

On the Employment of the Chorus in Tragedy

by Friedrich Schiller

The following essay was translated by George W. Gregory. It was originally published in the Schiller Institute's book Friedrich Schiller/ Poet of Freedom, Volume IV in 2003. Subheads have been added.

This essay was written as the Prologue to Schiller's tragedy, The Bride of Messina, or, The Hostile Brothers, which was completed on February 1, 1803, and first performed in the Weimar theater on March 19, 1803. In writing this play, Schiller was influenced by his study of the Classical Greek tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles, to reintroduce the ancient device of the chorus.

A poetical work must justify itself, and where the deed does not speak, words will not be to much avail. One might well, therefore, leave it to the chorus to be its own spokesman, were it for once given the appropriate form of representation. But the tragic work of art first becomes a whole in theatrical performance: the poet only provides the words; music and dance must be added to bring life to them. Thus, as long as the chorus lacks this sensuously powerful accompaniment, it will appear to be a thing extraneous to the economy of tragedy, a foreign body, and a way-station which only interrupts the progress of the action, disturbs the illusion, and makes the observer cold. To do justice to the chorus, therefore, one must transpose oneself from the actual state to a possible one, but one must do that everywhere where one intends to achieve something higher. That which art still lacks, that it is to obtain; the fortuitous lack of resources must not be permitted to constrain the creative power of imagination of the poet. He sets himself the most worthy as his goal, he strives toward an ideal, the practicing artist may accommodate himself to the circumstances.

It is not true, as one usually hears the claim made, that the audience degrades art; the artist degrades the audience, and at all times when art degenerated, it fell because of the artists. The audience needs nothing more than receptivity, and this it possesses. It steps before the curtain with an indeterminate yearning, with a manifold

capacity. Among the highest of these, it brings an ability, it takes pleasure in what is intelligent and right, and if it once begins to be satisfied with what is bad, it will assuredly cease to demand what is excellent, even when it is provided.

The poet, one hears the objection, does well to work according to an ideal, the art critic does well to judge according to ideas, contingent, limited, practicing art rests upon satisfying the wants to others. The entrepreneur wants to continue to exist, the actor wants to show himself, the audience wants to be entertained and moved. The audience seeks enjoyment, and is dissatisfied if one demands an effort from it, where it expected a play and recreation.

But by treating theater more seriously, one does not want to do away with the enjoyment of the audience, but to ennoble it. It should remain a play, but a poetical one. All art is dedicated to joy, and there is no higher and no more serious task than to make people happy. True art is only that art which provides the highest enjoyment. Supreme enjoyment is the freedom of the mind in the living play of all of its powers.

True art—Achieving Liberation

Every person, indeed, expects from the arts of imagination a certain liberation from the bounds of the real world; he wants to take pleasure in what is possible and give room to his own phantasy. He who sets his expectations the lowest, still wants to forget his business, his common life, his particular individuality, he wants to feel himself in extraordinary situations, he wants to delight in the strange combinations of chance; if he is of a more serious nature, he wants to find the moral world-government, which he misses in real life, upon the stage. But he himself knows quite well, that he is engaging in but an empty play, that in fact he takes delight only in dreams, and when he returns from the theater back to the real world, it will surround him once more with its full, oppressive constriction; he is its booty as



An illustration of Friedrich Schiller's tragedy The Bride of Messina, from Project Gutenberg at the Berlin State Library.

he was before, and it has not been changed in the slightest. Thus, nothing but a pleasant delusion of the moment has been won, which disappears when one awakens.

And just for that reason, because the intent here is but a temporary illusion, all that is necessary is thus but an appearance of truth, or popular probability, which one so gladly sets in the place of truth.

True art, however, does not aim merely at a temporary play; it seriously intends not to transpose a person into a merely momentary dream of freedom, but to make him really and in fact free, and to accomplish this by awakening in him a force, exercising it and developing it, to thrust the sensuous world, which otherwise only presses upon us as crude material, bearing down upon us as a blind power, into an objective distance, to transpose it into a free work of our mind, and to achieve mastery over the material with ideas.

