In volume I of his study of Goethe, Nicholas Boyle characterizes the stagnation in German letters in the years between Lessing’s death in 1781 and the French Revolution as follows:

As the ‘geniuses’ of the 1770s dispersed […] so there came over German literature, before the storm of 1789, something of the sultry stillness in which many flies breed. Literary culture was growing, poetical almanacs, Sentimental and Gothick novels and dramas were thicker on the ground, actor-managers … were consolidating the position of German theatre as a serious and financially viable institution; but at the higher level of original production the sense of purpose, of some central energy or conflict, was lost. (270)

Specifically, a new skepticism appears in these years with regard to the ongoing Enlightenment hope for a middle-class program of self-cultivation (Bildung)\(^1\) centered in a national, Shakespeare-inspired theater. This development is particularly obvious in three important texts from the decade in question. In Karl Phillip Moritz’ *Anton Reiser* (1785–1790) theater is clearly an escape from the boredom and oppression of middle-class life rather than a locus of new hope for the middle classes (Beuten 169). And in the last chapter of *Wilhelm Meister’s theatralische Sendung* (left unfinished in 1785) the true motivation behind the bourgeois enthusiasm for all things theatrical becomes an unanswered question:

«war jene Aussicht, jener Ausweg nach dem Theater bloß einem unordentlichen, unruhigen Menschen willkomen, der ein Leben forzusetzen wünschte, das ihm die Verhältnisse der bürgerlichen Welt nicht gestatten, oder war es alles anders, reiner, würdiger? (331)

The third text is Schiller’s *Der Geisterseher*. In this unfinished novel, the literary decline of the 1780s takes on a wider historical significance. Schiller develops a far-reaching ethical skepticism towards the theater, and a philosophical skepticism towards the Enlightenment as a whole, both of which still resonate profoundly today.

Here I highlight three aspects of Schiller’s text: the critique of theater and of bourgeois self-identity which drive the plot, the moral skepticism of the
narrative’s philosophical content, and the lack of closure reflected in its fragmentary, unfinished form. Where these three aspects overlap is where Schiller’s loss of faith in the moral culture of the Enlightenment comes into focus. The following remarks are intended not as an exhaustive interpretation, but as possible points of departure for a new appreciation of this long-neglected text as reflective of a German Enlightenment in crisis.

My approach owes much to the remarks on *Der Geisterseher* made long ago in Benno von Wiese’s classic biography of Schiller. He places it in the tradition of the *Zeitroman*, the social novel in the British tradition, in which personal crisis mirrors societal upheaval and decay (327–29). Certainly Schiller’s interest in what we would today call psychology lends a note of personal urgency to the crisis of social values in the story. In his unique use of an inherited popular form, the «case study» of someone caught up in the machinations of a secret society, Schiller’s real concern becomes evident: the psychological suffering occasioned in a «sensitive soul» by an immanent breakdown of cultural consensus. It is this decay of moral values, traceable both in the self and in the cultural environment, which makes the protagonist so vulnerable to manipulation by powerful unseen forces.

Who is Schiller’s prince? Although an aristocrat, he desires privacy and anonymity, and practices the frugality and moral austerity more often linked to the middle classes of the time:

> Er lebte unter dem strengsten Inkognito, weil er sich selbst leben wollte […] Den Aufwand vermied er, mehr aus Temperament als aus Sparsamkeit. Er floh die Vergnügungen; in einem Alter von fünfunddreißig Jahren hatte er allen Reizungen dieser wollustigen Stadt widerstanden. (48–49)

The prince thus exhibits an array of bourgeois virtues; in fact he becomes in the course of the narrative a kind of brooding bourgeois intellectual in noble guise. «Tiefer Ernst und eine schwarmerische Melancholie herrschten in seiner Gemütsart. […] Mitten in einem geräuschvollen Gewühle von Menschen ging er einsam; in seine Phantasiewelt verschlossen, war er oft ein Fremdling in der wirklichen» (49). Schiller makes it clear that the prince’s problems arise from two sources. On the one hand, he has suffered from a haphazard education. In the opening pages of the story we learn that he «las viel, doch ohne Wahl; eine vernachlässigte Erziehung und frühe Kriegsdienste hatten seinen Geist nicht zur Reife kommen lassen. Alle Kenntnisse, die er nachher schöpfte, vermehrten nur die Verwirrung seiner Begriffe, weil sie auf keinen festen Grund gebaut waren» (49).

