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## “The Pledge” (*Die Bürgschaft*): Schiller’s Human Bail Bond Ballad

SCHILLER’S DRAMATIC 1798 ballad, *Die Bürgschaft*, begins *in medias res*, with the immediate events leading up to the pledge. The scene is ancient Syracuse where Dionysios the Elder (430 BC), a brutal despot, ruthlessly lords it over the Greek populace, consolidating and extending his power. As the action begins, one enemy, Damon, has been apprehended: dagger under his cloak, he was found in suspiciously close proximity to the tyrant. When questioned, the would-be assassin admits his desire to free the city from its oppressor. Adjudication comes instantly and Damon must die on the cross. Stoically accepting the sentence, Damon entreats Dionysios to grant him a three-day reprieve to get his sister married. He also pledges a close friend as bail should he himself fail to return by the deadline imposed. The King grants what Damon asks, with the understanding that the perpetrator’s debt will be paid should his friend be executed in his place. Schiller’s scant but convincing lines on Dionysios’s character leave little doubt as to the tyrant’s sinister intention.

Next, Damon approaches his friend with his extraordinary, momentous “request,” surely one to exceed the scope of a personal favour. He offers a terse explanation of the circumstances, an urgent, yet emotional plea that the friend act as a bailbond, and a firm promise to return immediately upon completion of his “last mission” suffice. With a silent embrace the friend agrees. In one stanza Schiller reports the agreement, the bail’s turning himself in to the king, and Damon’s prompt departure, mindful of his return within three days.

What follows complicates the plot while at the same time retarding the action. Facing natural and manmade adversities beyond his control, Damon feels his frustration turn to despair, as his timely return appears less and less likely. Torrential rain causes a bridge to collapse, thwarting his crossing, a hold-up attempt is aborted, physical exhaustion takes its toll and his time. Hastening toward Syracuse, he overhears two wayfarers' remarks about the execution in progress. With superhuman exertion Damon wins the race against time, here the equivalent of death. Rejecting the tyrant's disdain, the friend had never lost faith in Damon's genuine loyalty. Breaking through the crowds of curious onlookers, Damon signals his presence, identifying himself as the man for whom the accused had stood bail. Professing to join his friend in death to demonstrate true meaning of love and loyalty, he manages to halt the execution. After a tearful reunion at the scene of the crucifixion the tyrant, in utter disbelief and actually moved by such a show of character and human sentiment tested under extreme circumstances, asks the twosome to accept him to form a triumvirate of friendship.

Such is the plot. Even in this brief paraphrase we find not one, but several pledges made along with the moral implications of each: Damon to the King, the King to Damon (albeit a dubious pledge), Damon to the friend and vice versa, and the King to the two formerly condemned men, now released and accepted, living proof of the power of mutual trust and instrument—indeed, of the liberating quality of the moral cleansing of a thoroughly evil individual. True to his moral convictions, Schiller uses the device of a wager to press a serious moral claim. In other narratives, bets often serve to initiate comic imbroglios or romantic adventures, such as the wager that propels Phileas Fogg to circumnavigate the earth in record time. Schiller's wager has likewise a firm deadline, but its stakes are life and death and decency. The last minute stay of execution, and the poem's elevating finale, yield the desired closure and ultimately a higher purpose—the tyrant's conversion.

The poem's genre, the ballad, became popular on German soil around 1790, the term "ballad" having derived from its English meaning. It occupies a vague position among the lyrical categories. Some characteristics of the ballad include: an imaginative plot, with frequently demonic or ghostly events taken from history, legend, or myth; events leading to a fateful encounter in which man functions merely as a paraphrase of cosmic events, notably the

collision of moral and natural powers, propelled by assertion and contradiction; and a style consisting of concise, rhymed stanzas. Evoking a lyrical mood, the ballad is distinguished from the related poetic romance particularly by its tendency toward an earnest, noble disposition, or the dominion of fate. Among its prevalent rhetorical devices are the use of alliteration, assonance, rhyme, repetition, and power of creative assertion. Literary history tends to view the genre as an extension or transformation of the ancient sagas through the Middle Ages, followed by its mutation into the "folk ballad," *Zeitungslied*,<sup>1</sup> and *Bänkelsang*, until the eventual reversal beginning with Gleim. The first artistic ballads (*Kunstballaden*) originated during the classical *Balladenjahr* (year marked by ballads) of 1797 for Goethe and Schiller.

