Introduction: Schiller After Two Centuries*

The third version of Goethe’s public lament for Schiller includes an emphatic wish that posterity should celebrate Schiller and thereby not only fill the void left by his untimely death but also in some sense complete his unfulfilled life: “So feiert ihn! Denn was dem Mann das Leben / Nur halb erteilt, soll ganz die Nachwelt geben”.\(^1\) The wish was granted, though had Goethe known precisely what posterity had in store for Schiller, he might perhaps have been more careful in what he wished for. Even before the onset of the physical afflictions that would eventually kill him, Schiller himself had commented in rather different terms on the nature of his fame. In a letter to a friend in 1789 he wrote: “Wenn mich je das Unglück oder Glück träfe, sehr berühmt zu werden […], so seyen Sie mit Ihrer Freundschaft gegen mich vorsichtiger. Lesen Sie alsdann meine Schriften, und lassen den Menschen übrigens laufen” (NA 25. 209).\(^2\) By 1789 Schiller was already very famous, of course, and his fame was to increase steadily until his death on 9 May 1805 at the age of forty-five. His posthumous fame – the “Schiller legend” in the various guises it has assumed over the past two hundred years – has dwarfed the fame he enjoyed during his relatively short life. It is the nature of this posthumous fame that Schiller appears to be hinting at in his remarks; for it is precisely in the elevation or mythologisation of the man at the expense of his writings that Schiller’s reputation has suffered much harm. Arguably, still more harm has been done over the years by the periodic emphasis on alleged political and national(ist) messages in Schiller’s writings to the near exclusion of reflections on his achievement as a dramatist and poet.

The two-hundredth anniversary of Schiller’s death was an important cultural event yet it had to jostle for attention on a crowded stage, because 2005 was an

---


\(^2\) To Caroline von Beulwitz. 25.2.1789. Schiller appears to have been in a particularly despondent and self-critical mood that day, writing to another friend, Christian Gottfried Körner: “[…] je mehr ich empfinde, wie viele und welche Talente oder Erfodernisse mir fehlten, so überzeuge ich mich desto lebhafter von der Realität und Stärke desjenigen Talents, welches, jenes Mangels ungeachtet, mich soweit gebracht hat, als ich schon bin” (NA 25. 212).
unusually busy year for round anniversaries. It saw the one-hundredth birthdays of Jean-Paul Sartre, Elias Canetti and Anthony Powell, the centenary of the publication of Einstein’s special theory of relativity, and the quatercentenary of the publication of the first part of *Don Quijote*. 12 August 2005 was the fiftieth anniversary of Thomas Mann’s death, and the 150th anniversary of Kierkegaard’s death was also commemorated in 2005. However, it was the bicentenaries which seemed the most numerous. In addition to Schiller’s two-hundredth “Todestag”, 2005 saw Hans Christian Andersen’s two-hundredth birthday, as well as the bicentenaries of the battles of Trafalgar (21 October) and Austerlitz (2 December), and of the first performance of Beethoven’s *Fidelio* (20 November). Anniversaries of Schiller’s birth or death have usually been celebrated at fifty-year intervals. The “Schillerjahr 2005” was the seventh of these, after 1855, 1859, 1905, 1909, 1955 and 1959. In May 2005, the Austrian public television channel Ö1 attempted to explain to its audience the significance of the Schiller anniversary: “Jedes Jubiläum – ein runder Geburtstag oder Todestag – wurde schon immer zum Anlass genommen, die jeweils aktuelle Sicht auf Person oder Werk eines Künstlers in Publikationen aller Art zu verbreiten. Jetzt ist Friedrich Schiller dran”. This is quite correct, of course, but tells only half the story. As important as the views expressed on Schiller is what these views tell us about the individuals and cultures expressing them. The major “Schillerfeiern” of the past two hundred years offer not only a picture of the vicissitudes of the poet’s fame but also revealing snapshots of German intellectual, political and popular culture. In the context of the present volume, it seems appropriate to provide a brief sketch of Schiller’s reception as seen through the prism of these formal celebrations and commemorations.

The high tides in Schiller’s reputation since his death have occurred during the Wars of Liberation of 1813–14, the ensuing period up to and including the 1848 revolutions, and the anniversaries of 1859 and 1905. Periods during which Schiller has tended to be out of favour include the years immediately following his death (1805–12), the “Gründerjahre” of the Wilhelmine Reich, the disillusioned anniversary of 1909, the First World War, as well as much of the second half of the twentieth century. For better or worse, the Schiller we know today is still to some extent the product of the 1859 centenary celebrations which set the tone for both the form and the rhetorical content of many

---

3 A glaring exception to this rule was 1934, when the Nazis thought it politically expedient to celebrate Schiller’s 175th birthday.