At the beginning of Book Two this lack of a structured education is mentioned again, and recast as actual psychological abuse associated with the
religious themes which inform the text from this point on: «Eine bigotte, knechtische Erziehung war die Quelle dieser Furcht [vor Religionsgegen-
ständen]; diese hatte seinem zarten Gehirne Schreckenbilder eingeprägt, von denen er sich während seines ganzen Lebens nie ganz losmachen konnte» (105). Secondly, and in the prince’s own view, his social position itself plays a key role in his fate. His station as a nobleman, instead of bringing with it a greater freedom and mobility, is paradoxically a source of bondage and entrapment. He shuns «appearances,» the public displays associated with his high rank. This becomes clear when he complains later in the novel:


Schiller pinpoints here with chilling accuracy the limits of self-cultivation. For an education ending only in bewilderment and confusion, combined with the pressures inherent in his social status, has left the prince without a moral core, a source of confidence and integrity. For Schiller, external forces can interrupt or short-circuit the process of Bildung, causing the loss of precisely that stable center of selfhood from which Bildung might have proceeded further. «Representative publicness» itself (cf. Habermas), the force exerted by the opinions of others upon someone of high social rank, is especially at fault here. Schiller views true subjectivity as nurifiable only in private. Thus he joins the debates about privacy, self-determination and freedom from constraint current in the literary public sphere of his day, but in a way unusual for a middle-class writer. In the very act of highlighting the importance of those ideals, he also indicates in a powerful way their fragile and contingent nature. For Schiller there is the constant possibility of Bildung being ineffectual by failing to take root in the psyche. Der Geisterseher reveals the limits of that peculiarly German literary project often associated with Lessing: the «bourgeoisification» of the aristocracy (Verbürgerlichung des Adels). The prince’s failure to achieve Bildung is at the same time the failure of middle-class values to reach upward to the ruling classes.

In its attitude to theater as well Schiller’s text abandons the Enlightenment. In Der Geisterseher theater is reduced to pure theatricality. Michael Voges has given the most detailed account of the séance sequence in the novel, including how the revelation of the séance as mere theatrics and illusion by the prince follows the tradition of the «secret society novel» (Geheimbund-
Mysterious or uncanny events, initially left unexplained, are later «unmasked» through rational explanation. This tradition became popular in England as well through the Gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe, for example. But in this context it is important to note how strikingly modern, almost prophet-ic, Schiller’s view of theater is here. He ignores every positive hope his century or his countrymen had invested in the theater as an institution. Gone is the goal of early Enlightenment drama of reflecting and strengthening bourgeois virtues. Nor is there any hint of using theater to recover a lost or threatened human wholeness, as in Schiller’s later philosophical and dramatic works. Instead, he isolates with a kind of scientific precision the power of spectacle to magnetize and manipulate human desire. Theater is the single most important tool used by the secret society to manipulate the prince’s mind and emotions. It becomes in the course of the novel a shadowy, liminal realm fraught with the potential for deception and delusion, and emotionally for the prince, the means of his disintegration, his «anti-Bildung.»

Theater is a de-centering force, an instrument in the undoing of an already tenuous sense of identity.

Besides its literal presence in the séance, theater functions in Schiller’s text in at least two other important ways: as a network of allusions to dramatic literature, and as a structural principle of the narrative. References to Shakespeare, specifically the tragedies, both in the fictional «editor’s footnotes» and in the body of the text, help to create a sinister atmosphere, a sense of the uncanny, the «Gothic» feeling some commentators have noticed.

