

# Schiller's Alchemical Education: Conceptualizing Art as the Philosopher's Stone

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## ABSTRACT

*In "On the Aesthetic Education of Man", Friedrich Schiller develops an art theory asserting that aesthetics can resolve human conflict while empowering the individual. However, it is often unclear as to how Schiller's proposals are to be practiced and achieved. I claim that Schiller's theory appropriates alchemical concepts, thereby identifying a cause for his theory's obtuseness, and clarifying how the processes are to be understood. Schiller's appropriation of alchemy is evinced through an overview of Schiller's claims, evidence that alchemical information was available to Schiller, and a demonstration that the features and goals of Schiller's theory are similar to those of the alchemists' processes. From there, I support the claim that Schiller employs alchemical concepts by identifying how the underlying structure of his assertions, and his diction, correspond with the alchemists' preparatio, putrefactio, and hierogamy.*

The nascent stage of the French Revolution was hailed initially as the triumph of reason over emotions, and was thus seen as the culmination of the Enlightenment projects, a belief held by men such as Thomas Jefferson and expressed in Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*; yet the Reign of Terror quickly dissolved such lofty hopes, as many citizens were brutally murdered. This violence suggested that emotions have the greater influence upon humankind's actions, and that this imbalance fosters societal disorder and decline, as well as irrational egoism. The failure of reason to sweep over the world, and with it the possibility to settle all differences peacefully through debate, compelled Friedrich Schiller to explain the cause of this breakdown and to identify how the vision of universal reason might be attained. Schiller's theory, presented in *On The Aesthetic Education of Man*, claims that in order to be liberated from two potentially

domineering impulses, rationality and emotionality, humankind must harmonize them by creating and contemplating art.

Schiller's theory is obtuse; he often employs poetic language in place of deduction, there is little instruction regarding how to practice his assertions, and it is unclear how the claimed effects of his theory are achieved. If we recognize that Schiller appropriated alchemical concepts,<sup>1</sup> then we may dissipate the obscurity of Schiller's theory. The process of evincing Schiller's appropriation begins with an overview of Schiller's claims, as this will aid in recognizing parallels with alchemical concepts. As we will see below, Schiller would have been familiar with alchemical operations thanks to his friendship with Goethe and the academic environment

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1 While one usually speaks of alchemical "processes," I have chosen to use the term "concepts" because I wish to include the images and phrases used by alchemists to communicate the stages and processes of the alchemical work, and not just the processes themselves.

in which he worked. Having identified plausible alchemical resources, the features and goals of the alchemical process are shown to be similar to the features and goals of Schiller's theory. In particular, Schiller's diction and concepts emulate three stages of the alchemical process: the *preparatio*, the *putrefactio*, and the *hierogamy*.<sup>2</sup> As will also become apparent, knowledge of this triadic sequence of stages allows one to clarify Schiller's abstract processes for developing the ideal self.

An overview of Schiller's claims concerning the aesthetic education assists in the identification of alchemical concepts at play in Schiller's discourse. Schiller claimed that man oscillates between two impulses: the rational, which he termed the formal impulse, and the emotional, termed the sensuous impulse. The sensuous impulse renders man an object in time, in which man merely responds to a sequence of changes; the sensuous impulse turns man into matter (Schiller 64). The formal impulse is supposed to proceed from man's "rational nature" and strives to bring harmony (65). Reason, according to Schiller, ought to harmonize our existence, yet reason can be said to operate through division, not harmonization — an approximation of how Schiller resolves this contradiction will be addressed through the later delineation of alchemical stages. This harmonizing formal impulse cannot succeed upon a society that acts on unrestrained emotion. Schiller proposes that to resolve this unbalanced situation, we must first become aesthetic, a state in which the creation and contemplation of art can train humankind's emotions, so that the emotions energize our efforts to act according to the formal impulse. Only after achieving this aesthetic state can we attain

the rational. Despite the disparities arising from our differing cultures, all can be harmoniously unified through our creation and contemplation of art. For Schiller, art is a representation of our shared humanity, and humanity implies the shared conflict we feel between our formal and our sensuous impulses. He claims that we can harmonize humankind's two contrary impulses through the play impulse, in which we create beauty. Beauty is achieved when the artist harmoniously conjoins abstract concepts with the material; metaphorically, rational concepts fill in and animate the objects used in constructing art (Schiller 81-7). As will become evident below, these claims borrow from alchemical thought, the history and practice of which would have been familiar to Schiller, given his education and circle of friends.

