field of political, historiographic, aesthetic, theological and other discourses.

As *Dantons Tod* represents it, the discourse of idealism is not just political and aesthetic, as in Robespierre's framing of the Revolution as sublime, but historiographic as well: St. Just's speech (II: 7) is effectively a manifesto of idealist historicism. This is one point in the play where Büchner sees fit to invent: not only is the speech itself undocumented, but as we already saw, Weineck and Port draw attention to the fact that St. Just's use of the term "Weltgeist" (*WB* 41) is an anachronistic writing-in of Hegelian philosophy of history. Port calls St. Just's insistence that the world spirit is guiding events in France "parodierter Hegel" ("Pathosformeln," 214), and as Weineck reminds us, Hegel is the "single most important figure in the development of idealist historicism," a historiographic paradigm extremely influential in the 1830s and against which *Dantons Tod* is written ("Sex and History," 352). Again, in order to carry out this specific critique, Büchner has to augment the historical record in the interest of drawing out a homology—namely that the Terror anticipates idealist historicism as its practical political expression. Robespierre and St. Just are the concrete foreshadowing of Hegel.

Büchner's play does not just *show* the realization of idealist historiography in its depiction of the Terror, it also presents alternatives to it. The clearest example, following Weineck, is not so much the Dantonists—who, as we'll see, practice their own form of idealism—but the (invented) figure of Marion, through whom Büchner writes in the discourse of eroticism.¹⁸ Marion appears only once during the play (I: 5): Danton has visited her for sex, and instead she tells him the story of her first lover, whose suicide she calls

der einzige Bruch in meinem Wesen. Die andern Leute haben Sonn- und Werkstage, sie arbeiten sechs Tage und beten am siebenten, sie sind jedes Jahr auf ihren Geburtstag einmal gerührt und denken jedes Jahr auf Neujahr einmal nach. Ich begreife nichts davon. Ich kenne keinen Absatz, keine Veränderung. Ich bin immer nur Eins. Ein ununterbrochenes Sehnen und Fassen, eine Glut, ein Strom... Es läuft auf eins hinaus, an was man seine Freude hat, an Leibern, Christusbildern,

¹⁸ Weineck: "*Dantons Tod* is very consciously a post-Hegelian play, indeed an attack on Hegelian historicism—an attack, moreover, that is launched from the site of eroticism." "Sex and History," 355.

Blumen oder Kinderspielsachen, es ist das nämliche Gefühl, wer am Meisten genießt, betet am Meisten. (*WB* 20)

Marion's first lover killed himself out of jealousy: by her own account, once introduced to sex, "ich wurde wie ein Meer, was Alles verschlang und sich tiefer und tiefer wühlte. Es war für mich nur ein Gegensatz da, alle Männer verschmolzen in einen Leib" (*WB* 19). This is an eroticism that does not recognize the uniqueness of any individual partner, much as Marion's view of time does not acknowledge differentiation or progress ("kein Absatz, keine Veränderung"). Everything is simply one, "nur Eins," and the only question is how one derives pleasure ("Freude") from existence. Satisfaction in sex, religion, flowers or children's toys ("Blumen oder Kinderspielsachen")—for Marion, it is all the same basic phenomenon.

But the monologue is more than a statement of personal idiosyncrasy. As Weineck argues, it is also a compressed, multidimensional polemic against the idealist understanding of history that runs through the rest of *Dantons Tod*. First, formally, Marion and her story are "non-integral" components of the drama in that they are never repeated or referred to again—this kind of "excess," of which Payne's theodicy discourse is another example, "constitutes the most remarkable departure from the demands of traditional plot" in Büchner's play (Weineck 353). Exactly this plot convention—that all elements of the story are at some level integrated with each other—is the one most closely homologous with idealist historicism, which presupposes the analogous total integration of all historical events. Moreover, the de-individuated, fatalistic conclusion of Marion's monologue strikes at a core premise of revolutionary politics, whether Jacobin or Dantonist: the very "concept of History. Her specific position is... marked as a site that can reflect and deflect the ideology and the language of History, i.e., the very language that Robespierre, St. Just, and, often enough, Danton speak" (Weineck 354). This is the language of heroic individuals directing the course of historical events, one Büchner draws attention to *as*

language, among many places, in St. Just's speech, where significant revolutionary dates are compared to punctuation: "Jedes Glied dieses in der Wirklichkeit angewandten Satzes hat seine Menschen getötet. Der 14. Juli, der 10. August, der 31. Mai sind seine Interpunktionszeichen," and continuing the metaphor, he insists, "Wir werden unserm Satze noch einige Schlüsse hinzuzufügen haben, sollen einige Hundert Leiche uns verhindern sie zu machen?" (*WB* 41) This is the Revolution conceived as a sentence that must be completed, regardless of the body count. But Marion's monologue proceeds from the axiom that this kind of closure is impossible, as is any sort of "progress," even change itself, because life is one continuous substrate of desire ("Ein ununterbrochenes Sehnen und Fassen, eine Glut, ein Strom").

