In his philosophy and his philosophical poetry from the mid 1790s, Friedrich Schiller participates in the enlightenment ideal of individual freedom. He explores in his writings how one might best achieve this ideal. In his essays from the time period, he describes freedom as the process of resolving the diverse forces that act upon the individual. The opening stanza of his poem «Das Ideal und das Leben» presents two of these forces as the choice between finding physical satisfaction in sensual pleasure or finding peace for the soul «zwischen Sinnenglück und Seelenfrieden.» This is the first of the many contrasting pairs in the poem. The pairs at first suggest an ordered world with simple choices that lead either to the ideal of freedom that Olympus represents, or to the death and captivity of Hades. But with each new concept that Schiller adds to the poem, simplicity quickly gives way to complexity as he acknowledges the need to accept the requirements of reality while still striving for the ideal. The structure of «Das Ideal und das Leben» relies on the symmetry of a series of nested chiasms as it reinforces Schiller’s philosophical objectives.

Schiller’s theoretical writings struggle with the dialectic tension between reason and direct experience, and endeavor to find a sphere between the two in which free will and beauty can exist. In the eighteenth letter of his Über die Aesthetische Erziehung des Menschen, he describes the diametrical opposition of these two forces, and the need to bring them together.

Unser zweytes Geschäft ist also, diese Verbindung vollkommen zu machen, sie so rein und vollständig durchzuführen, daß beyde Zustände in einem Dritten gänzlich verschwinden und keine Spur der Theilung in dem Ganzen zurückbleibt; sonst vereineln wir, aber vereinigen nicht. (Schiller 20: 366)

For Schiller, freedom can only be obtained when one’s sensuous nature works in harmony with one’s rational nature. This unification of opposing forces is accomplished by means of a third agent – beauty – which combines with the other two in such a way that no trace of the original division between thought and feeling remains. Beauty is able to act as a mediating force for both of these drives because it has the ability to touch both: «Durch die Schönheit wird der
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sinnliche Mensch zur Form und zum Denken geleitet; durch die Schönheit wird der geistige Mensch zur Materie zurückgeführt und der Sinnenwelt wiedergegeben» (20: 365).

From his theory, one would expect Schiller to translate his intellectual ideas into an aesthetic form which can seamlessly put theory into practice. However, such an attempted merger of philosophy and poetry could very easily fail to be either. To avoid this possibility while also revealing the complexity of his ideas, Schiller constructs his poem from a series of symmetrical elements that illuminate the opposing forces of human experience. As he combines, dissects, and recombines these elements in overlapping patterns, his ideas take on an almost organic intricacy. Thus, to fully appreciate the ideas at work in «Das Ideal und das Leben» the reader must recognize the complex layering of structural elements that Schiller employs to give shape to his ideas.

Much of the secondary literature about this poem concentrates on Schiller’s philosophical objectives. It addresses the poem’s relationship to his essays, especially Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen and the other philosophical writings which Schiller published during that same time. These studies, however, neglect or deal only briefly with the structure of the poem. One exception is Helmut Koopmann’s detailed analysis. He describes a «threefold symmetry» (84) encompassing the first three and the final three stanzas of the poem. He argues that the themes of the first stanza parallel those in the last, the second stanza parallels the second-to-last, and the third stanza mirrors the third-to-last to provide a frame for the poem that places the ideal world of Olympus in opposition to the death and captivity of the underworld. After the first three stanzas, Koopmann believes that the analogy has run its course and the symmetry does not continue, since the fourth stanza concerns itself still with the heavenly spheres whereas the twelfth (fourth-to-last) is concerned more with the middle sphere between the extremes of Olympus and Hades. This, however, is not the case.