Alchemy is most commonly known as the transmutation of base metals into gold, lending support to its derision by many as mere mysticism; however, throughout the history of its development, and in Schiller's time, alchemy's ability to lend itself to metaphor ensured its value independent of the promise of monetary gain. Martin Luther appreciated it as an allegory for "the resurrection of the dead at the Last Day" (Eliade 191); throughout the Renaissance, Neo-Platonists appreciated it as a metaphor for the ascent of the soul and the redemption of man. During the Enlightenment, the processes of alchemy were valued for their exploration of dividing properties, and in its ability to create a new product. Within the Enlightenment period, individuals such as Newton and Goethe valued alchemy's function as a model for the workings of the universe (Eliade 231-33). Goethe himself practiced it, as he states in his autobiography, "I concealed from Herder my mystico-cabalistical chemistry, and everything relating to it; although at the same time, I was still very fond of secretly busying myself in working it out more

<sup>2</sup> This triadic structure invites comparison to Hegelian dialectics; Hegel would have developed his claims after Schiller's work had been published. Investigating correlations and potential influences may prove fruitful.

consistently than it had been communicated to me” (357); this autobiographical evidence, coupled with Goethe’s well-known friendship and correspondence with Schiller, provides reason to believe that the concepts of the alchemist were available to Schiller. That Schiller did re-employ the symbolic potential of alchemy is learnt more plausibly through the work of Paul Bishop, who mentions how Schiller’s use of certain terms throughout his works “all have overtones of alchemy or freemasonry, areas probably Goethe brought to his attention” (Bishop 141). Additionally, Bishop notes that Goethe had written a work associating alchemy with a form of education that would enable man to no longer be ruled by his emotions<sup>3</sup> (141).

From these available resources concerning alchemical thought, Schiller would have found features in alchemy that were attractive to him, as they corresponded with his goals within the *Aesthetic Education*. The alchemist understood that the true aim, the true masterwork, was the transmutation of the alchemist himself – he was to become the liberated, purified material. As the alchemist performed his processes on the metal, often practicing celibacy and fasting while doing so, he was working those processes on himself – turning himself into his “golden state,” an ideal state in which he would not be violable by the ravages of the human condition, as temporal matter sentenced to a finite existence (Eliade 159). Schiller’s goal of liberating man from unruly emotions relates to alchemy’s processes and objectives, as the alchemist understood the true intent of alchemy as the purification of the self to achieve the quality of gold, as gold is immune to the ravages of time. It had been thought that all metals naturally developed into gold, but the natural passing of time was too slow.

Through alchemical processes, man could assist time, so that he and the materials he experimented with were accelerated toward the ideal versions of themselves (Eliade 169). The culmination of the alchemical processes produced a material termed the philosopher’s stone, which could transmute other metals into gold upon contact, and could be liquefied and imbibed by an individual, endowing them with youth and health. From this manipulation of matter, we see that the alchemist could assist time, and liberate man and nature from existing merely as finite material subject to corruption, or impurity. This goal of the alchemist approximates Schiller’s understanding of art’s positive effects, as he claims that art can help humankind attain “the perfection of his being” through the aesthetic appreciation of art; humankind must only be taught how to do so (73).

Schiller’s goal resembles that of the alchemist. The attainment of an ideal self that is equivalent to the purified state offered by alchemy is expressed by Schiller when he presents the concept of the “pure ideal man” (31), as he claims that “Every individual man...carries in disposition and determination a pure ideal man within himself, with whose unalterable unity it is the great task of his existence...to harmonize” (31). What Schiller identifies as the pure ideal man is the same objective of the alchemist, but the alchemist identifies the objective as the philosopher’s stone. The task of achieving this objective is complicated by the impulses that humankind is subjected to. Schiller describes the conflicts resulting from our impulses, and their ensuing effects, when he states, “Nature demands multiplicity” (32), while reason “finds combination only through dissolution...” and “in order to seize the fleeting appearance [reason] must bind it in the fetters of rule, dissect its fair body into abstract notions, and preserve its living spirit in a sorry skeleton of words”

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3 Paul Bishop states that this may be found within Goethe’s *History of the Theory of Colours*, in the section entitled “Alchemists.”

