Twenty-Sixth Letter from Friedrich Schiller's "Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man" (1795)

Abstract

This is an extraordinarily important text in the theory of the modern self. Written by the poet, philosopher, and playwright Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), a figure of enormous cultural authority in Germany well into the twentieth century, this text played a singular role in uniting the sense of self with aesthetic creativity. The message was: to be an authentic person, do not imitate the heroic examples of others or align yourself with external truth claims rooted in nature, religion, or philosophy. Rather, become your own hero by realizing the internal truths of your supremely original aim in life. Anyone who discovers and creates him- or herself in this way will see that the essence of life is idiosyncratic aesthetic expression. This view of authentic personhood had major implications for nearly every facet of modern German intellectual endeavor, culture, and commerce. Aesthetic personhood also raised serious questions about the binding force of ethics and the possibilities of social coherence.

Source

I have shown in the previous letters that the aesthetic disposition of the soul is what first gives rise to freedom; therefore, it cannot be derived from freedom and consequently it can have no moral origin. It must be a gift of nature; the favor of fortune alone can loosen the bonds of the physical condition and bring the savage to beauty. The germ of beauty will find it just as difficult to develop in places where an austere nature prevents man from enjoying himself, as in those where a prodigal nature releases him from every effort – where blunted sensuality feels no want, and where violent desire finds no satisfaction. Not where man hides like a *Troglodyte* in his cave, always alone, never finding humanity *outside of himself*; not where he moves *nomadically*, travelling in great troops, always only a number, and never finding humanity *inside himself* – only where he converses peacefully with himself in his own cottage and, once he goes forth from it, with the whole human race, only then will its lovely bud blossom. In those climates where a limpid air opens the senses to the most delicate impression, whilst a life-giving warmth animates a luxuriant nature – where even in inanimate creation the domain of sheer mass is already circumscribed, and the triumphant form ennobles even the most abject natures – in this joyful state and that blessed zone where activity alone leads to enjoyment, and enjoyment to activity, where out of life itself a sacred harmony emerges and out of the laws of order life alone develops – where imagination constantly escapes from reality and yet never abandons the simplicity of nature – here alone will the mind and the senses, the receptive force and the creative force develop in that happy equilibrium that is the soul of the beautiful and the condition of humanity.

What sort of phenomenon proclaims the initiation of the savage into humanity? However far we look back into history, the phenomenon is identical among all people who have shaken off the slavery of the animal state: a delight in *appearance*, and an inclination toward *ornament* and *play.*

Extreme stupidity and extreme intelligence have a certain affinity, in that both seek only the *real* and are completely insensible to mere appearance. The former is only jolted from its rest by the immediate presence of an

object in the senses, while the latter only achieves rest by aligning its conceptions with the facts of experience. In short, stupidity cannot rise above reality, and intelligence cannot descend below truth. What lack of imagination does in the one place, absolute mastery of it does in the other. Thus, insofar as the requirements of reality and the attachment to the real are only the result of a deficiency, indifference toward reality and an interest in appearances constitute a true enlargement of humanity and a decisive step towards culture. In the first place, it is proof of external freedom, for as long as necessity dictates and want is urgent, imagination is tightly shackled to the real; it is only when want is satisfied that imagination develops unfettered. But it is also proof of internal freedom, because it reveals to us a force that, independent of any external substance, sets itself in motion, and has enough energy to extract itself from the solicitations of nature. The reality of things is affected by things, the appearance of things is the work of man, and a soul that takes pleasure in appearance does not take pleasure in what it receives but in what it creates.