We can see why Marion's perspective is irreconcilable with Hegel, whose view of history relies on the progressive integration and *Aufhebung* of the past, and the Jacobins, who are obsessed with imposing a higher order of virtue on a recalcitrant political world. Both swear by the kind of "Veränderung" Marion simply denies. More complicated is the relationship between Marion's view of the world and Danton's. Danton often refers to himself as "epikuräisch"—epicurean, or more straightforwardly in this context, pleasure-seeking. Chief among those pleasures, for Büchner's Danton, is sex, a constant fixation for him, even at the direst moments—shortly before the execution, he compares his imminent guillotining to slipping out of a lover's bed: "Ich will mich aus dem Leben nicht wie aus dem Betstuhl, sondern wie aus dem Bett einer barmherzigen Schwester wegschleichen. Es ist eine Hure, es treibt mit der ganzen Welt Unzucht" (*WB* 61). Danton's notorious promiscuity precedes and incriminates him in street-scene debates over the validity of his punishment, in which his defenders desert him over accusations that "[er] schläft bei euren Weibern und Töchtern, wenn er betrunken ist" (*WB* 57). At first glance, this would seem to align Danton with Marion: an "ununterbrochenes Sehnen und

Fassen” appears to be an important part of how each approaches and experiences the world. But this is a partial affinity at best. While Marion and Danton share a preoccupation with sex and sexuality, they have incommensurable conceptions of history and their own individual positions in that history. For Marion, “History” as such does not exist, only an ongoing, unalterable flux of desire and release—there are no phases, no progress, neither development nor regression, etc. Not so for Danton, who remains committed, at least nominally, to the ideals of the Revolution (and thus the idea of political progress), as well as safeguarding *his own legacy* as a revolutionary hero. When asked by the revolutionary tribunal to state his name (III: 4), he answers, “Die Revolution nennt meinen Namen. Meine Wohnung ist bald im Nichts und mein Namen im Pantheon der Geschichte” (*WB* 47). Danton’s avowal that his name will be in the “pantheon of history” obviously implies that such a pantheon exists—that is, that there is a kind of posterity or final truth to history, that the *real* heroes will one day be revealed. This is much the same idealist historicism that animates the Jacobins—they only disagree about who the heroes are.

With Danton, we have a kind of balancing act: he wants simultaneously to indulge his “epicurean” appetites *and* secure his place in revolutionary history.¹⁹ In a word, his agenda is both physical and ideal: his conceit is to follow both revolutionary *principles* like freedom and equality as well as his own sensuous *desires*, a concatenation the Jacobins (successfully) condemn as *Laster*. In his early conversation with Robespierre in act I, Danton defensively claims that everyone is epicurean to different degrees: “Es gibt nur Epikureer und zwar grobe und feine” (*WB* 24), but it is possible there is another element at work here. I mean that Danton’s attempts to operate under simultaneously physical (sexual) and ideal (revolutionary) maxims

¹⁹ Weineck, “Sex and History,” 357: “Danton, in spite of his mental and physical escapades, insists on his place in history again and again. He clamors for a part in Robespierre’s “erhabenes Drama.””

suggest a kind of perverted aesthetic education. Recall the centrality of reciprocity in Schillerian aesthetics: the play-drive is necessary to instate formal reconciliation between ideality and sensuousness. In a state of *Spiel*, no single drive can predominate, but rather, much like with Büchner's Danton, physicality and ideality operate together, effectively dividing their respective zones of influence. Or this at least is Danton's pretense.

There are two ways we can think of Danton as an echo of Schiller's politics of beauty: first, in a more clearly polemical, satiric sense, Büchner can be inviting us to view Danton's awkward balancing act as a concrete and accurate expression of Schillerian *Spiel*—the idea can be that this is one possible result of using aesthetic education as a frame for life and political action; alternatively, the play may invite a reading of Danton, not so much as an aesthetically well-educated Schillerian, but as a figure *engaged with the same problematic* Schiller addresses in the *Ästhetische Erziehung*. I mean that Büchner may effectively place Danton on the same theoretical terrain as Schiller, in the sense that Danton's basic issue is how to reconcile his competing tendencies—some “epicurean” and related to physical desire; others ideal-political—into an integrated form of living in the world. There is still a critical edge to viewing Danton in this way: even if he is aesthetically *uneducated*, his drive to “have it both ways” still resonates with the guiding premise of Schiller's *Spiel*; he can still strive for a form of ideality, even if he misunderstands the nature of it.