(24). The institutions that authorize truth in our lives present words sans feeling, i.e. principles are formulated and enforced rather than freely chosen, while our emotions in response to the natural world threaten to become unruly – we are determined, and the relativist rejoices. For Schiller, art is supposed to highlight these determiners for the artist and the audience, leading to liberation from a potentially repressive rational impulse, and from untamed passions. Alchemy reveals itself to be the inspiration for Schiller’s remedy to this conflicted condition, and, as it does so, it helps explain certain obtuse features within Schiller’s claims.

Comprehending the actualization of Schiller’s claims leads to confusion. Schiller’s process of highlighting the dilemmas facing humankind, and therefore the attractiveness of a reconciling factor, is keen. Similar to the alchemical concern with the corruption of matter, Schiller believed that man is corrupted by existing within a *certain* time, and that our political institutions use force to impose harmony, while failing to train our emotions (Sharpe 152). Art, Schiller claims, allows us to realize what is true for all time, thereby purifying us of our corruptions from thinking and acting as creatures determined by a specific time (Schiller 64-7). The artist is able to deliver the ideal to the audience, because the artist conjoins matter and abstraction so that the viewer grasps this union and is “educated;” theoretically, moral conduct is to become second nature (Sharpe 155). This notion sounds quite appealing, as it presents the possibility of morality chosen by all because of our interaction with art. Yet how is it achieved? Have artists failed, or has the audience failed to follow a necessary process of contemplation? These questions hone in on a crucial criticism of Schiller’s work, as the ideal process of creating and contemplating art appears as mystifying as alchemy is mystical. Having noted the

similarities between the goals of Schiller’s theory and alchemy, the triadic sequence that Schiller appropriated from alchemy may begin to be discussed; recognizing this structure and its implications assists the reader in understanding Schiller’s intentions.

The alchemist achieved his transmutation to gold, and his attainment of the ideal self, through repeating the processes of *preparatio*, *putrefactio*, and the *hierogamy*. The *preparatio* is the distillation process, “the process of purification and clarification whereby the volatile spirit is extracted from the impure matter or body” (Abraham 55). The alchemist claims that following the *preparatio*, the soul ascends un-tethered by the corrupted material. Schiller would understand this ascent of the soul as the mind of the individual ascending to the intellectual realm; this interpretation is an appropriation of the alchemist’s distillation process of burning away the impurities accumulated through existence in time. Schiller’s use of the *preparatio* concept is evinced when he claims that the secret of the master artist is his “annihilating the material by means of the form” (Schiller 106). Schiller’s re-conceptualization of the *preparatio* is further demonstrated when he states “Man has *risen* [emphasis added] to a *unit of idea* embracing the whole realm of phenomena. By this operation we are no more in time, but time...is in us” (67). This process mirrors the alchemist’s goal of the *preparatio*, as “During this phase the body is made spiritual and the spirit made corporeal” (Abraham 56).

When Schiller states that “[man] is to eradicate in himself everything that is merely world, and produce harmony in all its mutations” (63-64), he employs the alchemical concept of the *preparatio*, the removal of accrued determiners, or impurities. The *preparatio* is the torturing of the object for the removal of impurities accumulated by existing as matter, and

we can understand Schiller's statement of "annihilating the material by means of the form" (106) as meaning that as the artist creates, he tortures and burns away the determiners of mankind's disparate histories and cultures, discovering what is true and what is possible for all men, for all time. We are brought back to the alchemist's aim of *assisting* time, rather than being determined by it. Time allows development, which is necessary, but it serves as a boundary that can easily limit humankind's productive activity (64). Rather than be determined by the boundaries of our specific time, alchemy enables humankind a more active role. Schiller assigns art the role of alchemy, as he claims that the creation and contemplation of art enables humankind to enact a more active role in their development, i.e. humankind can more readily achieve its potential through interaction with art. This claim, once again, enjoins questions as to how the liberation from cultural boundaries and man's assistance of time, rather than his determination by it, might be actualized. Perhaps more frustratingly, how is truth recognized and advocated, especially in a postmodern, postcolonial world?