Koopmann rightly points out that the middle nine stanzas deal with the human condition in a third realm between the two extremes of the framing stanzas. However, he misses the vertical movement involved in the fourth and twelfth stanzas, which mark the transition into and out of a mortal realm bound by «das Unsterbliche.» The primary difference between the two stanzas is that where the fourth stanza marks mankind’s descent into the struggles of mortality, the twelfth begins the final ascent out of them. When confronted with the suffering of this world, as illustrated through Laokoon’s struggle with the serpent, the poet admonishes, «da empöre sich der Mensch!» The reader is instructed to lift himself or herself up out of the physical trials of mortality and rediscover one’s own immortal ideal nature within. What
Koopmann sees as a middle ground between immortal spheres is in reality a transposition of Schiller’s imagery from the immortal to the mortal. Further parallels between the fourth and the twelfth stanzas show that the symmetry continues. Laokoon’s struggle in the twelfth stanza recalls the battle for life and death that hangs in the balance in the fourth. In both instances, the mortal state is associated with sorrow, death, and suffering. Both of these stanzas mark a transition between the mortal spheres discussed in the middle section of the poem and the immortal spheres that are the concern of the first three and final three stanzas.

As the symmetry continues throughout the poem, it forms a chiastus that draws the reader’s attention to the central elements of the poem. This style of poetry, according to John Welch, appears frequently in ancient Greek texts, as well as in most writings of the ancient world (9). It seems therefore appropriate for Schiller to incorporate chiastus into a poem so laden with classical allusions. The word comes from the Greek letter χι or /χ/. Thus, the ideas in a chiastus are presented in a series of inverted and crossing parallelisms with a main idea located in the center. In the second half of «Das Ideal und das Leben,» Schiller returns the reader to the beginning point, retracing as he does all the previously covered points in such a way that his solution to the problem stated at the beginning becomes a clear, unavoidable conclusion.

Chiastus also provides a framework in which the author can «compare, contrast, juxtapose, complement, or complete» ideas by incorporating them into a chiastic system (Welch 11). Further, the ability of chiastus to reinforce an idea makes it ideal for didactic writing, as in the Psalms of the Old Testament, where chiastus is frequently employed. This educational quality also makes it well suited to Schiller’s philosophical purposes, since, according to Welch, as the chiast increases in complexity, «the character of the form itself merges with the message and meaning of the passage» (11).2 Chiastus thus serves a distinct purpose of Schiller’s poem as a Lehrgedicht; namely, it establishes the interplay of ideas in a complex, yet ordered system of symmetry which points toward a resolution of conflicting forces by means of a mediating ideal.

The structural elements of «Das Ideal und das Leben» are both deceptively simple and intriguingly complex. The poem consists of fifteen ten-line stanzas, each of which conforms to a strict pattern of rhyme and meter. The first stanza of «Das Ideal und das Leben» describes the ideal world of the gods on Olympus. The fifteenth stanza mirrors the first with Hercules’ triumphant victory and entry into Olympus as a man become god. The chiastus continues in a similar fashion, as the second and the fourteenth stanzas discuss similar themes of the underworld. The third and the thirteenth stanzas also parallel each other, and so on down to the eighth stanza, which forms the
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cross-over point of the /χ/. Each stanza is not simply a restatement of its counterpart; rather, the themes of one stanza expand on the themes of the other. In some instances, one will be the opposite of the other, or offer an antithetical example, such as when the courage and strength, so valued in the physical conflict of the sixth stanza are proven inadequate in the struggle with the ideal in the tenth stanza. In this latter stanza, the physical struggle has been transformed into a mental conflict in which physical prowess is of no help. The «Mut» and «Kühnheit» is thus contrasted against «erblassen» and «mutlos», and «Glück» turns to «Trauer» if the individual is unable to find harmony between these two extremes.

The chiastic device is not unique to «Das Ideal und das Leben» in Schiller’s writings. Wilkinson and Willoughby show how Schiller also uses chiasmus in the thirteenth of his Ästhetische Briefe to illustrate the reciprocal dependence of «Stoff» and «Form» (348–49).³ «Beide Prinzipien sind einander auch zueinander subordiniert und koordiniert, d.h. sie stehen in Wechselwirkung: ohne Form keine Materie, ohne Materie keine Form» (84, Note 1, emphasis added). This simple chiasmus, which is imbedded in a larger chiastic complex,⁴ shows how Schiller uses the structure of his writings to illustrate his thesis in the images that permeate his poetic and philosophical language. By using chiastic symmetry, Schiller can express his concept of an ideal world and focus the readers’ attention on his method of unifying this heavenly ideal with the earthly reality.