Schiller's preferred form, the subgenre of "thought or ideas" ballad differs from the folk ballad in that it manifests the victory of an idea over fate and reality. A didactic intention—to Schiller, a "moral lesson"—cannot be ignored if one considers a number of prominent ballads which he published during 1796–1797, such as *Der Kampf mit dem Drachen*, *Ritter Toggenburg* (both labeled "Romanzen" by Schiller), *Der Taucher*, *Die Kraniche des Ibykus*, *Der Ring des Polykrates*, *Der Handschuh*, *Die Bürgerschaft*, to cite major examples. Herbert Cysarz<sup>2</sup> accords Schiller's ballads the appellation of "elevated folk poetry"—an acclaim that reflects their popularity and, indeed, the awe and respect-inspiring aura which they continued to enjoy through required reading and memorization, i.e., applied lessons in morality, by successive generations of intermediate and high schoolers. Cysarz points to Schiller's accomplished yet simple style in his best dramatic production of this particular period, in which his rhetoric is a major factor instrumental to achieving skillful suspense, not willful thrills (Cysarz 292). Suspense may become an ennobling agent elevating the sometimes sensational tendencies in the plotting.

Those familiar with Schiller's ideals and propensities know that again and again he chooses foreign soil as the scene of the action, lending colour, interest, and perhaps a degree of immunity to the unfolding and ultimate resolution of the plot. The past—

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<sup>1</sup> Gero von Wilpert, *Sachwörterbuch der Literatur*, 7th ed. (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1980) 73–75.

<sup>2</sup> Herbert Cysarz, *Schiller* (Halle/Saale: Niemeyer, 1934) 290.

notably a distant past, including antiquity—is a preferred setting for the scene of his actions. He has dramatized important historical events, some of which he has lent extraordinary impact by means of his personal insight or subjective interpretations, but altogether most likely for the express purpose of dramatic effectiveness, an intention which he freely acknowledged. In his portrayal of human characters and their destinies—historical or invented—his ideals of freedom, friendship, loyalty, sense of responsibility and their ramifications above all others play a dominant part.

His concept of the role of theater as a “moral institution” equally informs his sense of the ballad’s importance as a vehicle of drama in miniature, if not necessarily tragedy. In drama and hence also in the ballad human liberty becomes a “tool of Nemesis,” according to Cysarz (293). Issues of felicity and adversity, reward and punishment, sense and nonsense, are subordinated to the awareness of personal responsibility in keeping with Schiller’s moral principles. The ballad shares with the tragedy mainly its structure, less its system (Cysarz 294). Considering the conciliatory conclusion of “The Pledge,” the poem would be better classified as an allegory, a parable, or gospel. A veritable arena of the applied principles of friendship among men, steadfast loyalty, and humility form the basic elements of “The Pledge.”

In these themes “The Pledge” reflects its antique source. Replying to a letter, dated December 15, 1797, to Goethe, in which Schiller had expressed displeasure about the deplorable dearth of rewarding poetic source material, Goethe sent him a work from his own library, by Gaius Iulius Hyginus, a Roman historian and grammarian; Schiller subsequently acknowledged this piece as his source for “The Pledge.”<sup>3</sup> The central motif is the topic which had been transmitted in various versions from antiquity through the Middle Ages. According to Lytton, the title, too, had undergone changes, along with the names of the principal characters: originally Damon and Pythias (a.k.a. Phintias), then Moerus and Selinuntius in Hyginus’s version.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Hyginus Fable No. 257, concerning an example of men bound by extraordinarily profound friendship; see Friedrich Schiller, *Schillers Werke*. Nationalausgabe, Vol. 2, ed. Norbert Oellers (Weimar: Böhlau, 1991) 649-50.

<sup>4</sup> *The Poems and Ballads of Schiller*, trans. Edward Bulwer Lytton, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, London: Blackwood, 1884) 2:1. Hereafter cited as Lytton.

Having considered the "when," the "where," and the "what" of the ballad, let me consider the "how," the means by which Schiller achieves the requisite suspense. In the exposition, Schiller employs direct speech to create a sense of lively immediacy. Direct speech also dramatizes most effectively Damon's despair directed to *du*, presumably a god, in his urgent prayer addressed to Zeus to halt the storm, and again, giving thanks to the god for having saved him from the weather, the robbers' attack, adding a prayer for water to drink and refresh himself as the merciless rays of the hot sun threaten to parch his skin and advance his exhaustion. Thus, weather conditions, too, became an important factor contributing to the rapidly changing action. Even the absence of a verbal reaction supplanted by a gesture—the silent, affirmative embrace of the two men—adds immeasurably to the effect of the moment. The use of the coordinating conjunction *und* commencing twelve of the twenty stanzas also emphasizes the growing urgency of the action under pressure, and the mounting fear, albeit without the use of enjambment. This repeated *und* is employed to introduce adverse as well as felicitous developments in a stanza, usually beginning a new or opposing set of illustrations.