This striving, this pursuit of an ideal, is what connects Danton formally with Robespierre. Crucial to remember is that both are consumed by the Revolution they claim to represent. There is a larger power at work that obliterates ideological formations like the politics of beauty and sublimity, that is neither assimilable to their models of history, nor susceptible of being *directed* in any way the Dantonists and Jacobins imagine. Put another way, *Dantons Tod* is play about the

self-delusion of aesthetic-political idealism: the problem for Danton and Robespierre is not that they cannot find the *solution* to their political situation, but that this situation, in its full historical and material reality, is essentially outside their comprehension and control.

* * *

This brings us to the question I posed at the beginning: does *Dantons Tod* itself have a politics, a “Stellungnahme” (Campe)? The short version of my answer is *yes*, and if we want to find its politics, we must look to the play’s aesthetics. This, after all, is Büchner’s critical approach to idealism: he draws political implications from its aesthetic principles. Whether the reciprocal functioning of drives (Danton) or ideality’s triumph over material (Robespierre, St. Just), Büchner connects mechanism of idealist aesthetics—beauty’s *Spiel*; sublimity’s transcendence—to disastrous or hopeless forms of political activity. The question, then, is whether *Dantons Tod* has a positive counterpart to this critique of idealism, a question I propose to frame as follows: do Büchner’s aesthetic decisions, especially his formal innovations as a playwright, suggest their own form of politics, or a specific political worldview? I want to focus on two aspects here: Büchner’s street scenes, and his use of montage.

If *Dantons Tod* has a politics, it must have a conception of “the people,” which I suggest we find in the play’s street scenes. That is, Büchner’s model of *das Volk* in *Dantons Tod* is his *presentation* of actual people on the streets of Paris. The image is not a kind one: of the play’s six street scenes, two especially (I: 2 and III: 10) depict Parisian citizens as starving, hysterical, frenzied, and easily susceptible of manipulation. Significantly, as Port observes, the first of these scenes (I: 2) involves a marked contradiction between the language of Simon, the theater *souffleur* who introduces the scene, and the conditions around him:

Die in seinen Tiraden herbeizitierten und durcheinander geworfenen Heroes und Heroinnen des Römerdramas (Virginius, Lucrecia/Virginia, Porcia), Leitbilder einer Tod bzw. Freitod endenden familiären Opferökonomie, stehen in offensichtlichem Widerspruch zu den höchst profanen Subsistenzproblemen der Pariser Straße im Jahre sechs der Revolution. (“Pathosformeln,” 211)

Surrounded by actually starving Parisians, Simon holds forth on the heroic figures of Roman drama. It is a gesture we see replicated throughout the play, by the Dantonists and Jacobins alike, who are constantly drawing analogies between themselves and their political idols from antiquity. For Port, there is a parodic element at work here, directed not just at the conceit of a lost age of great figures, but also at recent German tragedy’s susceptibility to it (e.g. Schiller and ancient Greece).²⁰ But this flight to antiquity is related to a politics of the present: as Port notes, the language of political heroism stands in glaring contradiction to the real circumstances of the people these modern-day “heroes” claim to represent. To confront the economic situation of Paris would require doing exactly what the Jacobins refuse, and the Dantonists appear powerless, to do: disengage the Revolution and start constructing durable institutions of government. Instead, the revolutionaries address the people figurally or conceptually, at a remove from their real lived conditions. Campe argues Büchner’s street-scenes show the people in a specific role: to be *spoken for*, not engaged as a concrete entity.²¹ The one choice excludes the other, a reality on vivid (if convoluted) display in the exchange between Robespierre and several citizens that concludes the play’s first street scene. At first, the Jacobin concept of popular sovereignty appears to be caught in a bind:

ALLE. Totgeschlagen! totgeschlagen!
ROBESPIERRE. Im Namen des Gesetzes!
ERSTER BÜRGER. Was ist das Gesetz?
ROBESPIERRE. Der Wille des Volks.

²⁰ Port: “Simons Pathos... erweist sich als doppelt adressierte Parodie, die nicht nur der heroischen Semantik antiker Sujets, sonder ebenso der Artifizialität klassischer *deutscher* (sprich Weimaraner) Tragödien gilt.” “Pathosformeln,” 211.

²¹ “Ohne eine sie sozial zusammenfassende Identität auszubilden, ist das Volk in Büchners Volksszenen sprachlich und politisch Bezugspunkt und Gradmesser der Versuche, in seinem Namen zu sprechen.” “*Dantons Tod*,” 34-35.