Early on, at the first appearance of the mysterious Maske at Carneval, the prince quotes Hamlet to the narrator, Count von O.: «es gibt mehr Dinge im Himmel und auf Erden, als wir in unsern Philosophien träumen» (51). A few pages later, the prince and his entourage take a holiday boat trip along the river Brenta near Venice and disembark at a small village where an open air festival is taking place. Some village boys and girls are performing a pantomischer Tanz which ends in a strange and abrupt manner:


The scene is a miniature theatrical performance embedded in the narrative. The brief description of the music, the village market, and the pantomime/dance serve as a prelude to the sudden break in the action performed by the girl’s odd gestures followed by motionlessness and silence. The prince be-
comes embarrassed and confused; his much-desired incognito is shattered as he becomes the center of attention in a public situation. The shift in the tone of the narrative accomplished by the dancing maiden’s curious behavior becomes a condensed symbol of the prince’s fate in the novel, a foreboding of the sudden whirlwind of events which now begin to engulf him and undermine his psychological and moral existence. In a footnote to this passage in the original version of the novel in his journal Thalia, Schiller drew an explicit parallel between the «tidings» (Botschaft) of his village dancer and that of the witches in Macbeth, thus underscoring and strengthening through yet another Shakespearean allusion the «iconic» value of this theatrical sequence (Voges 378).

Near the end of Book One there is a reference to Garrick’s performance of Richard III, in which the legendary actor’s reputed ability to control not only his voice and bodily movements, but the very «organs of life» themselves, fuels the prince’s paranoia about the possible theatrical talents of the perpetrators of the false séance (100). The significance of the allusion to the figure of Richard at this juncture however goes beyond the historical reference to the acting ability of David Garrick. For the figure of Richard was known not only through Shakespeare but through the German Richard III of Christian Felix Weise, written much earlier but first appearing in 1759. By Schiller’s time the figure of the scheming, usurping monarch had become a topos of self-conscious and deliberate deception and villainy. In the context of the narrative as a whole the allusion to Richard clearly serves to underscore the power of the conspiratorial forces the prince is up against.

These theatrical allusions, while indeed helping to create that «Gothic» atmosphere of inevitability or unavoidable doom which made this story so popular in its day, are important for another reason. For they form but one facet of a larger nexus of theatricality which Schiller uses to structure his story. The theatricality inherent in the setting of the story, Venice at Carneval time, is the most obvious use of this structural principle. In this atmosphere where masking is the order of the day, the masking of identity quickly begins to threaten identity itself. The tone set in the opening pages by the sudden appearance and prophecy of the first Maske (whose identity is never revealed) pervades the entire work. Identities constantly shift. The «Armenian» appears alternately as «himself» (perhaps in the garb of a priest of the Armenian Orthodox rite), a Russian officer, and an officer of the Roman Inquisition. The Greek beauty with whom the prince falls in love from afar turns out to be a German Catholic princess. Above all, the ubiquitous «invisible hand» of the secret society soon spreads beyond its initial identification with the figure of the Armenian to catalyze all other elements of theatricality in the text. It «di-
rects» the entire action of the novel like the sequence of scenes in a stage play. This unknowable source of control, as it propels all the significant turns of events from «behind the scenes,» increasingly blurs the distinctions between «on stage» and «off stage,» role and person, appearance and reality, within the fictional world Schiller creates (Voges 382–84). Monika Schmitz-Emans in a recent interpretation of Der Geisterseher has focused on the analogy between the deceptive magic/illusion practiced by the Armenian (and other members of the secret society) within the tale, and Schiller as storyteller/magician. Her essay highlights from a different perspective this same blurring of boundaries between seeming and being, to the point where the difference between Schein and Sein becomes virtually meaningless (42–43).

Indeed, if any unmasking just reveals another mask, then «Enlightenment» cannot take place at all, neither on the individual nor the collective level. For Schiller’s prince, the machinations of the secret society deepen his own crisis of identity. Even his glimpses «behind the scenes,» his growing insight into the workings of the secret society, cannot free him from its power. Schiller takes great pains to show that insight alone (in the form of logical explanations) is not sufficient to supply that stable center of identity which the prince lacks. He exercises critical judgment readily enough, but is still unable to form a stable ground for meaningful action. His successful rational explanations (at the end of Book One) for the Sicilian’s trickery at the séance simply lead him further into skepticism, hedonism, and freethinking (Freigeisterei). The conspirators are then able to exploit this state of mind in order to manipulate him even more thoroughly in Book Two. But beyond this, the secret society, in its increasing control over the prince’s fate, eventually becomes more than an element of plot. It becomes a figure for loss of self-identity and a symbol of cultural decay.