Martin Dyck credits the figures in Schiller's imagery with the dynamics of the constituent elements.<sup>5</sup> He perceives Damon's "pilgrimage," characterized throughout as a manifestation of love, fidelity, and humility, with a definite time in which the action can play out, as a horizontal line. In Dyck's illustration, this line only briefly changes into a vertical at the moment the friend descends from the cross, and again at the king's attitudinal change from arrogance to humility. In this scheme, a readily perceptible dominance of the numeral three is evident: Damon is granted three days to order his personal affairs; he must overcome three obstacles which threaten the successful completion of his mission; he kills three in the gang of holdup men; finally, friendship triumphs through the "conversion" of the king in the act of establishing the triumvirate. Likewise, Dyck underscores the image of the cross as the Christian symbol where sacrifice, faith, love, and fidelity unite in the act of redemption.

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<sup>5</sup> Martin Dyck, *Die Gedichte Schillers. Figuren der Dynamik des Bildes* (Bern, München: Francke, 1967) 144–45.

It is precisely the desperate, physical need of water which Lytton (6–7), siding with Goethe's opinion, criticizes as unlikely in an individual who has quite recently passed through a stream on a rainy day and whose clothes must still be saturated with moisture. Staiger makes a similar observation, citing Goethe's remark on this point.<sup>6</sup> The same source cites other critics who feel that the tyrant's sudden relenting "is contrary to his character" (Lytton 7). I am inclined to agree with Lytton's observation that the tyrant, a mere personification of disbelief in truth and the capability of love, lacks a definable, individual character (Lytton 7). Staiger also sees Schiller's patterning of time in the poem as signaling that time is a power not rarely hostile to man's physical existence but instead akin to the moral force of obligation, and as such as a factor essential to the progression and resolution of the ballad (Staiger 216).

Having sent the work to Goethe on September 4, 1798, with a request that the latter examine whether its main motifs had been duly considered in Schiller's version, Schiller received Goethe's aforementioned reservation concerning the poem's verisimilitude and the emotional rendering of Damon's state of dehydration. On the positive side, Goethe not only praised the agreement between the suspense of the action and the iambic-anapestic meters, but also the sensory content, plus the way the moral implications are regarded with apparent detachment as a natural phenomenon.

The year before, in 1797, Schiller had announced his idealism, particularly in the poem *Die Worte des Glaubens* (The Words of Faith), which he identified as freedom, virtue, and God, and consequently man's worth so long as he believes in them. In 1799, he followed in the same vein with *Die Worte des Wahns* (Words of Illusion), in which he emphasizes the liberating influence of the freely moving spirit. And again, in the poem *Das Ideal und das Leben* (The Ideal and Life), he proffers a poetic invitation to escape from a narrow, stifling life into the realm of the ideal and, indeed, to flee from the boundaries of the senses to the freedom of thoughts. All this characterizes his speculative idealism, the very thinking which animates "The Pledge."

In Lytton's opinion, "The Pledge" is not one of Schiller's best ballads. While his poetic spirit is reflected in the terseness of the

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<sup>6</sup> Emil Staiger, *Friedrich Schiller* (Zürich: Atlantis: 1967) 174. Hereafter cited as Staiger.

narrative, Schiller's additions to the original are less than happy choices. Yet the ballad, writes Lytton (7), is redeemed by its "spectacle of sublime self-abnegation." Lytton's claim calls to mind Schiller's elucidation in his essay *Über das Erhabene* (On the Sublime),<sup>7</sup> where he associates plot with the concept of the sublimity of an action. The prospect of suffering, he reasons, is likely to deter man from acting morally, but suffering is actually a consequence of the moral act committed by one if one chooses to accept suffering out of respect for a given obligation—since man is a being of free will ("*Der Mensch ist das Wesen, welches will,*" Dufner, 96 and 97).<sup>8</sup> The issue of the free will has been visited numerous times in Schiller's works as an important aspect of freedom. His dramatic work again and again reflects the theme of choice as does his lyrical output, especially the ballads, which traditionally have a plot in which the exercise of will plays a pivotal part. Likewise, his major essays present his most sustained theoretical reflections on the principles of morality, in particular the force of obligation versus inclination and the attendant role of man's will in the process. This segment of work most clearly shows his interpretation of Kant's moral philosophy and the range of its applicability to his thought. The passages probably most relevant to the moral argument of "The Pledge" are found in *Ueber Anmuth und Würde* (On Grace and Dignity), written 1793 and printed in Schiller's journal *Neue Thalia*, 1793 (Vol. III, No. 2).

