

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02248-4 - The Works of Thomas Carlyle, Volume 25

Edited by Henry Duff Traill

Excerpt

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FRIEDRICH SCHILLER

PART I

SCHILLER'S YOUTH

1759-1784

AMONG the writers of the concluding part of the last century there is none more deserving of our notice than Friedrich Schiller. Distinguished alike for the splendour of his intellectual faculties, and the elevation of his tastes and feelings, he has left behind him in his works a noble emblem of these great qualities: and the reputation which he thus enjoys, and has merited, excites our attention the more, on considering the circumstances under which it was acquired. Schiller had peculiar difficulties to strive with, and his success has likewise been peculiar. Much of his life was deformed by inquietude and disease, and it terminated at middle age; he composed in a language then scarcely settled into form, or admitted to a rank among the cultivated languages of Europe: yet his writings are remarkable for their extent and variety as well as their intrinsic excellence; and his own countrymen are not his only, or perhaps his principal admirers. It is difficult to collect or interpret the general voice; but the World, no less than Germany, seems already to have dignified him with the reputation of a classic; to have enrolled him among that select number whose works belong not wholly to any age or nation, but who, having instructed their own contemporaries, are claimed as instructors by the great family of mankind, and set apart for many centuries from the common oblivion which soon overtakes the mass of authors, as it does the mass of other men.

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[More information](#)

2

SCHILLER'S YOUTH [PART I.]

Such has been the high destiny of Schiller. His history and character deserve our study for more than one reason. A natural and harmless feeling attracts us towards such a subject; we are anxious to know how so great a man passed through the world, how he lived, and moved, and had his being; and the question, if properly investigated, might yield advantage as well as pleasure. It would be interesting to discover by what gifts and what employment of them he reached the eminence on which we now see him; to follow the steps of his intellectual and moral culture; to gather from his life and works some picture of himself. It is worth inquiring, whether he, who could represent noble actions so well, did himself act nobly; how those powers of intellect, which in philosophy and art achieved so much, applied themselves to the everyday emergencies of life; how the generous ardour, which delights us in his poetry, displayed itself in the common intercourse between man and man. It would at once instruct and gratify us if we could understand him thoroughly, could transport ourselves into his circumstances outward and inward, could see as he saw, and feel as he felt.

But if the various utility of such a task is palpable enough, its difficulties are not less so. We should not lightly think of comprehending the very simplest character, in all its bearings; and it might argue vanity to boast of even a common acquaintance with one like Schiller's. Such men as he are misunderstood by their daily companions, much more by the distant observer, who gleans his information from scanty records, and casual notices of characteristic events, which biographers are often too indolent or injudicious to collect, and which the peaceful life of a man of letters usually supplies in little abundance. The published details of Schiller's history are meagre and insufficient; and his writings, like those of every author, can afford but a dim and dubious copy of his mind. Nor is it easy to decipher even this, with moderate accuracy. The haze of a foreign language, of foreign manners, and modes of thinking strange to us, confuses and obscures the sight,

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[More information](#)

1759-84]

HIS BOYHOOD

3

often magnifying what is trivial, softening what is rude, and sometimes hiding or distorting what is beautiful. To take the dimensions of Schiller's mind were a hard enterprise, in any case; harder still with these impediments.

Accordingly we do not, in this place, pretend to attempt it: we have no finished portrait of his character to offer, no formal estimate of his works. It will be enough for us if, in glancing over his life, we can satisfy a simple curiosity, about the fortunes and chief peculiarities of a man connected with us by a bond so kindly as that of the teacher to the taught, the giver to the receiver of mental delight; if, in wandering through his intellectual creation, we can enjoy once more the magnificent and fragrant beauty of that fairy land, and express our feelings, where we do not aim at judging and deciding.

Johann Christoph Friedrich Schiller was a native of Marbach, a small town of Würtemberg, situated on the banks of the Neckar. He was born on the 10th of November 1759,—a few months later than our own Robert Burns. Schiller's early culture was favoured by the dispositions, but obstructed by the outward circumstances of his parents. Though removed above the pressure of poverty, their station was dependent and fluctuating; it involved a frequent change of place and plan. Johann Caspar Schiller, the father, had been a surgeon in the Bavarian army; he served in the Netherlands during the Succession War. After his return home to Würtemberg, he laid aside the medical profession, having obtained a commission of ensign and adjutant under his native Prince. This post he held successively in two regiments; he had changed into the second, and was absent on active duty when Friedrich was born. The Peace of Paris put an end to his military employment; but Caspar had shown himself an intelligent, unassuming and useful man, and the Duke of Würtemberg was willing to retain him in his service. The laying-out of various nurseries and plantations in the pleasure-grounds of Ludwigsburg and Solitude was intrusted to the retired soldier, now advanced

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

SCHILLER'S YOUTH [PART I.]

to the rank of captain: he removed from one establishment to another, from time to time; and continued in the Duke's pay till death. In his latter years he resided chiefly at Ludwigsburg.