The cultural crisis at issue here is given a more theoretical expression in the Philosophical Conversation (Philosophisches Gespräch) forming in the original Thalia version a lengthy portion of the fourth letter of Book Two, but increasingly shortened in subsequent book versions. In modern editions it is restored to its original length, but printed as an addendum to the main text. Here I propose a reading which reinserts the Conversation in its long form into Book Two of the novel, for the immediate prelude to it is significant. The prince has just dismissed a money lender from his rooms in Venice. He thus makes for the first time a deliberate choice to live beyond his means, to keep up «appearances,» to continue a life of debauchery and excess, now without regard for the cost. A new, more confessional mood of depression and nihilism comes upon him in the subsequent exchange with Baron von F***. It begins with his complaints about the power of «public opinion» over someone
of his high social rank already quoted. Then he launches into a long medita-
tion on his loss of autonomy and identity, in an initially confusing mixture
of philosophical abstraction and poetic imagery. In the novel as a whole it is
the secret society which erodes the prince’s privacy and eventually his sense
of self. In the *Philosophical Conversation*, that function is taken over by a
conception of «nature» quite horrifying in its implications. The prince begins
the *Conversation* proper by describing his total isolation in time and space:
«Wenn alles vor mir und hinter mir versinkt – die Vergangenheit im traurigen
Einerlei wie ein Reich der Versteinerung hinter mir liegt – wenn die Zukunft
mir nichts bietet – wenn ich meines Daseins ganzen Kreis im schmalen Rau-
me der *Gegenwart* beschlossen sehe –» (160). From out of this pseudo-Car-
tesian space of separateness and radical doubt he then evokes the presence
of a «nature» so menacing that it can only be described through recourse
to myth: «Aber wer ist denn diese Natur, diese Ordnung, wider welche ich
klage? Immerhin! Möchte sie, wie der Griechen Saturn, ihre eigenen Kinder
verzehren» (167). The omnipotence of this all-devouring «nature» allows it to
instrumentalize all human thought and feeling, to use for its own mysterious,
but always «selfish» purposes any conviction about the priority of the think-
ing subject.

Würum anders nennen Sie den *Gedanken* im Gegensatz von der *Bewegung* edel, als
weil Sie das denkende Wesen schon als Mittelpunkt voraussetzen, dem Sie die Fol-
genreihe der Dinge unterordnen? Treten Sie in *meine* Gedankenreihe, so wird diese
Rangordnung verschwinden, der Gedanke ist Wirkung und Ursache der Bewegung
und ein Glied der Notwendigkeit, wie der Pulsschlag, der ihn begleitet. (162–63)

This de-centering of the faculty of cognition (Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum*) is it-
self a direct attack on one of the key axioms of early Enlightenment thinking.
But feeling had already begun to replace reason as the center of human iden-
tity in the course of the eighteenth century. The prince is clearly concerned
with a certain type of feeling when he states:

Erfüllt also das moralische Wesen die Bedingungen seiner Glückseligkeit, so tritt es
ebendadurch wieder in den Plan der Natur ein, dem es durch diesen abgesonderten
Plan entzogen zu sein schien, ebenso wie der Erdkörper durch den Fall seiner Teile
zu ihrem Zentrum fähig gemacht wird, die Ekliptik zu beschreiben. (164)

In other words, any feeling, including the feeling of happiness (*Glückselig-
keit*) is also exploitable by «nature» for her own purposes and has no ethical
import. Here we see Schiller’s dissatisfaction with the accounts of ethics of the
British «moral sense» school, the grounding of moral certitude in intuition
and feeling. Terry Eagleton associates this school of thought with the «se-
rene confidence» of a bourgeois/aristocratic coalition of values in the British
public sphere at a high point of its hegemony (38). Elements of this tradition had established themselves in German thought via Rousseau and Lessing, but Schiller also knew the work of Hutcheson, Ferguson, and Adam Smith directly. Within that tradition, the well-oiled machine appears in a positive light, as the aesthetic image of an effortless unity of individual moral «taste» with the common good. Adam Smith states in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