If, as Welch asserts, the use of chiasmus allows the poet to «elevate the importance of a central concept or to dramatize a radical shift of events at the turning point» (9), then one must look to the center of Schiller’s poem to find the means whereby one may combine the ideal and the real spheres. As we will see, this central concept that can unify intellectual reason and sensual experience is the work of art. The interdependence of Stoff and Form in the example from the Ästhetische Briefe is also apparent in the central stanza of «Das Ideal und das Leben,» where truth and freedom become possible when one recognizes the interdependence of the physical and intellectual worlds.

Beyond the overall chiastic structure of «Das Ideal und das Leben,» the poem breaks down into several additional substructures, which also emphasize and reinforce the central thesis in the eighth stanza. The substructures allow the reader to examine the text on a number of different levels. The first level of structure is linear. Each stanza follows naturally from the one preceding it, establishing a narrative framework for the entire poem. In this respect, Schiller uses the same technique here as he does in «Das Lied von der Glocke.» In that poem, the pouring of the bell provides a narrative infrastructure upon which Schiller can hang his theoretical ideas. Both poems are concerned with the
forming (*Bildung*) of the human character. Specifically, the narrative structure of «Das Ideal und das Leben» describes the process of transforming the mortal into his or her god-like ideal. This idea is reinforced by the chain of linguistic markers with the root *wandeln* that begin the poem. For example, «wandellos» in the first stanza becomes «wandelbar» in the second, which becomes «Wandelt» in the third and finally is repeated as «wandeln» in the fourth. The word foreshadows the transformation that Hercules will undergo in the process of his trials in the mortal and immortal spheres. With Hercules, the poem takes the reader through the spheres of life and death, remaining conscious of the paradox and conflict that exists between them, and progressing toward a resolution in which the ideal of each sphere can be maintained.\(^5\)

In addition to the linear progression and the overarching chiasmus, the poem also divides up into triads, where each group of three stanzas together forms an independent and cohesive idea. These five triads also form a chiasmus, in which the idea represented in each triad echoes the idea in its corresponding triad and with the central triad (stanzas 7, 8, and 9) containing the thesis for the entire poem. As with the overall chiasmus, corresponding triads are not identical to each other. Instead, they compliment each other, often through opposing ideas, especially between the physical and intellectual or transcendental struggles that confront humanity. Thus, the first triad (stanzas 1, 2, and 3) describe the immortal worlds of Olympus and the underworld as the teleological potential for mankind with the freedom of Olympus on the one hand and the dark captivity of Hades on the other. The second triad (4, 5, and 6) develops the physical struggle of mortal life and its requirements for victory. The central triad (7, 8, and 9) moves into the realm of art and beauty and identifies the interdependence between the physical and the spiritual and the role of beauty in bringing these two together. The fourth triad (10, 11, and 12) contrasts the physical struggle of the second triad with the intellectual and spiritual struggles that are also a part of mortal existence. The final triad returns to the immortal realms, but here, the poem shows how a mortal, Hercules, transcends the immortal and the mortal worlds and becomes like the gods by subjecting himself to their wills.
At the center of each of these triad chiasms there is a version of Schiller’s objective for bringing earthly life into harmony with the ideal. In the second stanza of the first triad the goal is becoming like the gods while still on earth, «schon auf Erden Göttern gleichen.» This is the first expression in the poem of Schiller’s objective. He has just described the gods and their world, and then presents the idea that everyone can be a part of it. This is accomplished by submitting one’s will to the greater ideal of godliness. In the second triad the struggle is an effort to bring vitality back to the fatigued warrior: «Den Erschöpften zu erquicken.» The third triad features the phrase «das Tote bildend zu beseelen,» and in the middle of the fourth triad is the admonition to come into harmony with the will of the gods: «Nehmt die Gottheit auf in euren Willen.»