Schiller parts these potentially chaotic waters by appropriating the alchemist's *putrefactio*, the second stage of the triadic sequence. Schiller had already identified this problem of "truth," or meaning, as he notes that our concepts can lead to contradictions, for they are fluid attempts at organizing our perceptions; the problem of truth is expressed when Schiller states that "Every other condition into which we can come refers us to some previous one, and requires for its solution some other condition" (103); to resolve this Derridean sea of signifiers, our concepts must be purified through distillation, the alchemist's *preparatio*. Art allows the distillation of our concepts, of our emotional responses to

the world, because it releases us from the determiners of our particular place in time; we die, the soul is released outside of time, and our intellect functions unencumbered. Schiller borrows from alchemy when he claims that: "the aesthetic alone is a whole in itself [because in it] alone do we feel ourselves snatched outside of time" (103). To leave the realm of time, we experience death; thus we are brought to the second stage of alchemy – the *putrefactio*.

The *putrefactio* is the death that always follows the *preparatio* (Eliade 152). The material dies after the *preparatio*, the torturing. The distillation makes the material transition into a vapor. Gas is produced, and the symbolism becomes obvious – the soul leaves the body, or is "snatched outside of time" (Schiller 103). The soul that has existed in time has been corrupted, or determined. The risen soul now exists outside of time, and realizes all that is rational, and all that is in man's power to perform. The material, the body that the soul has left behind, is now the alchemical *prima materia* (Eliade 154-57), the primal material that has not accumulated impurities through existing in time. It has returned to a pre-created state, one that has not been determined. When Schiller says that the creation and contemplation of art allows us to be "snatched outside of time" (103) he employs a concept of alchemy, as "The putrefaction of the 'body' of the metal releases the spark of divine light and life which is hidden in it" (Abraham 161). As art is contemplated, the determiners that restrict the soul (or rational capacities) are dissolved, enabling the realization of humankind's potential. The material body, with the sensuous impulse, is redeemed through its reintegration with a mind that has been snatched outside of time. Humankind is able to figuratively ascend to a sense of shared humanity through this ego-death, thus realizing what is true for all time.

The completion of the *putrefactio* has the same effect as Schiller's concept of semblance, that of objectification, and both necessitate a third stage. The artist is able to remove the accumulation of reductive concepts that separate man from his fellow man, i.e. the artist is able to distill his concepts, and then present them through the materials of his time – this is Schiller's concept of semblance. For Schiller, art operates through semblance, meaning that it is a representation, thereby making events and emotions objects that can be studied. Semblance enables individuals to distance themselves from their emotions, and the events of their life, so that they can analyze and educate themselves upon the presentations of the artist, thereby realizing truths for all time (Sharpe 161-62). Both the alchemist and Schiller have, at this stage, produced an object; the alchemist produces the *prima materia*, in which the animating soul has departed and impure material accumulations have been annihilated, leaving behind an object. For Schiller, the artist and audience experience a temporary ego-death, i.e. the body becomes an object, because it is left behind as the viewer contemplates what is true for all time. Following this objectification, there is the task of rejoining the soul with the body, the ability of the object to be animated and energized by the truths that have been realized, namely, an awareness of humankind's shared condition of experiencing conflicting impulses, and a recognition of humankind's potential.

This reintegration is a difficult task, as the recognition of these truths and the ability to continually act on them is confronted by subjectivity and external influences on one hand, and the potential for an overemphasis on reason that can result in passive indifference on another. Schiller encountered this dilemma as a necessary result of conceiving of art as a purificatory object; for Schiller, art allows us to

transcend our time, resembling what Kant referred to as the sublime, the elevation of objects to the supersensible level. But we cannot remain outside of time, thus acting as the abstruse philosophers that David Hume so loathed, acting as one oblivious to what actual life requires. We must do what is necessary for our time, within our time, but there is tension as to how to act.

Schiller resolves these points of tension by appropriating the alchemists' *hierogamy*, which he does in "On Grace and Dignity." Grace is the type of beauty in art that enables man to transcend his time. Dignity is the type of beauty that moves man to conform to moral law, so that he is acting within time (Sharpe 156). Schiller assigns the concept of grace a feminine gender, and dignity a masculine gender. In the ideal work of art, the feminine grace is married to the masculine dignity, birthing an ideal artwork that perfectly harmonizes our impulses. This marriage, this harmony, is taken from alchemy. It is the *hierogamy*, taken from what Mircea Eliade termed the *hieros gamos* (161), the sacred marriage. Schiller appropriated the alchemical concept of a union of opposites resulting in an ennobled product. After the soul has left the material body, and both have been purified, they reunite in marriage – the material is resurrected. The resurrected body is the completed philosopher's stone.