> Human society, when we contemplate it in a certain abstract and philosophical light, appears like a great, an immense machine, whose regular and harmonious movements produce a thousand agreeable effects. As in any other beautiful and noble machine that was the production of human art, whatever tended to render its movements more smooth and easy, would derive a beauty from this effect, and [...] whatever tended to obstruct them would displease on that account: so virtue, which is, as it were, the fine polish to the wheels of society, necessarily pleases; while vice, like the vile rust [...] is necessarily offensive. (quoted in Eagleton 37)

It is this effortless, pre- or subrational conjuncture of ethics and aesthetics (in its broadest definition as an anthropology of feeling) which seems to me to be one of Schiller’s main points of attack in the *Philosophical Conversation*. The prince’s personification of nature as monstrous can be read as a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* proof of the impossibility of taking feeling alone as a guarantee of moral conduct or social cohesion. In fact the prince’s interlocutor, Baron von F***, gets momentarily carried away by a vision (quite like that of Adam Smith) of a perfect blending of human desire and cosmic harmony, before he is impatiently cut off by the prince and accused of indulging in self-serving, illusory mental projection (165). For in the prince’s «system,» the spontaneous intuition of right and wrong is simply another link in a beginningless and endless chain of cause and effect whose ultimate purpose is known only to nature «herself.» Adam Smith’s well-oiled machine has become a mindless, soulless demon.

Schiller’s prince admits the categories of good and bad into his system, only to strip them of all descriptive or explanatory power. Any movement from thought to action enters into that realm of pervasive necessity (*Notwendigkeit*) already characterized as all-devouring nature: «Lassen wir also zwischen die äußere Welt und das denkende Wesen eine Scheidewand fallen, so erscheint uns die nämliche Handlung außerhalb derselben gleichgültig, innerhalb derselben nennen wir sie schlimm oder gut» (172). Moral feeling is no guarantee of freedom, but a kind of illusory freedom confined to a prison of interiority. This part of the *Conversation* is a powerful philosophical echo of the Gothic mood of the story. Interiority per se (*Innerlichkeit*) is certainly no stranger to eighteenth-century German thought. It is the primary reality for Pietists as well as Leibnizian rationalists. For both, the realm of «external
relations,» of cause and effect, is a «mere appearance.» But in Schiller the hu-
man soul, Leibniz’ «windowless monad,» is suddenly completely cut off from
the preestablished harmony which guaranteed not only its own inviolable
identity, but also its meaningful connection to a series of ever larger wholes
through an «identity of interest» (cf. Boyle 13–15). The prince’s dark vision
is of a world where human agency has lost all such protection and all sense
of meaningful inter-connectedness. Innerlichkeit has become an unbearable
total claustrophobia. The empirical subject is lost within a demonic nature
which instrumentalizes it and drowned in the broad, anonymous sweep of a
history devoid of any discernable purpose.

But this same «partition» between inner and outer, self and world, points
to yet another level of critique of the Enlightenment which Schiller voices
through his hero, a critique of the faith in the specularity of representation
itself, a faith in the «naturally» reflexive connection of sign and mental event,
the ideal of transparency of language. In his book on Lessing’s Laocoon, Da-
vid Wellbery pinpoints the category of intuition as the site of this eighteenth-
century faith in the efficacy of all representation systems, even the arbitrary
signs of language:

The sign is the area of transit between two intuitions. This priority of intuition – it
is always both the origin and the end of sign use – can be observed throughout En-
lightenment semiotics. Indeed, we can speak here of an intuitionist doctrine of the
sign: the very notion of the arbitrary sign is formulated in terms of the notion of
intuition; the sign is, at its origin, the freely chosen mark of a directly intuited idea.