ERSTER BÜRGER. Wir sind das Volk und wir wollen, das kein Gesetz sei; ergo ist dieser Wille das Gesetz, ergo im Namen des Gesetzes gibts kein Gesetz mehr, ergo totgeschlagen! (*WB* 14)

The Jacobins' pretense is to govern solely based on the will of the people, which prompts this Parisian to state his will directly to Robespierre—if it is true that revolutionary law emanates from the popular will, his statement should have legal force. But Robespierre counters with an important specification: “Volk deine Streiche dürfen deinen eignen Leib nicht verwunden, du mordest dich selbst in deinem Grimm... Deine Gesetzgeber wachen, sie werden deine Hände führen, ihre Augen sind untrügbar, deine Hände sind unentrinnbar. Kommt mit zu den Jakobinern” (*WB* 14). Effectively, Robespierre's argument is that the (empirical) people do not fully understand their own situation, and therefore—though law is technically defined as the “Wille des Volks”—there are nonetheless revolutionary “Gesetzgeber” who guide (“führen”) the people, preventing their self-injury (“den eignen Leib verwunden”). This kind of paternalism is perfectly consistent with the chain of equivalences we saw in chapter one that make up Jacobin ideology: sovereignty emanates from the will of the people, but the revolutionary government represents this will (i.e. the “Wille des Volks” is not something actually articulated by the people), and the Committee of Public Safety effectively *is* the government. Ultimately, the people's “Gesetzgeber” determine their will.

This conception of popular sovereignty follows the formula of idealism: the “material” people are subordinated to a representative construct of the popular will, which should soften the contradiction of Büchner's street scenes—for the Jacobins, actual people are not the ones who count. But it is hard to argue there is any softening for the viewer, who instead is confronted with the mismatch between revolutionary rhetoric and practice. This is an indirect argument for a definition of the political community along the lines of *Der Hessische Landbote*, i.e. as a concrete multiplicity. Büchner makes it a point to show everyday citizens of revolutionary

France in their full abjection and desperation, which decision itself contributes to the ostensible “ambivalence” of the play: it is impossible to ascribe a straightforwardly heroic role to Danton or his followers, in large part because they indulge in various luxuries while most of Paris starves. The Jacobins in Büchner’s play are deranged, but the Dantonists are hardly unambiguously “good.” But this, again, is part of the drama’s critique of aesthetic-political idealism: whether in a beautiful or sublime mode, it still ignores the real lived conditions of the people it claims to represent.

This critique finds powerful articulation in act II, in Danton and Camille’s exchange about the discrepancy between creative artifice and reality. Camille’s famous exclamation “ach, die Kunst!” marks off a trenchant indictment of art understood as “ein Ideal,” in which actual experience is ostensibly elevated through stilted linguistic forms and stiff, lifeless movements. His language is reminiscent of Büchner’s critique of idealist aesthetics in his family correspondence as well as in “Lenz”: “Schnitzt Einer eine Marionette, wo man den Strick hereinhängen sieht, an dem sie gezerrt wird und deren Gelenke bei jedem Schritt in fünffüßigen Jamben krachen, welch ein Charakter, welche Konsequenz!” (*WB* 33) This is how Camille sees theater, and—not incidentally in a play with such frequent street scenes—he exhorts people to abandon playhouses in favor of the street:

Setzt die Leute aus dem Theater auf die Gasse: ach, die erbärmliche Wirklichkeit! Sie vergessen ihren Herrgott über seinen schlechten Kopisten. Von der Schöpfung, die glühend, brausend und leuchtend, um und in ihnen, sich jeden Augenblick neu gebiert, hören und sehen Sie nichts. Sie gehen in’s Theater, lesen Gedichte und Romane, schneiden den Fratzen darin die Gesichter nach und sagen zu Gottes Geschöpfen: wie gewöhnlich! [...]

DANTON. Und die Künstler gehn mit der Natur um wie David, der im September die Gemordeten, wie sie aus der Force auf die Gasse geworfen wurden, kaltblütig zeichnete und sagte: ich erhasche die letzten Zuckungen des Lebens in diesen Bösewichtern. (*WB* 33-34)

Turning to the street, for Camille, returns us to the creation (“Schöpfung”) of which art is just a poor copy, the work of a “schlechten Kopisten.” Consuming aesthetic products—he mentions

theater, poetry and novels—Camille sees as a way of disengaging from a far more vibrant and complex given world, “die glühend, brausend und leuchtend... sich jeden Augenblick neu gebiert.” Danton extends the argument to visual art with the example of Jacques-Louis David, party artist of the Jacobins, whose iconic *Death of Marat* galvanized support for the extreme wing of the Revolution and is still universally recognizable. It is worth considering in detail the picture Danton creates: victims of a massacre thrown into the street to die, and David, coldly observing and sketching them, capturing their last twitches of life (“ich erhasche die letzten Zuckungen des Lebens”), to produce his famous revolutionary images.

