CHAPTER THREE

SCHILLER: REFORM CONSCIOUSNESS TO CHANGE THE WORLD

Here is Schiller

Johann Christoph Friedrich Von Schiller (1759–1805) spent all his life in what is now Germany. This somewhat restricted home-range was the result of financial limitations in his youth, coupled with an early dissident determination to live outside the feudal economy. That marginal existence led to his contracting tuberculosis, crippling his lifestyle with progressive severity, leading to the grave at the age of forty-five years. This relative immobility did, however, provide ample opportunity to pursue his first passion: authorship. The result is an enormous collection of writings, filling row upon row of shelves in German libraries.

Schiller was a sparkling example of the capacity to ‘live locally, think globally.’ This animated his critical perspective and allowed him to focus in very real terms on his immediate condition, considered always in reference to a global standard of the infinite promise of the moral and intellectual human potential that defined European enlightenment.

The shortcoming of pressing too intensively on that nearly eschatological vision of enlightenment is that, in socio-political terms, local reality is invariably disappointing. Like Voltaire before him, Schiller was aghast with an acute sense of injustice for what he considered the rampant violation of the noble human potential that he endorsed as uncontestable principle. Rather than retreating into passive intellectualist cynicism, spiritual retreatism, or ‘going over to the enemy,’ by deciding to profit as much as possible from the inequality of the situation, he held to his intellectualist ethical position and set down what he saw, as literature.

Going a step further took him out of his personal space and into the political; building that into his writings, his work generated furious backlash and as with Voltaire before him, Schiller found himself in agitated turmoil wherever he went. However, unlike Voltaire, Schiller was unable to keep his emotional distance from the critical issues which he explored. If there is place for psychological autopsy in this book, it is probably just to assert that this essential difference in personal style, of engaged-detachment by Voltaire, of nearly hyperventilating-engagement by Schiller, may well explain why the one lived twice as long as the other.
The tension generated by Schiller’s rarely inactive critical judgment was demonstrated in remarkable terms when, in 1789, he accepted an invitation to join the faculty of the German university in Jena. The fact that this was also the year of the French Revolution was but a coincidence, yet the explosive effect of that series of events in France was mirrored in a small way for him personally as he assumed the post of professor.

By the time he arrived at Jena, Schiller had already demonstrated his extremely serious edge, his capacity for sober historical scholarship and his ability to write; in other words, he was qualified for an entry-level professorial post. But there were issues, particularly his having spent time in prison for insulting the local political authority with his first theater piece, The Robbers, which he composed while still in military school, and which continues to be staged, with particular popularity among students, two-hundred and fifty years later. The fellow whose recommendation got him that first appointment was none other than Goethe, by reputation the greatest German intellectual that the language has ever known. Goethe was caught between admiration for Schiller’s potential, and the problem he had restraining himself, which is why that first, and last, teaching post was unpaid, obligating Schiller to attract paying students to his seminars if he hoped to earn a living, which he never achieved.

In keeping with custom in German universities, on joining that faculty Schiller was expected to introduce himself by delivering a public lecture. While the result turned the student-packed amphitheater into an uproar of adoration, it surely did nothing to improve his standing with the other professors. The theme for his Inaugural Lesson was “Universal History” (1972/1789). A perspective central to the enlightenment, this theme involves the supposition that the force of humanity as inner essence has propelled the gradual movement or progress of humankind, from savage natural conditions, up to culture and civilization. The fact that this was an ethnocentric, European-centered world view was not recognized in the 18th century, allowing for a certain mysticism concerning humanity on the part of not just Schiller, but many others, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Given the circumstances, universal history was a grandiose theme to tackle for someone less than thirty years of age. Further, Schiller approached the issue by addressing himself exclusively to students, seemingly indifferent to what he was saying to other professors who were also in the audience.