This mode of life was not the most propitious for educating such a boy as Friedrich; but the native worth of his parents did more than compensate for the disadvantages of their worldly condition and their limited acquirements in knowledge. The benevolence, the modest and prudent integrity, the true devoutness of these good people shone forth at an after-period, expanded and beautified in the character of their son; his heart was nourished by a constant exposure to such influences, and thus the better part of his education prospered well. The mother was a woman of many household virtues; to a warm affection for her children and husband she joined a degree of taste and intelligence which is of much rarer occurrence. She is said to have been a lover of poetry; in particular an admiring reader of Utz and Gellert, writers whom it is creditable for one in her situation to have relished.¹ Her kindness and tenderness of heart peculiarly endeared her to Friedrich. Her husband appears to have been a person of great probity, somewhat rugged of temper, but sincerely desirous to approve himself a useful member of society, and to do his duty conscientiously to all men. The seeds of many valuable qualities had been sown in him by nature; and though his early life had been unfavourable for their cultivation, he at a late period laboured, not without success, to remedy this disadvantage. Such branches of science and philosophy as lay within his reach, he studied with diligence, whenever his professional employments left him leisure; on a subject connected with the latter he became an author.² But what chiefly distinguished him was the practice of a sincere piety, which seems to have diffused itself over all his feelings, and given to his clear and

¹ She was of humble descent and little education, the daughter of a baker in Marbach.—For much new light on Schiller's Parentage, Boyhood and Youth, see *Supplement of 1872, infra*.

² His book is entitled *Die Baumzucht im Grossen* (the Cultivation of Trees on the Grand Scale): it came to a second edition in 1806.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

1759-84]

HIS EDUCATION

5

honest character that calm elevation which, in such a case, is its natural result. As his religion mingled itself with every motive and action of his life, the wish which in all his wanderings lay nearest his heart, the wish for the education of his son, was likely to be deeply tinctured with it. There is yet preserved, in his handwriting, a prayer composed in advanced age, wherein he mentions how, at the child's birth, he had entreated the great Father of all, "to supply in strength of spirit what must needs be wanting in outward instruction." The grey-haired man, who had lived to see the maturity of his boy, could now express his solemn thankfulness, that "God had heard the prayer of a mortal."

Friedrich followed the movements of his parents for some time; and had to gather the elements of learning from various masters. Perhaps it was in part owing to this circumstance, that his progress, though respectable, or more, was so little commensurate with what he afterwards became, or with the capacities of which even his earliest years gave symptoms. Thoughtless and gay, as a boy is wont to be, he would now and then dissipate his time in childish sports, forgetful that the stolen charms of ball and leap-frog must be dearly bought by reproaches: but occasionally he was overtaken with feelings of deeper import, and used to express the agitations of his little mind in words and actions, which were first rightly interpreted when they were called to mind long afterwards. His school-fellows can *now* recollect that even his freaks had sometimes a poetic character; that a certain earnestness of temper, a frank integrity, an appetite for things grand or moving, was discernible across all the caprices of his boyhood. Once, it is said, during a tremendous thunderstorm, his father missed him in the young group within doors; none of the sisters could tell what was become of Fritz, and the old man grew at length so anxious that he was forced to go out in quest of him. Fritz was scarcely past the age of infancy, and knew not the dangers of a scene so awful. His father found him at last, in a solitary place of the neighbourhood, perched

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

6

SCHILLER'S YOUTH

[PART I.]

on the branch of a tree, gazing at the tempestuous face of the sky, and watching the flashes as in succession they spread their lurid gleam over it. To the reprimands of his parent, the whimpering truant pleaded in extenuation, "that the lightning was very beautiful, and that he wished to see where it was coming from!"—Such anecdotes, we have long known, are in themselves of small value: the present one has the additional defect of being somewhat dubious in respect of authenticity. We have ventured to give it, as it came to us, notwithstanding. The picture of the boy Schiller, contemplating the thunder, is not without a certain interest, for such as know the man.