To Kant, morality constitutes the relation of the actions to the autonomy of the will. "The dependence of a will not absolutely good on the principle of autonomy (the moral compulsion) is obligation," and, he continues, "the objective necessity of an action from obligation is called duty."<sup>9</sup> Duty, Kant postulates, includes the notion of a good will, though with certain subjective restrictions

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<sup>7</sup> First printed in *Kleinere prosaische Schriften* (Leipzig, 1801) Vol. III. Though scholars believe that it was written between 1791 and 1795, some feel it was written much later. Quotations and references to this work are to *German Essays III, Schiller*, ed. Max Dufner and Valentine C. Hubbs (New York: Macmillan, 1964). Hereafter cited as Dufner.

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *Schillers Werke*. Nationalausgabe, Vol. 20, ed. Benno von Wiese (Weimar: Böhlau, 1962) 251–308. Hereafter cited as Wiese.

<sup>9</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Ethics*, trans. Otto Manthey-Zorn (New York, London: Appleton-Century, 1938) 58. Hereafter cited as Manthey-Zorn.

(Manthey-Zorn 12). The ultimate foundation of morality is the good will, which is an autonomous will. It is the only thing which has absolute value. To will, he reminds us, is to have a desire which is within our own control.<sup>10</sup> On the essential value of the good will, which we see richly demonstrated in Schiller's "The Pledge," Kant has this to say: "It is impossible to conceive of anything anywhere in the world or even anywhere out of it that can without qualification be called good, except a Good Will" (Manthey-Zorn 8). A good will is conducive to the entire principle of activity: it "seems to be the indispensable condition even of being worthy of happiness" (Manthey-Zorn 8). Moreover, Kant distinguishes between the concepts of "dutiful" and "out of duty." Thus, a dutiful action may be performed out of duty or for some selfish reason. Speculation over what constitutes the moral value of an action comprises the centerpiece of the Kantian argument: an action may lack moral content if performed from duty and not from inclination, but, on the other hand, if an individual overcomes a "deadly indifference" and acts solely out of duty, without any inclination, then the action may reflect "genuine moral value" (Manthey-Zorn 13). "A man's will is good," Kant maintains, "not because the consequences which flow from it are good, nor because it is capable of attaining the end that it seeks, but it is good in itself, or because it wills the good. By a good will is not meant mere well-wishing; it consists in a resolute employment of all the means within one's reach, and its intrinsic value is in no way increased by success or lessened by failure."<sup>11</sup>

Owing to its rapid incident-filled pace, "The Pledge" is brimming with acts of decision-making directed by the will. That said, in his essay *Ueber Anmuth und Würde*, Schiller takes exception to Kant's view of obligation. Kant presents this concept with such rigidity as to cause the Graces, personifying grace and dignity, to start back from the idea, and might easily tempt a weak intellect to seek moral perfection by way of an obscure, monastic asceticism. With the help of a rhetorical device or an image, Schiller tends to lighten the ponderousness of Kant's moral message in an effort to harmonize obligation and inclination. Man, Schiller feels, is not

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<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 31.

<sup>11</sup> *The Philosophy of Kant*, ed. and trans. John Watson (Glasgow: Maclehose, 1919) 225–26.



destined to perform single moral acts, but to be a moral individual, whose instruction is not a set of virtues, but virtue collectively; and virtue, to Schiller, is nothing other than "inclination to obligation" (Wiese 283). Man, he continues, ought to obey his intellect cheerfully. Those who can achieve agreement of the principles of obligation and inclination may be comfortable relying on the guidance of the will without hesitation. Such is the moral constitution of a person known as a "beautiful soul," who is not known necessarily for his or her moral acts, but for the entirety of the person's character (Wiese 287); such a person's appearance reflects grace, while dignity, to Schiller, signifies a noble or lofty disposition (Wiese 289). While man ought to promote conformity between the two aspects of his dual nature in order to constitute a harmonizing entity and to act with his entire humanity, Schiller deplores the fact that such a desirable harmony is never quite attainable owing to the physical conditions of his existence (Wiese 289).

As one of the most important motivating forces in the plot of "The Pledge," the factor of the free will also provides the moral foundation of the ballad's content. It should be considered a message or instrument to raise the level of this ballad's quality beyond any serious reproach.