We can make a direct political analogy: just as, in this exchange between Camille and Danton, aesthetic images are a way of not only bypassing the manifest reality of *Schöpfung*, but also becoming desensitized to it (David feels no compassion for the dying people he sketches), so too is the political ideal of the *Volk* a way for the revolutionaries to (1) avoid confronting the empirical people of Paris and (2) indiscriminately guillotine any member of the people suspected of political opposition, with no sense of humane restraint or mercy. We could think of this as a specifically idealist form of populism—“idealist” in the sense that it subordinates real people to an idea of “the people”—that is simultaneously aesthetic and political. That is, the specific aesthetic and political processes of representation at work here involve the same distancing from reality. Büchner’s alternative in *Dantons Tod* is to represent the people in their lived condition, i.e. as a concrete multiplicity.

While Büchner’s street scenes accomplish this specific representational task, his use of montage draws out the wider political resonance of the French Revolution. I follow Campe in referring to “montage” as the way Büchner arranges empirical (citational) material and invented

content, with some priority paid to both.²² As we've already seen, Büchner combines rigorous historical research, via Thiers and other sources available to him, with certain wholesale creations like Marion and St. Just's speech to the Convention. I suggested above that, though not empirically grounded, these inventions nonetheless fill out the discursive universe at work in the events the play depicts. After all, to name one example, the affinity between Jacobin politics and Hegelian historicism would not be explicable until after Hegel, and Büchner dramatizes Robespierre and St. Just from this larger perspective. Similarly, with Marion's eroticism, Büchner may perceive its germaneness to the story of *Dantons Tod* without finding that connection expressed to his satisfaction in the empirical sources. That is, a discourse like Marion's eroticism may be *latent* in the Terror, and Büchner invites his viewers to consider the relationship—in this case, between the conceits of heroic political idealism and the competing image of an infinite, faceless “Sehnen und Fassen.” These juxtapositions are often direct, perhaps most conspicuously, as Weineck has noted (“Sex and History,” 358), in the case of St. Just's speech, which aligns neatly with Robespierre's address to the Jacobin club: both are long, involved expositions of Jacobin political ideology that attempt to frame the events of the play. Robespierre's speech, following immediately on the play's first street scene, anchors act one, while St. Just's concludes act two. The first half of the drama is dominated by Jacobin rhetoric. The difference, of course, is that Robespierre's speech is comprised almost entirely of transcriptions from the empirical Robespierre's oratory, while Büchner creates St. Just's entirely. The effect, I suggest, is to position the two speeches on the same continuum, to draw a parallel:

²² “Montage ist in diesem rein technischen Sinn sogar notwendige Ergänzung zum Zitat: Sie schneidet das zu Zitierende im Ausgangstext aus, übersetzt es und setzt es in die andere Gattung, das andere Medium, um und klebt es schließlich im Zieltext mit anderen Stücken zusammen... In jedem Fall ist die (quellenkundliche) Montage in *Dantons Tod*, Schneide- und Klebetechnik im Dienst des performativen Zitats, das Geschichte auf die Bühne und zum Sprechen bringt... Im Stück wird das noch einmal dadurch deutlich, dass die historischen Worte auch theatralisch montiert – d.h. vorgeführt und kommentiert, manipuliert und zurechgemacht – erscheinen.” Campe, “Zitat,” 278.

if St. Just's imagery, written by Büchner—of the revolutionaries' heroic destiny; of an equivalence between natural disasters and morally necessary violence; of the Revolution as a linguistic sequence; of a *Weltgeist*—seems consistent with Robespierre's, that is because *it is consistent*: Büchner is inviting a connection between the specific rhetorical dressing of the Terror and the idealist philosophy of history still to come.

In this way, Büchner's combination of empirical and invented content serves a specific, historically based form of political critique. But there is also an affirmative dimension to this strategy. Consider *Dantons Tod* in relation to Schiller's history plays: while Schiller also consciously fuses documented history with his own fictions, he always does so, as we say in chapter two, under the rubric of *Spiel*. That is, Schiller treats empirical and invented content as potentially divergent categories on which *Wechselwirkung* has to be imposed, and this prerogative guides his dramaturgical decisions. Analytically speaking, the ends of aesthetic education and *Spiel* precede the actual construction of a Schillerian history play. But as Barbara Nagel has recently argued, there is no real "master" discourse in *Dantons Tod*, as aesthetic education is for Schiller.²³ This is another aspect of the play's apparent ambivalence: it does not propose its own answer to the problematics it draws out. Nagel's starts by rejecting the familiar categorization of Büchner as a "materialist": "neither idealism nor materialism are safe from Büchner" ("Spirit," 2)—instead, *Dantons Tod* creates a space in which no theoretical or ideological system predominates entirely. The discursive profusion is the point: just as the play presents a trenchant critique of idealism, it also preempts the hegemony of its counterpart, materialism, which in elevating substance or physicality to a privileged position, becomes its