Schiller's first teacher was Moser, pastor and schoolmaster in the village of Lorch, where the parents resided from the sixth to the ninth year of their son. This person deserves mention for the influence he exerted on the early history of his pupil: he seems to have given his name to the Priest 'Moser' in the *Robbers*; his spiritual calling, and the conversation of his son, himself afterwards a preacher, are supposed to have suggested to Schiller the idea of consecrating himself to the clerical profession. This idea, which laid hold of and cherished some predominant though vague propensities of the boy's disposition, suited well with the religious sentiments of his parents, and was soon formed into a settled purpose. In the public school at Ludwigsburg, whither the family had now removed, his studies were regulated with this view; and he underwent, in four successive years, the annual examination before the Stuttgart Commission, to which young men destined for the Church are subjected in that country. Schiller's temper was naturally devout; with a delicacy of feeling which tended towards bashfulness and timidity, there was mingled in him a fervid impetuosity, which was ever struggling through its concealment, and indicating that he felt deeply and strongly, as well as delicately. Such a turn of mind easily took the form of religion, prescribed to it by early example and early affections, as well as nature. Schiller looked forward to the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

1759-84] STUTTGARD SCHOOL 7

sacred profession with alacrity: it was the serious day-dream of all his boyhood, and much of his youth. As yet, however, the project hovered before him at a great distance, and the path to its fulfilment offered him but little entertainment. His studies did not seize his attention firmly; he followed them from a sense of duty, not of pleasure. Virgil and Horace he learned to construe accurately; but is said to have taken no deep interest in their poetry. The tenderness and meek beauty of the first, the humour and sagacity and capricious pathos of the last, the matchless elegance of both, would of course escape his inexperienced perception; while the matter of their writings must have appeared frigid and shallow to a mind so susceptible. He loved rather to meditate on the splendour of the Ludwigsburg theatre, which had inflamed his imagination when he first saw it in his ninth year, and given shape and materials to many of his subsequent reveries.¹ Under these

¹ The first display of his poetic gifts occurred also in his ninth year, but took its rise in a much humbler and less common source than the inspiration of the stage. His biographers have recorded this small event with a conscientious accuracy, second only to that of Boswell and Hawkins in regard to the Lichfield *duck*. 'The little tale,' says one of them, 'is worth relating; the rather that, after an interval of more than twenty years, Schiller himself, on meeting with his early comrade (the late Dr. Elwert of Kantstadt) for the first time since their boyhood, reminded him of the adventure, recounting the circumstances with great minuteness and glee. It is as follows: Once in 1768, Elwert and he had to repeat their catechism together on a certain day publicly in the church. Their teacher, an ill-conditioned, narrow-minded pietist, had previously threatened them with a thorough flogging if they missed even a single word. To make the matter worse, this very teacher chanced to be the person whose turn it was to catechise on the appointed day. Both the boys began their answers with dismayed hearts and faltering tongues; yet they succeeded in accomplishing the task; and were in consequence rewarded by the mollified pedagogue with two kreutzers apiece. Four kreutzers of ready cash was a sum of no common magnitude; how it should be disposed of formed a serious question for the parties interested. Schiller moved that they should go to Harteneck, a hamlet in the neighbourhood, and have a dish of curds-and-cream: his partner assented; but alas! in Harteneck no particle of curds or cream was to be had. Schiller then made offer for a quarter-cake of cheese; but for this four entire kreutzers were demanded, leaving nothing whatever in reserve for bread! Twice baffled, the little gastronomes, unsatisfied in stomach, wandered on to Neckarweiingen; where, at length, though not till after much

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 SCHILLER'S YOUTH [PART I.]

circumstances, his progress, with all his natural ability, could not be very striking; the teachers did not fail now and then to visit him with their severities; yet still there was a negligent success in his attempts, which, joined to his honest and vivid temper, made men augur well of him. The Stuttgart Examinators have marked him in their records with the customary formula of approval, or, at worst, of toleration. They usually designate him as 'a boy of good hope,' *puer bonæ spei*.