And just for that reason, because true art wants something real and objective, it cannot be satisfied

merely with the appearance of truth; upon the truth itself, upon the firm and deep foundation of nature, art erects its ideal edifice.

But now, how art can be at once entirely ideal and yet in the most profound sense real—how it can take leave utterly from what is real and yet be in most precise accord with nature, that is what few comprehend, which makes the view of poetic and plastic works so furtive, because these two requirements seem to cancel each other out in the common way of judging.

Furthermore, it usually happens that one seeks to achieve the first by sacrificing the other, and fails to meet either requirement for that very reason. He who is endowed by nature with a true sense and an intimacy of emotion, but who is deprived of creative imagination, will be a faithful painter of reality; he will be able to grasp chance phenomena, but never the spirit of nature. He will restore the material of nature to us, but it does not become our work on that account, not the free product of our forming mind, and can thus also not have the beneficial effect of art, which consists in freedom. Such an artist and poet will leave us in a serious mood, but distasteful, and we shall see ourselves painfully thrown back into the mean narrowness of reality by the very art which should have liberated us. On the other hand, he who partakes indeed of a vivid imagination, but without mind and character, will not trouble himself over any truth; he will, instead, but play with the material of the world, will only seek to surprise us with fantastical and bizarre constructions, and since everything he does is only foam and fancy, he will, to be sure, entertain us for the moment, but he will neither build nor found anything in the mind. His play, like the seriousness of the other, is not poetical. To arrange fantastic portraits in an arbitrary sequence does not mean entering into the ideal, and to present reality imitatively does not signify a representation of nature. These two requirements are so little in contradiction with each other that they are, instead, one and the same: art is for that reason true, that it completely takes leave of reality and becomes purely ideal. Nature herself is only an idea of the mind, which never impinges upon the senses. She lies beneath the blanket of appearances, but never appears herself. It is granted alone to the art of the ideal, or actually it is her mission, to grasp this mind of the universe, and bind it to a corporeal form. Even this art cannot present the universe to the senses, but yet, by means of her creating force, she can present it to the power of imagination, and on that account be more true than all reality, and

more real than all experience. It follows, self-evidently, that the artist can use no single element of reality as he finds it, that his work must be ideal in all of its parts, if it is to have reality as a whole and be in agreement with nature.

What is true of poetry and art as a whole, also holds for all of the species of the same, and what has just been said, may be applied to tragedy with no difficulty. Here, too, one has struggled for a long time, and is still struggling, with the common notion of natural, which as much as annuls and destroys all poetry and art. The plastic arts are grudgingly conceded a certain ideality, more out of convention and for internal reasons, but from poetry and the dramatic arts, in particular, one demands illusion, which, were it actually achievable, would only be the miserable fraud of a pick-pocket. Everything external in a dramatic performance is contrary to this notion—everything is but a symbol of reality. The very day in the theater is only artificial, the architecture is only symbolic, the metrical language itself is ideal, but the action is supposed to be real, and the part destroys the whole. The French, who first misunderstood the spirit of the ancients, thus introduced a unity of place and time in the crudest empirical sense upon the stage, as if this were a place different from merely ideal space, and a time different from the mere continuous succession of the action.

One has come a large step closer to poetical tragedy by introducing metrical speech. Some lyrical experiments on the stage have been successful, and, in individual cases, poetry has carried a number of victories over dominant prejudice by virtue of its own vital force. But little is won in these individual cases, if the error is not felled in the whole, and it is not sufficient that only that is tolerated as poetic freedom, which is in fact the essence of all poetry. The introduction of the chorus were the last, the crowning step; and if it only served to openly and honestly declare war upon naturalism in art; to us it should be a living wall which tragedy draws around itself in order to close itself off completely from the real world, and to maintain for itself its ideal ground, its poetic freedom.

Enter the Chorus

The tragedy of the Greeks, as we know, emerged from the chorus. And although it cut itself loose from the chorus historically and in the course of time, one can also say that it emerged from the chorus poetically and in spirit, and that without this perseverant witness

and bearer of the action, it would have become an entirely different poetry. The dissolution of the chorus, and drawing this sensuously powerful organ together into the characterless, boring, ever returning figure of a miserable confidant, was thus no such great improvement of the tragedy, as the French and those who parrot them have imagined.