Wellbery’s point allows one to glimpse the depth of Enlightenment critique
in Schiller’s work. For in despairing of intuition, the prince strikes at the heart
of eighteenth-century assumptions about the self-evident relations between
signs and things. In questioning the validity of the connection between the
«feeling» of happiness and any genuine moral certainty, the prince also im-
plicitly questions the power of any set of linguistic signs to reflect a state of
affairs in the inner or outer world:

Aber ebensowenig Ähnlichkeit die schnelle Bewegung, die wir Feuer nennen, mit
der Empfindung des Brennens oder die kubistische Form eines Salzes mit seinem
bittern Geschmacke hat, ebensowenig Ähnlichkeit hat das Gefühl, das wir Glück-
seligkeit nennen, mit dem Zustand unsrer innern Vollkommenheit, den es begleitet,
oder mit dem Zweck der Natur, dem es dienet. (165)

The prince’s experience of disconnection between his internal state and any
series of events in an outer world, between his body and language, signifies at
once a crisis of the self and a crisis of the sign.5
One of the major critical problems posed by Schiller’s text is the proper interpretation of its status as a fragment. In addition to Voges’ foregrounding of tensions between the essayistic and novelistic elements in it, there is Scott Abbott’s provocative thesis that Schiller deliberately left the work a fragment to undercut his readers’ desire for closure, readers who continually «besieged» him for the continuation. Abbott argues convincingly from within the text to show how Schiller thematizes closure throughout the story (55–57). The conspirators manipulate the prince’s desire for «closure» with his departed friend (his desire to hear his friend complete his dying words) to get him to agree to a séance in the first place. The desire to explain the disconcerting outcome of the séance prepares the prince psychologically for hearing the Sicilian’s falsified narrative from prison. But in my view there is no need to invoke a quasi–Romantic aesthetic of the fragment to explain Schiller’s unwillingness to complete the work (cf. Abbott 57). I would look primarily to the *Philosophical Conversation* itself and the moral crisis found therein for clues to the fragmentary nature of the work. Liliane Weissberg does precisely this, and gives the simplest and most convincing reason behind Schiller’s abandonment of the novel. The material of the *Philosophical Conversation* was simply too close to him. It represented pure philosophy in the ancient and venerable form of the Platonic dialog. On the eve of his turn toward philosophy and away from fiction, this was precisely the kind of discourse which increasingly held Schiller’s interest, not the popular «secret society plot» out of which it had arisen (98, 123).

We are now in a position to pinpoint more precisely the kind of moral crisis which Schiller’s prince, and perhaps Schiller himself, was experiencing at this time. The arguments in the *Philosophical Conversation* for skepticism and nihilism are moral arguments, but they can also be read as reflections on the nature of all language purporting to represent an «inner life.» Schiller himself was able to reinvest the categories of ethical thought with meaning only after a long personal philosophical crisis (which began with his abandonment of Der Geisterseher) during which he produced no poetic works, but immersed himself in the study of Kant. But the analogy between Schiller’s own situation and that of his protagonist need not be seen as biographical in the narrow sense. The text as a whole, but more specifically the *Philosophical Conversation*, when read against the status of the text as an unfinished fragment, can become a study of the impossibility of narrative itself in a time of cultural upheaval. If Schiller’s prince experiences and describes a failure of the moral will in the *Philosophical Conversation*, then this failure is also a failure of «the will to narrate,» to see a series of events, such as the events constituting one’s life, as meaningful, as more than a linear series. And Schiller as author
allows an analogous failure to show through in the fragmentary status of his text.

It is Hayden White who has reminded us of the connection between ethics and narration by underscoring the fact that narrative closure is a moral as well as an aesthetic category. In the context of the «moralistic» closures of late medieval histories, White states that

it is this moralism that alone permits the work to end, or rather to conclude, in a way different from the way the annals and the chronicle forms do. But on what other grounds could a narrative of real events possibly conclude? When it is a matter of recounting the concourse of real events, what other «ending» could a given sequence of such events have than a «moralizing» ending? What else could narrative closure consist of than a passage from one moral order to another?» (23)

It is this «passage from one moral order to another» which both Schiller and his protagonist are unable to make. Where moral authority is no longer felt, narrativization of any events, whether real or fictional, that set of forms imposing the coherence we associate with stories and their tellings, becomes impossible.