This good hope was not, however, destined to be realised in the way they expected: accidents occurred which changed the direction of Schiller's exertions, and threatened for a time to prevent the success of them altogether. The Duke of Würtemberg had lately founded a Free Seminary for certain branches of professional education: it was first set up at Solitude, one of his country residences; and had now been transferred to Stuttgart, where, under an improved form, and with the name of *Karls-schule*, we believe it still exists. The Duke proposed to give the sons of his military officers a preferable claim to the benefits of this institution; and having formed a good opinion both of Schiller and his father, he invited the former to profit by this opportunity. The offer occasioned great embarrassment: the young man and his parents were alike determined in favour of the Church, a project with which this new one was inconsistent. Their embarrassment was but increased, when the Duke, on learning the nature of their scruples, desired them to think well before

inquiry, they did obtain a comfortable mess of curds-and-cream, served up in a gay platter, and silver spoons to eat it with. For all this, moreover, they were charged but three kreutzers; so that there was still one left to provide them with a bunch of St. John grapes. Exhilarated by such liberal cheer, Schiller rose into a glow of inspiration: having left the village, he mounted with his comrade to the adjacent height, which overlooks both Harteneck and Neckarweihingen; and there in a truly poetic effusion he pronounced his malediction on the creamless region, bestowing with the same solemnity his blessing on the one which had afforded him that savoury refreshment.'—*Friedrich von Schillers Leben* (Heidelberg, 1817), p. 11.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

1759-84] STUTTGARD SCHOOL 9

they decided. It was out of fear, and with reluctance that his proposal was accepted. Schiller enrolled himself in 1773; and turned, with a heavy heart, from freedom and cherished hopes, to Greek, and seclusion, and Law.

His anticipations proved to be but too just: the six years which he spent in this establishment were the most harassing and comfortless of his life. The Stuttgart system of education seems to have been formed on the principle, not of cherishing and correcting nature, but of rooting it out, and supplying its place with something better. The process of teaching and living was conducted with the stiff formality of military drilling; every thing went on by statute and ordinance, there was no scope for the exercise of free-will, no allowance for the varieties of original structure. A scholar might possess what instincts or capacities he pleased; the 'regulations of the school' took no account of this; he must fit himself into the common mould, which, like the old Giant's bed, stood there, appointed by superior authority, to be filled alike by the great and the little. The same strict and narrow course of reading and composition was marked out for each beforehand, and it was by stealth if he read or wrote anything beside. Their domestic economy was regulated in the same spirit as their preceptorial: it consisted of the same sedulous exclusion of all that could border on pleasure, or give any exercise to choice. The pupils were kept apart from the conversation or sight of any person but their teachers; none ever got beyond the precincts of despotism to snatch even a fearful joy; their very amusements proceeded by the word of command.

How grievous all this must have been, it is easy to conceive. To Schiller it was more grievous than to any other. Of an ardent and impetuous yet delicate nature, whilst his discontentment devoured him internally, he was too modest and timid to give it the relief of utterance by deeds or words. Locked up within himself, he suffered deeply, but without complaining. Some of his letters written during this period

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

10

SCHILLER'S YOUTH

[PART I.]

have been preserved : they exhibit the ineffectual struggles of a fervid and busy mind veiling its many chagrins under a certain dreary patience, which only shows them more painfully. He pored over his lexicons and grammars, and insipid tasks, with an artificial composure ; but his spirit pined within him like a captive's, when he looked forth into the cheerful world, or recollected the affection of parents, the hopes and frolicsome enjoyments of past years. The misery he endured in this severe and lonely mode of existence strengthened or produced in him a habit of constraint and shyness, which clung to his character through life.

The study of Law, for which he had never felt any predilection, naturally grew in his mind to be the representative of all these evils, and his distaste for it went on increasing. On this point he made no secret of his feelings. One of the exercises, yearly prescribed to every scholar, was a written delineation of his own character, according to his own views of it, to be delivered publicly at an appointed time : Schiller, on the first of these exhibitions, ventured to state his persuasion, that he was not made to be a jurist, but called rather by his inclinations and faculties to the clerical profession. This statement, of course, produced no effect ; he was forced to continue the accustomed course, and his dislike for Law kept fast approaching to absolute disgust. In 1775, he was fortunate enough to get it relinquished, though at the expense of adopting another employment, for which, in different circumstances, he would hardly have declared himself. The study of Medicine, for which a new institution was about this time added to the Stuttgart school, had no attractions for Schiller : he accepted it only as a galling servitude in exchange for one more galling. His mind was bent on higher objects ; and he still felt all his present vexations aggravated by the thought, that his fairest expectations from the future had been sacrificed to worldly convenience, and the humblest necessities of life.

Meanwhile the youth was waxing into manhood, and the