It is self-evident that I am speaking of aesthetic appearance, which is different from reality and truth, and not of logical appearance, which gets mistaken for them – it is liked because it is an appearance, and not because it is thought to be something better than it is. Only the first is play, the second is pure deception. To give value to the appearance of the first sort can never injure truth, because there is no reason to fear that appearance will supplant it – and this is the only way that truth can be injured. To despise appearance is to despise the fine arts in general, since appearance is their essence. Nevertheless, it sometimes happens that the mind carries its zeal for reality all the way to this sort of intolerance and issues a general condemnation of all the arts relating to beauty in appearance, because it is only appearance. But this only happens when the mind does not remember the above-mentioned affinity. Someday I shall find the occasion to speak more specifically about the limits of beauty in appearance.

It is nature herself that elevates man from reality to appearance by endowing him with two senses that lead him to the knowledge of the real through appearance alone. In the eye and the ear, the matter that comes to us is already peeled away from the senses, and the object that we access directly in the animal senses moves away from us. What we *see* with the eye differs from what we *perceive*; for the mind leaps beyond the light to the objects. The object of touch is a force that we encounter; the object of the eye and the ear is a form that we create. As long as man is still a savage, he enjoys only with the senses of feeling, to which the senses of appearance are still subservient at this stage. He either does not rise to see or is not satisfied with it. As soon as he begins to enjoy through sight, vision has an independent value, he is aesthetically free, and the play impulse has developed.

The play impulse likes appearance, and as soon as it is awakened it is followed by the creative-imitative impulse, which treats appearance as an independent thing. As soon as man has come to distinguish appearance from reality, form from the body, he can separate the two, in fact he has already done so. Thus, the capacity for the art of imitation comes with the capacity for form in general. The inclination that draws us to it rests on another tendency that I need not discuss here. How early or how late the aesthetic instinct, or that of art, develops depends entirely on the attraction that man has to mere appearance.

Since every real existence comes from nature, as a foreign power, while every appearance originally comes from man as the percipient subject, he only uses his absolute right in separating resemblance from essence and arranging it according to his own subjective laws. With unbridled freedom he can unite what nature has separated, provided that he can imagine this union, and he can separate what nature has united, provided that he can separate it in his mind. Here nothing can be sacred to him but his own law: the only condition imposed upon him is to respect the border that separates his own sphere from the existence of things or from the realm of nature.

This human right of sovereignty is exercised by man in the art of appearance; and his success in extending the realm of the beautiful, and guarding the frontiers of truth, will be proportionate with the strictness with which he separates form from substance: for if he frees appearance from reality he must also do the opposite.

But man possesses sovereign power only in the *world of appearance*, in the unsubstantial realm of imagination, and here the more strictly he separates mine and yours from each other, the more carefully he separates the form from the being, and the more independence he endows it with, the more he will extend not only the realm of beauty but also preserve the limits of truth; for he cannot purify appearance from reality without freeing reality from appearance at the same time.

But he possesses this sovereign right only in the *world of appearance*, in the disembodied realm of the imagination, and only as long as he conscientiously abstains from declaring its existence in theory, and as long as he renounces it in practice, and thereby grants existence to it. It follows that the poet oversteps his assigned limits when he attributes being to his ideal, and when he aims to give this ideal a determined existence. For he can only accomplish this by exceeding his right as a poet, encroaching through his ideal upon the field of experience and by pretending to determine real existence through the simple possibility of doing so, or else he renounces his right as poet by letting experience encroach upon the sphere of the ideal, and by confining possibility to the conditions of reality.

It is only by being *frank* (or disclaiming all reality) and only by being *independent* (or dispensing with reality), that appearance is aesthetic. As soon as it imitates reality or needs reality for effect, it becomes nothing more than a base instrument for material ends and can prove nothing for the freedom of the spirit. Moreover, the object in which we find beauty need not be unreal, so long as our judgment disregards this reality; for if it does regard this, then the judgment is no longer aesthetic. A beautiful woman in the flesh would no doubt please us as much and rather more than an equally beautiful woman in painting; but insofar as the former pleases men more, she no longer pleases as an independent appearance; she no longer pleases the pure aesthetic feeling. The painting may please the living only as an appearance, and reality only as an idea. But, of course, it requires a much higher degree of aesthetic culture to feel only the pure appearance in the living than to deprive the living of the appearance.