Ancient tragedy, which initially dealt only with gods, heroes, and kings, required the chorus as a necessary accompaniment; it found it in nature, and employed it because it found it. The actions and fates of the heroes and kings are public in and of themselves, and were even more so in simple, primal time. The chorus, thus, was more than a natural organ in ancient tragedy; it followed out of the poetical form of real life. In modern tragedy, it becomes an artificial organ, it helps to bring poetry forth. The modern poet no longer finds the chorus in nature; he must create it poetically and introduce it, i.e., he must make such a change in the story he treats, whereby it is transposed into that child-like time and that simple form of life.

For the modern poet, therefore, the chorus performs a far more essential service than it did for the ancient poet, and just for the very reason that it transforms the common modern world into the ancient poetical one, because it makes everything useless which contends against poetry, and drives him aloft to the most simple, the most original, and most naive motifs. The palace of the kings is now closed; the courts have withdrawn from the gates of the city into the inner courts of the buildings; writing has displaced the living word; the people itself, the sensuous, living mass, where it does not make itself felt as raw power, has become the state, and thus become a derivative conception; the gods have returned within the breasts of people. The poet must open the palaces once again; he must conduct the courts out under the open heavens; he must resurrect the gods; he must reestablish everything immediate, which has been annulled by the artificial edifice of real life; and he must cast off all artificial concoctions of the person and around him, everything which hinders the appearance of his inner nature and his original character, as a sculptor casts off modern robes, and he must take nothing of the external environment except that which makes the highest of forms, the human form, visible.

But just as the plastic artist spreads the pleated fullness of robes about his figures in order to fill the space of his portrait richly and gracefully, combining the disparate parts in a continuity of calm masses, giving the

color, which entices and pleases the eye, room to play, ingeniously veiling the human form and making it visible at the same time, in the same way the tragic poet carries through and surrounds his rigorously proportioned action and the firm contours of his acting figures with a lyrical, splendid fabric, in which the acting persons, as if in a broadly folded robe of purple, move freely and nobly with dignity and high composure.

In a higher organization, the material or the elementary need no longer be visible, the chemical color disappears in the fine carnation

of a living being. But the material, too, has its splendor, and can, as such, be taken up in a work of art. But then it must earn its place with life and fullness, and with harmony, and it must vindicate the forms which it surrounds, rather than suffocate them with its gravity.

This is easy for everyone to understand in works of the plastic arts, but the same happens in poetry, and in the tragical, which is the subject of our attention here. Everything which the understanding expresses, in general, is like that which merely excites the senses, only material and raw element in a poetic work, and where it predominates, it will inevitably destroy the poetical, because it lies at the point of indifference of the ideal and the sensuous. Now, the human being is so constituted, that he always wants to proceed from the particular to the universal, and therefore reflection must also have its place in tragedy. But if it is to earn this place, it must obtain that through the presentation which it lacks in sensuous life, since if the two elements of poetry, the ideal and the sensuous, are to work in intimate connection together, then they must work beside one another, or the poetry is annulled. If the scale does not stand perfectly still, the balance can only be established by an oscillation of the two pans of the scale.

And this is the function of the chorus in tragedy. The chorus itself is not an individual, rather a general conception, but this conception represents itself in a sensuous, powerful mass, which impresses the senses



The chorus in a production of Sophocles' tragedy Antigone.

with its opulent presence. The chorus leaves the narrow arena of the action, in order to make statements about the past and future, about distant times and peoples, about what is human in general, to draw the grand results of life and to express the teachings of wisdom. But it does this with the full power of fantasy, with a bold lyrical freedom, which coincides, at the high summit of things human, as though with the stride of the gods—and it does this accompanied by the full sensuous power of rhythm and music, in sound and movement.

The chorus thus purifies the tragic poem by segregating reflection from the action, and equips itself with poetic power by means of this segregation, just as the plastic artist transforms the common requirement of clothing into charm and beauty with rich draperies.