²³ See Barbara Natalie Nagel, "The Spirit of Matter in Büchner," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* (2011). <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1802>>. Subsequent citations of Nagel correspond to page numbers on this linked version.

own form of idealism. Nagel traces a transition in Büchner's thought from a "metaphysical" materialism, in which "materiality already gets entangled in its own conceptual ideality" once it has been posited as absolute, to a literary-linguistic stage, aimed directly at this kind of absolutist materialism ("Spirit," 9). At that final stage (when he writes *Dantons Tod*), "every conceptual ideality in Büchner remains bound to a *linguistic* materiality of the dead letter" (Nagel 9; my emphasis). That is, any given conceptual system—any discourse—is grounded in the play to the extent that it is linguistically expressed: it is *concrete* in being articulated, but none of these articulations can become absolute. Radicalism, epicureanism, populism, idealism, eroticism, Spinozism—all discourses Büchner writes into the play via direct speech situations, monologues, conversations, orations. These linguistic expressions alone are the substance of their respective "idealities," their discourses.

The concreteness of language is also on display in the practice of revolutionary violence itself, which Port describes as the "mimetische Übersetzung" ("Pathosformeln," 216) of revolutionary idioms. In a sense less abstract than the Revolution *qua* "Satz" of St. Just's speech, certain linguistic decisions—statements in the street or in a private conversation—are tied to a specific political fate. Part of the exceptional politics of the Terror is what Nagel calls "death by a slip of the tongue": any offhand remark can carry unexpected political consequences, which she likens to a process in which speech is no longer one form of symbolic activity employed by an acting subject, but *is itself the act* and *itself constitutes the subject* ("Spirit," 8). The clearest example in *Dantons Tod* is its final moment: Lucille's declaration "Es lebe der König!" has her immediately detained by the revolutionary guard, for whom she is inconsequential until making this statement (*WB* 68). Her speech is a criminal act that also subjectivizes her as a counter-revolutionary, and in such a way that is part of an immediate sequence of actions—it is a

concrete provocation with the direct consequence of her detainment (and likely later execution). In moments like this, Nagel sees language “on the verge of turning into matter” (“Spirit,” 8). That is, language “materializes” directly in a series of tangible effects.

This kind of linguistic materiality complements the aforementioned function of language in the play, i.e. to install various discourses, some empirical, some fictive, all organized episodically. The overall effect is that of variously intersecting themes, none of which predominates. The discursive world of the play is multitudinous, much like Büchner imagines the composition of a political community. If *Dantons Tod* has a politics, the concept of *multiplicity* is crucial—not just in describing the world of political *subjects*, but also the circulation of political *ideas*. Büchner’s play shows us a program of *uniformity* (Jacobinism) colliding with a field of representations and ideas, the sheer variegation of which is amplified through the play’s use of montage. In this sense, *Dantons Tod* comes close to the politics of Lefort and Rancière, whose conceptions of democracy emphasize the role of disagreement, profusion, debate—multiplicity at all levels.

The resonance with Lefort is worth exploring in more detail. Lefort’s famous formula is that, in a democracy, “the place of power is empty”—there is no source of authority that could function as an absolute, no final arbiter, no *permanent, unaccountable* power. This is one corollary; the second is that society is *essentially and always non-integrated*: there is no neatly unified *Volk*, just as there is no wholly apposite representation of it. This is another way of saying that direct democracy is impossible: only representative institutions that acknowledge and affirm the insurmountable distance between power and society can really claim to be sustainably democratic.

In several respects, *Dantons Tod* seems to dramatize exactly this gap. What are the Jacobins trying to do but unify society, to *directly* embody the people? And what does the play as a whole depict but the irrepressible circulation of competing discourses, a multiplicity that resists any attempt to integrate it into a single “revolutionary” rubric? *Dantons Tod* is the vehicle for this multiplicity, it *shows* politics coming to terms with the gap at the center of every modern democracy. The fact that we witness this process through the aesthetic representation of the play gives Camille and Danton’s exchange on art added significance: the insurmountable distance between power and society is depicted via a literary medium that is *itself subject* to a structurally equivalent distance from its own object of representation. In this way, the play involves a doubling of representative distance, exactly because it is a *dramatic*—and not, for instance, historiographic—representation of the Terror.