Whenever the *frank* and *independent* appearance is found in an individual man, or in a whole people, we may infer that they have intellect, taste, and all the excellence associated with them. There, the ideal will govern real life, honor will triumph over fortune, thought over enjoyment, the dream of immortality over transitory existence.

There, public opinion will no longer be feared, and an olive branch will be valued more greatly than a purple mantle. Only impotence and perversity take refuge in false and needy appearances, and individuals as well as nations who either "help reality by way of appearance or help (aesthetic) appearance by way of reality" – the tendency is to do both together – demonstrate both their moral unworthiness and their aesthetic impotence.

As for the question: *How far will appearance be permitted in the moral world*? The answer is short and conclusive: *insofar as this appearance is aesthetic*, that is, an appearance that neither wants to represent reality, nor needs to be represented by it. Aesthetic appearance can never endanger moral truth: wherever it does, it is easy to prove that the appearance is not aesthetic. Only a stranger to the fashionable world will take polite assurances, which are uttered only for the sake of form, as proof of affection, and then say he has been deceived; but even a clumsy fellow in good society will, for the sake of politeness, call duplicity to his aid and use flattery to ingratiate himself. The former still lacks the pure sense for independent appearance and therefore can only give value to appearance by truth. The second lacks reality and tries to replace it with appearance.

Nothing is more common than to hear certain petty critics of our age lament that all solidity has disappeared from the world, and that essence is neglected in favor of appearance. Though I feel by no means called upon to defend this age against such reproaches, I must say that the broad application of these criticisms shows that they blame the age not only for the false, but also for the genuine appearances. And even the exceptions that they make in favor of the beautiful pertain more to the needy than to the independent appearance. Not only do they attack the artificial gloss that hides truth and replaces reality, but also the benevolent appearance that fills emptiness and cloaks wretchedness; and they even attack the ideal appearance that ennobles a vulgar reality. Their strict sense of truth is rightly offended by the falsity of manners; unfortunately, they put politeness in this same category. It displeases them that showiness so often eclipses true merit, but they are no less annoyed that merit also demands appearance, and that a real substance does not dispense with agreeableness of form. They miss the cordiality, the energy, and solidity of ancient times; they would restore with them ancient coarseness, heaviness, and the old Gothic extravagance. By judgments of this sort, they show an esteem for matter in itself that is unworthy of humanity, which should only value matter inasmuch as it can be given form and enlarge the realm of ideas. Accordingly, the taste of our century need not fear these criticisms, if only it could have better judges. Our defect is not that we give value to aesthetic appearance (actually we do not do this enough); a rigorous judge of the beautiful might rather reproach us for not having arrived at pure appearance, for not having separated existence clearly enough from the phenomenon, and thus established their limits. We shall deserve this reproach so long as we cannot enjoy the beautiful in living nature without desiring it; as long as we cannot admire the beautiful in the imitative arts without having an end in sight; as long as we do not grant to imagination an absolute legislation of its own; and as long as we fail to grant it its dignity through the esteem we show for its works.

Source: This English translation was adapted by the GHI staff from Friedrich Schiller, Twenty-Sixth Letter, in "Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man" (1795) in *Literary and Philosophical Essays: French, German and Italian*. With introductions and notes. The Harvard Classics, edited by Charles W. Eliot LL.D. Volume 32. New York: P.P. Collier & Son Company, 1910, pp. 300–05. Available online at Hathi Trust: https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uva.x002669977?urlappend=%3Bseq=228

Source of original German text: Friedrich Schiller, Sechsundzwanzigster Brief, "Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen" (1795), in *Schillers sämmtliche Werke in zwölf bänden*, zwölfter Band. Stuttgart: J.G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung, 1862, pp. 96–103. Available online at HathiTrust: https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hwfvvt