Lifting Up the Mind

But just as the painter sees himself compelled to intensify the color-tone of the living being to maintain the balance of powerful materials, the lyrical speech of the chorus compels the poet to proportionally elevate the entire speech of the poem, and thus to intensify the sensuous power of the expression in general. Only the chorus justifies the tragic poet in this exaltation of tone which fills the ear, enraptures the spirit, expands the entire mind. This, a gigantic form in his portrait, compels him to place all of his characters upon the cothurn-

nus, thereby giving his portrait tragic magnitude. If the chorus is removed, the language of tragedy must be lowered on the whole, or that which is grand and powerful will seem forced and exaggerated. To introduce the ancient chorus into French tragedy would reveal it in its full paltriness and destroy it; without any doubt, introducing it into Shakespeare's tragedy would reveal its true significance for the first time.

While the chorus brings life to the speech, it brings calm to the action—but the beautiful and high calm which must be the character of a noble work of art. The mind of the audience must maintain its freedom even amidst the fiercest passion, it should not fall prey to impressions, rather take its leave of the emotions which it suffers, always clear and bright. What the usual judgment tends to fault about the chorus, that it dissolves the illusion, that it breaks the force of the affects, is actually its highest recommendation, for it is this very blind force of affects which the true artist avoids, it is this illusion which he disdains to excite. If the blows with which tragedy strikes our heart were to follow one another without interruption, suffering would vanquish activity. We would be immersed in the material, and no longer hover over it. By holding the parts apart, and stepping between the passions with its calming reflection, it restores our freedom to us, which would be lost in the storm of affects. The tragic characters also require this place of repose, this calm, in order to collect themselves, for they are no real beings, which obey merely the force of the moment, rather ideal persons and representatives of their species, which express the depth of humanity. The presence of the chorus, which listens to them as a judging witness, and harnesses the first outbreak of their passion with its intervention, motivates the presence of mind with which they act, and the dignity with which they speak. They stand, to a degree, upon a natural theater, because they speak and act in front of observers, and they will therefore speak all the more fittingly from the artificial theater to its audience.

So much on the subject of my right to reintroduce the ancient chorus upon the tragic stage. Choruses are, indeed, already known in modern tragedy, but the chorus of Greek tragedy, the way I have employed it here, the chorus as a single ideal person, which carries the entire action and accompanies it, this is fundamentally different from that opera-like chorus, and if I now and then hear talk about Greek choruses instead of a chorus, I become suspicious that someone does not know what he is talking about. The chorus of ancient

tragedy, to my knowledge, has not appeared on the stage since the demise of the same.

I have indeed separated the chorus into two parts, and represented it in conflict with itself; but this is only the case where it joins in the action as a real person and as a blind mass. As chorus and as ideal person, it is always identical with itself. I have changed the place and allowed the chorus to exit a number of times; but Aeschylus, too, the creator of tragedy, and Sophocles, the great master in this art, also employed this liberty.

Another liberty I have permitted myself, may be more difficult to justify. I have employed the Christian religion and the Greek gods together, and even recalled the faith of the Moors. But the location of the play is Messina, where these three religions still express themselves, partly in living form, partly in monuments, and they speak to the senses. And I hold it to be a right of poetry to treat the different religions as a collective whole for the power of imagination, in which everything which has its own character, expresses its own sensibility, has its place. Beneath the shroud of all religions there lies religion itself, the idea of one divinity, and it must be permitted to the poet to express this in whichever form he finds most comfortable and most fitting.

*“There is a limit to
the tyrant’s power.”*

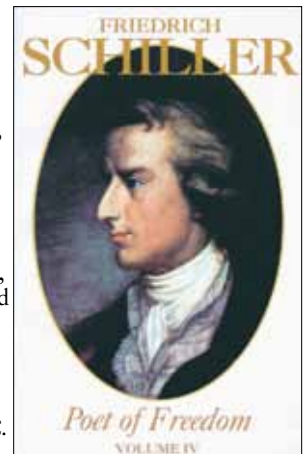
—Friedrich Schiller, *Wilhelm Tell*

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