The idea that this gap needs to be preserved also helps us understand the politics of *Der Hessische Landbote*. As we saw, Büchner’s pamphlet explicitly advocates *representative* democracy, which may seem counterintuitive, given the revolutionary political program Büchner tried to galvanize into existence, as well as the inherited image of Büchner as a bona fide political radical. I am not saying Büchner was not radical (quite the opposite) but rather that it may seem difficult to reconcile the idea of political radicalism with the idea of representative institutions. Something about these institutions just feels inherently moderate, probably due in part to the influence of political thinkers like Žižek and Badiou, who, like their Jacobin heroes, imagine a more authentic form of politics that cuts through the representative machinery of the state and arrives directly at the will of the people. Already in 1834, Büchner saw this was a trap. *Dantons Tod* is above all a play about the futility of trying to close the representative gap, whether political or aesthetic, and *Der Hessische Landbote*, anticipating Lefort, gives us the best

alternative: government by democratically chosen representatives, figures who are selected by the people, rather than claiming to incarnate some truer essence of them. Like *Dantons Tod*, this world involves the proliferation and ongoing circulation of discourses—it is a universe of real political exchange, founded on, rather than quixotically warring against, the impossibility of any perfect representation.

Conclusion

In Schiller, Fichte and Büchner we have three judgments of the French Revolution based on three concepts of representation. Each concept is simultaneously political, aesthetic, historiographic and theatrical, which means it addresses a complex set of questions: Should democracy be direct or representative? Does a democratic state transmit or incarnate the will of the people? What is the political function of art, and how closely should artworks observe a mimetic principle of representation? Is moral and political progress developmental, or should politics seek to bring about a radical break from the past? And what role does the institution of theater have in a democracy? Is it desirable to conceive of politics itself in theatrical terms, as a spectacle, a drama that unfolds before our eyes or in which we play a role?

The concept of representation in Schiller, Fichte and Büchner derives its uniqueness, in each case, from how it responds to these questions collectively. The three configurations that result are hardly assimilable into familiar intellectual-historical categorizations of these writers, e.g. idealism, materialism, aestheticism, subjectivism, etc. For instance, rather than classifying Schiller as an “aesthetic idealist,” I approach him as a thinker who favors representational distance along all four axes of politics, aesthetics, historiography and theater. This means Schiller advocates expressing the popular will through representative institutions rather than seeking to enact it directly, but with the important addition that all members of society are subject to aesthetic education. Political life is suffused with artworks that help bring citizens’

internal drives into a higher unity, thus preparing them for full democratic freedoms. Integral to this vision is a robust public knowledge of history, so that contemporary political subjects can situate themselves in the larger arc of human development. The chief venue for disseminating this historical awareness is theater: history plays provide a vehicle for representing critical junctures of the political past while also incorporating the conceptual parameters of aesthetic education in their composition. This is the political, aesthetic, historiographic and theatrical program Schiller opposes to the French Revolution in the *Ästhetische Erziehung* and his late history plays.

Unlike Schiller, Fichte supports the Revolution, and in developing his position, reverses Schiller along every axis of representation. Fichte's *Beitrag* is an ardent call for direct democracy: once the potential of the French Revolution is realized, the moral purity of the people will make representative institutions unnecessary. But this transcendence is only possible if we remove all forms of pleasure and edification that bind us to the present. Moored as they are in the sensuous dimension of human experience, aesthetic representations are precisely this kind of bondage. True to the concept of the sublime, Fichte's politics conceives of all sense-pleasure as anathema to moral elevation: it is only through traumatic collision with something impossibly vast and limitlessly terrifying (the Revolution) that we realize our subjective foundation in moral independence from the external world. In this sublime-political paradigm, the world of history is useful only as something that brings us to the threshold moment of moral transcendence, at which point we renounce the political past in toto. Fichte's vision is anti-theatrical for the same reason it opposes any practice of artistic representation—theater is another form of sense-pleasure that delays moral awakening—as well as in the sense that it rejects any non-moral

signification or metaphor for the social world. Conceiving of society *dramatically* can only mean weakening its determination as something *moral*.

Schiller and Fichte seem to invert one another, with a crucial exception: both insist the world as it is (including political history) needs to be elevated, transfigured, signified and *conceptualized* in some way. The same goes for the French Revolution itself, which Schiller and Fichte do not approach so much as an *event* as a *symbol*. But Büchner is interested in the event itself, and especially its consequences for subsequent European politics. For Büchner, history is not something to be overcome or idealized, but rather explored as closely as possible in its complexity and internal tension. In the case of the French Revolution, part of that complexity involves the way revolutionary actors constantly sought to rhetorically frame and orchestrate the Revolution as, alternatively, a spectacle and a sublime event. Thus his innovative practice of citation, putting literal (spoken) history on the German stage for the first time in *Dantons Tod*, which quotes extensively from revolutionary oratory. This drama, a watershed in theatrical and historiographic representation alike, is preceded directly by *Der hessische Landbote*, a document that is simultaneously an appeal to revolutionary action and a call for representative democracy. Politically, revolution is a means to representation: Büchner advocates upheaval for the sake of creating genuinely representative institutions of government.