The moral authority which brings about the «sense of an ending» in representation of the real in any narrative is also, and perhaps primarily, a force of social cohesion. This is true whether such a narrative is historical or poetic writing, especially when the latter, like Schiller’s psychologically oriented case-study fiction, aspires to a truth not unlike historical truth. For White asks rhetorically:

And does the world, even the social world, ever really come to us as already narrativized, already «speaking itself» from beyond the horizon of our capacity to make scientific sense of it? Or is the fiction of such a world, capable of speaking itself and of displaying itself in the form of a story, necessary for the establishment of that moral authority without which the notion of a specifically social reality be unthinkable? (25)

These insights into the connection between narrative closure and moral authority open yet another perspective on the psychological/moral crisis of Schiller’s prince. His crisis manifests as a kind of paralysis; he finds himself caught in an ethical «no-man’s land» between two forms of moral authority, neither of which can magnetize collective belief and thus bring about social cohesion. Schiller’s text casts a deeply critical eye upon both forms of authority. It reveals the tenacity of an aristocratic hegemony able to appropriate both Enlightenment rationality and Enlightenment aesthetic culture for the exercise of power, through intrigue, manipulation, and psychological terror. Political power can exploit the lack of a moral center in individuals and in
groups like a vulnerable aristocracy. At the same time, a fledgling bourgeois philosophical and literary culture of debate, *Kritik* and *Bildung* is revealed as equally problematic because of its fragility and impotence. For nowhere in the German states is this culture at that level of hegemony which Habermas cites as «the model case of British development» (76). Mainstream Enlightenment ideas with their optimistic import were often enthusiastically received in Germany. But the literary public sphere there, lacking any significant influence on political and economic institutions, was unable to appropriate or reoccupy older forms of publicness, forms which tended to retain their hold on social, political, and moral authority, especially in central Europe, before, during and after the French Revolution.

But it would be a mistake to reduce Schiller’s text to a mere illustration of Germany’s belated development of an effective middle class and embrace of liberal institutions. For its appearance on the eve of the Revolution also signals the end of an era, the era in which neither bourgeois values themselves, nor the views of language and representation underlying and supporting those values, could go unquestioned and unchallenged in any part of Europe. Specifically for the German context, Schiller’s novel fragment, coming at the very end of his belated *Sturm und Drang* phase, questions *àvant la lettre* the selective appropriation of high Enlightenment ideals embodied in the *Humanität* and *Bildung* of Weimar Classicism. But more importantly, by poetically exposing the ideological blind spots of eighteenth century thought, especially the radical subjectivism of both Leibniz’ theistic rationalism and of the British moralists, Schiller also implicitly questions the foundations of an entire edifice of thought about language, human identity, and the world.

**Notes**

1 See Bruford and Selbmann (1–8) for good overviews of the usage of the term *Bildung* and the growth of the tradition of *Bildung* before and after the 1780s.

2 As «dritter Prinz seines Hauses» with no real prospects for political power, the position of Schiller’s prince is analogous to the politically impotent bourgeoisie whose «retreat from the world» is detailed in Lepenies.

3 von Wiese used the term «umgekehrter Entwicklungsroman» (328). More recently Weissberg has called *Der Geisterseher* a «negative Bildungsroman,» citing Schiller’s refusal to orient the story toward any positively defined concept of *Bildung*. Incidentally Weissberg also points out that in his correspondence Schiller once referred to this work as a (theatrical) «farce» (99).

4 See primarily Menhennet. Also, Weissberg notes that upon its first reception in England, *Der Geisterseher* was widely seen as an example of the newly popular Gothic novel (98).
For a related perspective on the «semiotic doubt» of Schiller’s prince, see Weissberg (119–21). Weissberg sees in the unfinished novel a further extension of the doubts about the «referents» of metaphysical and moral language already voiced by Schiller in his earlier *Philosophische Briefe*, proving that Schiller’s double concern with ethical theories and theories of the sign predates *Der Geisterseher*.

Works Cited