Schiller borrowed from alchemy this marriage of opposing forces, with his feminine grace and masculine dignity. In alchemy, mercury is feminine, and sulfur is masculine (Abraham 193; Bartlett 25-26). Feminine grace corresponds with feminine mercury, the spirit that exists outside of time; masculine dignity corresponds with masculine sulfur, the soul that is released from a body upon its death (Abraham 188). The released sulfur/soul is conjoined with the mercury (the transcendent spirit) before re-entering the purified body (188). This chemical wedding births the philosopher's

stone, the ideal self. That Schiller appropriates this chemical wedding, this harmonization, reveals itself in his declaration that “every individual man... carries in disposition and determination a pure ideal man within himself, with whose unalterable unity it is the great task of his existence, throughout all his vicissitudes, to harmonize,” and this can be achieved by having the “temporal Man raised to the dignity of ideal Man” (31-2). The ideal man corresponds with the philosopher’s stone; as Schiller and the alchemists claim, the temporal man is the soul/sulfur that must be raised to a superior level, that of transcendent reason, corresponding with the spirit/mercury. In alchemy, mercury is variously referred to as Mercurius and Hermes, and “according to most alchemical texts, the chemical wedding... may not take place without the presence of a third mediating principle. This medium of conjunction is Mercurius” (Abraham 127). Thus Schiller’s mediating play impulse corresponds with the mediating mercury; the hierogamy, having actions in time informed by rational discoveries, cannot take place without it. In order to continually act on discovered truths, to reintegrate body and soul, humankind must continually play.

Schiller proposes the play impulse, in place of mercury, as the mediating entity that would enable humankind to achieve the completion of the harmonization process. Through the mediating play impulse, the creation and contemplation of art, our conflicting impulses are harmonized, or married (Schiller 74). The play impulse produces beauty, and for Schiller, the beautiful is the moral (76-85). This association of the play impulse with alchemical mercury suggests that the *hierogamy* is the task of the artist, achieved through the exercise of the play impulse, as Schiller calls on the artist to “take his subject matter from the present age, but

his form he will borrow from...beyond all time” (51). Form refers to the rational concepts that are true for all time, and they are to be married with, and serve as the design for, the material, or the content, of the contemporary. When Schiller states that man “is to turn everything that is mere form into world, and realize all his potentialities” (63), he employs the alchemical concept of the *hierogamy*, in which the body can now act upon new, rational, concepts. Following the *putrefactio*, the death, the soul rises to the level of the intellect, the body is purified, and the two reunite in this sacred marriage. The result of this marriage was the philosopher’s stone; audience members, having contemplated an appropriate artwork, experience this union of their rational capacities with their emotions that have been validated by the active use of reason.

By locating alchemical resources available to Schiller, and tracing the similarities between Schiller’s claims and the processes and goals of alchemy, Schiller’s abstract proposals are reified and placed within a more tenable context. Schiller’s claim that the “inevitable effect of the Beautiful is freedom from passion” (106) is elucidated, as an appropriation of the *preparatio* indicates that Schiller saw the contemplation of art as the alchemical process of removing biases, allowing humankind’s rational capacities, or soul, to attain truth for all time. Recognizing the influence of the *putrefactio* offers insight regarding the means of overcoming attachment to a specific time. Understanding Schiller’s appropriation of the alchemical *hierogamy* provides a source for the development of his claim that beauty combines and harmonizes our opposing impulses (88), as the claim mirrors the effects of constructing the philosopher’s stone. Identifying the similarities between Schiller’s claims and the alchemical processes presents a clarified vision of Schiller’s methodology for

attaining his concept of the ideal self. To attain this ideal, there must be practice, and art is the laboratory in which humankind can play with abstract concepts, trace them to their effects, and examine emotions as objects. Practice – the creation and contemplation of art – guides humankind

to act harmoniously. Thus Schiller's audience is being enjoined to create, to creatively play, leading to the attainment of an aesthetic state. In a rather Romantic sense, the audience is enjoined to play the alchemist.

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