Like Schiller, Büchner comes down in favor of representation on all four axes. Nonetheless, the overall aesthetic politics at work in Schiller and Büchner are vastly different, despite each figure's basic pro-representative stand. This involves the specific configuration of their respective concepts of representation, which is not simply a matter of whether one is "for" or "against" representation in politics, aesthetic, historiography and theater, but what representation more tangibly entails in each case. In this respect, the concept of *distance*

becomes crucial. Along the political axis of representation, for instance, if we accept that democracy should be representative rather than direct, the next question is: how *close* should representatives be to the people? Is it important for elected officials to be proximate and immediately responsive to their constituents, or is a more remote body of legislators better for the smooth functioning of government? Either would satisfy the basic criterion of “representative” democracy. The concept of distance helps us make more precise distinctions within these larger categories. With respect to Schiller and Büchner, for example, while both advocate representative democracy, Schiller has a far more contemptuous view of the everyday citizenry than Büchner. Because the public needs to be aesthetically educated before it is ready for substantive freedoms, Schiller is prepared to accept a strong (though still democratically accountable) body of rulers to guide the state in the meantime. But Büchner sees no need to improve the people. *Der hessische Landbote* appeals to impoverished farmers and laborers *as they are* to consolidate a revolutionary movement. And in the democracy Büchner envisions, representatives serve the immediate needs of their constituencies, governing in “Christian fraternity” (“Christlich über Brüder zu regieren”). However, since for Büchner the people is an active force, he does not dictate what form their self-representation should take. The same applies to *Dantons Tod*, which does not prescribe or condemn any specific representative mechanism.

The criterion of distance also helps distinguish Schiller and Büchner along other representative axes. Though both create theatrical representations of history, Büchner chooses an episode only 40 years in the past, while Schiller’s histories are far more remote from his own time. And in terms of their respective portrayals, Büchner is much more mimetically close to his material, meticulously excerpting from historical record in *Dantons Tod*, where Schiller gives

himself ample freedom to intervene and thus more smoothly present political history as a drama of drives (and therefore comprehensible under the rubric of aesthetic education). Though representing history is an important element of Schiller's larger aesthetic-political vision, the historical material of his plays is always submitted to a governing aesthetic concept—usually *Spiel* or the reciprocal functioning of the drives. But Büchner expressly avoids subordinating historical or experiential content to an idea (or ideal). Büchner's aesthetics is one of intense proximity: whereas a Schillerian play about the Terror would try to express a greater truth behind the event, Büchner lets his viewers experience the literal, quoted oratory of Robespierre in an actual context of speaker and audience (the theater). When it comes to politics, aesthetics, historiography and theater, Schiller and Büchner are both in favor of representational distance, but in every instance, Schiller's representation is *remote* while Büchner's is *close*.

Fichte refuses to make the key acknowledgement that unites Schiller and Büchner: that *some* degree of representative distance is inevitable and desirable. Unlike Schiller and Büchner, Fichte is not a literary writer—his own work is non-artistic, does not partake in aesthetic representation. Likewise, the world he envisions in the *Beitrag* does not seem to have a place for artistic institutions, nor does he attribute any cognitive or social benefit to aesthetic experience. This kind of experience can only create *distance* between humanity and its moral foundation, where the French Revolution provides a unique opportunity for the will of the people to *completely coincide* (“völlige Übereinstimmung”) with the moral law. For Fichte, morality is not filtered or communicated through an external concept (like Schillerian *Spiel*) but *incarnated* by human beings. There is no representative gap between the subject and its moral vocation. Similarly, Fichte's *Beitrag* calls for a form of government understand solely as the *immediate* expression of the popular will, which moreover disappears once the political community is

sufficiently morally integrated. Fichte also rejects the importance of historical understanding. The political past exists, in the world of the *Beitrag*, only to be negated outright: the point is to create a qualitative break from history, not to situate oneself in it.

The trope of distance thus helps us more clearly position Schiller, Fichte and Büchner on the aesthetic-political spectrum of the left. Schiller develops the most remote model of representation, with considerable distance along political, aesthetic, historiographic and theatrical axes. The representative gap is greatest with Schiller, and he also promotes what we would now call the most “moderate” political and aesthetic program. The middle figure is Büchner, an actual revolutionary operative whose radicalism, in the rubric I propose, is mitigated by his endorsement of various forms of representation: he supports representative democracy and creates a theatrical representation of history. But distance along every axis is closer for Büchner than it is for Schiller, and unlike Schiller, Büchner advocates revolutionary change for the sake of creating a more just society. The most radical vision is Fichte’s, premised on eliminating political, artistic and historiographic representation alike. This insistence coincides with a defense of political upheaval regardless of its human costs. Seen in this light, Schiller, Fichte and Büchner alike reinforce the lesson of the Jacobins: representation moderates programs of political change, and the more a movement attempts to overcome representative distance, the greater its capacity for violence and destruction.

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