The final triad as a whole illustrates the process of physical striving combined with an active submission to a higher ideal that incorporates all of the phrases listed above. In the final triad, Hercules becomes the model for portraying how a person may escape the mortal realm by becoming subject to a heavenly ideal. Hercules must struggle through life, perform his great labors, and take upon himself all of the burdens set before him by Hera. In contrast to Persephone, he does not concern himself with his own desires, but submits his will to the greater ideals as represented by the gods. Instead of needing rescue, Hercules ventures into the underworld and is able to rescue his friends from death. He represents the middle ground between mortal and immortal that embodies the best aspects of both.

Schiller adds yet another level of structure by organizing the three stanzas within each triad into an additional chiasm. For example, the first stanza describes the ideal realm of the gods as «ewigklar» and «spiegelrein.» The heavens are also characterized by the zephyr-lightness of life in that realm. The third stanza returns to the gods and echoes some of the themes through phrases such as «auf ihren Flügeln schweben,» or «in des Lichtes Fluren.» The third stanza also contrasts some of the themes of the first. Instead of «Ewig klar,» a «dunkle Schicksal» appears. Instead of a life that is «rein» and «eben,» man is encouraged to flee from an «engen, dumpfen Leben» into the realm of the ideal. In between these two descriptions of the ideal comes its opposite. In this example, it is Ceres’ daughter, Persephone, who is doomed to remain living among the dead because, unlike Hercules in the fourteenth stanza, she cannot submit her desires to the will of Orcus, the god of the underworld. Her fate illustrates the alternative to entering into the ideal realm of the gods. The symmetry is also apparent in the middle grouping, where «der Schönheit Sphäre» in the seventh stanza echoes «der Schönheit stille Schattenlande» in the ninth.
Through the repetition of ideas, Schiller is able to reinforce and clarify the central idea of the poem, that there is a middle ground in which the conflict between the realms of the real and the ideal can be resolved. Koopmann describes this middle-space as «die eigentliche Sphäre des Menschen» (89) and explains that Schiller saw it as a real and obtainable goal for anyone. The concept of the ideal in his opinion is not a theoretical abstract, «sondern als Chiffre für einen Zustand steht, in dem der Mensch sich nicht befindet, den er aber erreichen kann, und dieses ‹Idealisieren› […] ist dem Menschen sogar aufgetragen» (90). Schiller shows how a mortal, limited person can discover within himself or herself the ideal world of spirit and thought.

In «Das Ideal und das Leben,» art connects the real with the ideal. In the poem, art is first and foremost the representation of beauty, especially the classical depictions of nature which transcend everyday experience. Schiller consequently illustrates the poem with classical examples and ties them together with chiasmus to develop his concept of the ideal. The end of the eighth stanza introduces the metaphor of the sculptor as an artist who must wrestle mentally and physically with the heavy strokes of his hammer and chisel to create a work of art. Together with the seventh and the ninth stanzas, which comprise the central triad, beauty and art become a space which one may enter to resolve the conflict between the real and the ideal. Schiller refers to it as the «Schönheit stille Schattenlande» and the «Schönheitssphäre.» In these worlds one comes closest to discovering the ideal and finding peace amidst the struggle. The sculptor begins with a piece of raw marble. The block is ordinary «Stoff,» material. There is no form to it. It has no shape. It is a lump of stone dominated by its own gravity. But, as the artist physically strives to discover the «Schönheitssphäre» within the stone, the heaviness falls away with the rest of the formless matter. The artist discovers in his work a «Bild,» or a figure. The effort required to press forward in everyday life is echoed in the effort required to create the statue. One may imagine a statue of Hercules achieving perfection as he appears at the end of the poem. The artwork becomes just one more manifestation of human potential and human development. As one understands and appreciates the beauty of the work of art, one comes closer to the ideal, or begins to understand it better, and takes a step closer to perfection.

The eighth and central stanza of «Das Ideal und das Leben» best explains how to enter into and dwell in this middle ground. Although this stanza does not correspond specifically to any other single stanza, there are elements in it that repeat or reflect ideas and images in each of the other fourteen. In this way the middle stanza is connected linguistically and thematically to the rest of the poem, and its function as the thesis or focal point of the poem becomes
clear. At the beginning of the eighth stanza, Schiller restates the poem’s objective: «das Tote bildend zu beseelen.» This line reveals a surprising depth of meaning, which becomes more powerful as the themes reappear in the other fourteen stanzas. The term «das Tote,» implies a contrast between the reality of mortality with an immortal ideal. In the second stanza and the fourteenth, Schiller describes the encounters of the living, specifically Hercules and Persephone, in the world of the dead beyond the river Styx, a place both connected to and separate from man’s mortal existence. The fourth stanza also links death to the sorrows and trials of mortal existence. In other places, «das Tote» relates to images of heaviness or gravity found in the eighth, ninth, fourteenth and fifteenth stanzas. All of these examples emphasize the limitations of the mortal sphere.

