The German Identity, the German Querelle and the Ideal State:
A Fresh Look at Schiller’s Fragment “Deutsche Größe”*

The essay (re)locates Schiller’s controversial fragment “Deutsche Größe”, and the German identity it presents, within the contemporary intellectual context (and within Schiller’s own work) by relating it to late eighteenth-century German discussions regarding ancient and modern culture. Crucial parallels emerge between the German identity presented and Schiller’s own cultural and aesthetic theories developed in Über naïve und sentimentalische Dichtung and the Ästhetische Briefe. A comparison with key ideas put forward in Fichte’s Reden an die deutsche Nation highlights Schiller’s social and political intentions. The essay argues that Schiller presents a post-national German identity that does not contradict his cultural and aesthetic theories.

The title Schiller: National Poet – Poet of Nations suggests a tension, or possibly a connection, between the national and the cosmopolitan, between the particular and the universal. And it no doubt refers to the widely diverging interpretations of Schiller during 200 years of Schiller reception. Unlike in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Schiller has in the last fifty years or so not often been considered to have had overtly national intentions, and certainly not nationalistic ones. In a recent essay Peter-André Alt ascribed to Schiller “kosmopolitische Maßstäbe” and “weltbürgerliche Perspektiven”.1 In this more recent context “Deutsche Größe” is a difficult text. While it was enthusiastically pieced together, edited and received after it was discovered towards the end of the nineteenth century,2 after 1945 it appeared to contradict what from then

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2 What is known today under Bernhard Suphan’s title “Deutsche Größe” – Schiller had left the fragment untitled – was put together from manuscripts over a period of several decades. Karl Goedeke first published extant sections without a title in his critical Schiller edition of 1871. When Bernhard Suphan edited the fragment in 1902, it was enthusiastically received by academic circles and the general public alike. More sections were discovered by Edward Castle in 1937. All these pieces now form the basis of the text in the Nationalausgabe, which I use for my discussion here. See Hans A. Kaufmann: Nation und Nationalismus in Schillers Entwurf “Deutsche Größe” und im Schauspiel “Wilhelm Tell”. Frankfurt/M. 1993. Pp. 38–41.
on became defined as the general direction of Schiller’s thinking. What delighted in 1902 was now embarrassing, because “Deutsche Größe” contains ideas that seem to put forward notions of a German identity that has all the hallmarks of the infamous and dangerous German hubris, which, resulting from an experience of (national) inferiority, produced a compensatory superiority complex.

There is plenty of scope to argue that this text is insignificant: Schiller did not complete it, in fact it is hardly a fragment, but only a first outline, the poetic execution of which had not really been begun. As such it was not published, and perhaps Schiller would not have wished it to be placed in the public arena. It is well known that Schiller was repeatedly asked to write on national topics with national intentions and he is on record as having been reluctant to do so. This reluctance has frequently been put down to sentiments such as are expressed in the famous Xenion 96: “Zur Nation euch zu bilden, ihr hofft es, Deutsche, vergebens; / Bildet, ihr könnt es, dafür freier zu Menschen euch aus”. Such pronouncements are frequently taken as evidence that Schiller would never seriously have wished to write a poem promoting German nationality. Indeed, when his publisher Göschen (very cautiously) suggested to Schiller in a letter dated 16 February 1801 that he might like to write a poem celebrating the recent Lunéviller Frieden (9.2.1801), which Göschen could publish to commemorate the event (NA 39/I. 19), Schiller replied on 26 February that he could not (NA 31. 10). Nevertheless I do not think that the ideas expressed in “Deutsche Größe” and Xenion 96 are as contradictory as they at first appear. In this context the reasons Schiller gives for his refusal are important. Initially he reminds Göschen that he has turned down similar requests from Cotta three times, his refusal thus appears as polite courteousness. But then he goes on to say, more interestingly, that he does not feel able to write such a poem because “ich fürchte, daß wir Deutschen eine schändliche Rolle in diesem Frieden spielen werden” without elaborating (NA 31. 10).

“Deutsche Größe” has not been securely dated, but on the available evidence is likely to have been written in 1801. As such the Lunéville Peace referred to in the above letter is its most probable historical background. There is also a conceptual connection between the letter and the fragment. Schiller’s comments

3 At least two instances of such reluctance are documented. In 1794 he refused to compose a poem celebrating the imminent Peace of Basle, and in 1797 his attitude remained the same regarding the Treaty of Campo Formio. See Alt (n. 1). P. 226.
4 Suphan’s conclusions, suggesting 1801 as the likely date of composition, have not been convincingly challenged. Cf. NA. 2/IIB. 257.
5 Kaufmann suggested an “antagonistic” relationship between the fragment and the letter, when he proposed the interpretation that Schiller’s remark that such an “Ode [sich] unter den Händen des Poeten in eine Satyre auf das deutsche Reich verwandeln müßte” (which concludes Schiller’s sentence in the letter) indicates that Schiller was turning his back on the “Deutsche Größe” project. Kaufmann (n. 2). P. 74. I do not think this is likely.