The root of «beseelen,» on the other hand, emphasizes the life that the soul brings to a physical body. «Die Seele» accentuates the spiritual side of the two worlds to which a person belongs. It recalls the «Seelenfrieden» of the first stanza, as well as the images of weightlessness and beauty in other stanzas. «Beseelen,» therefore, participates in the act of imparting a soul, intellect, or godliness to the mortal being. Schiller alternately describes this goal in the second stanza as becoming like the gods while still remaining connected with the mortal world – «schon auf Erden Göttern gleichen.» Doing so allows an individual to enjoy the advantages of both realms while overcoming the limitations inherent in each.

The word «bildend» in the central stanza receives particular stress, both rhythmically, and through its alliterative association with «beseelen.» The term is central to understanding the rest of the poem, since it is an image that reappears over and over again. It is clear that Schiller uses Bild and bilden both literally, as in the English cognate «to build,» as well as figuratively, in the sense of Bildung – with everything that term connotes in eighteenth-century philosophy. When the word reappears in the ninth stanza, it refers to a statue, or «Standbild.» But added to this meaning is a whole list of linguistic markers that not only ties the concept of Bildung to other concepts, but also creates a complex constellation of words rich in significance. In the poem we find «Traumbild,» «Götterbild,» «bildend» and «Bild.» There is also «Gestalt» and «Form.» Schiller incorporates all of these possible connotations into an aesthetic progression. By repeating the forms of the word throughout the poem, it becomes clear that his concept of Bildung is central to the poem. Its meaning is made richer and more complex as each new term in the constellation is introduced. As it is represented in the poem, Bildung is closely related to Schiller’s concept of Erziehung demonstrated in his Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen. The development of the individual into a free
and thinking person has many analogies in the creation of a work of art, requiring many of the same compromises and presenting the same potential for the development of beauty. Thus the phrase «das Tote bildend zu beseelen» represents the project of uniting the soul with the mortal body through art and beauty and education.7

At the crossover point of the chiasmus in the middle of the eighth stanza, Schiller provides the means for accomplishing the task of aesthetic education. He describes the task as a process of reciprocal submission of thought and element. These central lines are the focus around which everything else in the entire poem is concentrated.

Da, da spanne sich des Fleißes Nerve,
Und beharrlich ringend unterwerfe
Der Gedanke sich das Element.
Nur dem Ernst, den keine Mühe bleichet
Rauscht der Wahrheit tief versteckter Born. (lines 74–78)

The submission in «Unterwerfen» is contrasted in the eleventh stanza with the resistance of man against God’s majesty. «Das Element,» which is related to the physical or earthly and therefore mortal, must become subjected to thought. However, the word «Gedanke» belongs to the same word constellation as «Seele» and «Geist» and all the spiritual, heavenly, and intellectual concepts of the ideal which accompany it. So although the material of «Das Element» must be subjugated to thought, the intellectual thought still has to function within the limits imposed upon it by the physical environment. If this process does not occur, then only the physical will have any validity and the intellectual thought and the freedom it brings with it will disappear. The central stanza of Schiller’s poem portrays a synthesis of opposing forces so that this intellectual/spiritual struggle takes place in a physical reality. For this reason, the persistence of «Beharrlich» combined with the struggling «ringend» further modify the submission, and are prominent features of the fifth stanza, which thematizes the earthly struggles and the necessity for constantly pressing forward, of never giving up or losing courage.

Together, the lines «Und beharrlich ringend unterwerfe/Der Gedanke sich das Element» describe the process of submission as a battle that occurs on a physical level in the second triad, as well as on a spiritual or metaphysical level in the fourth triad. When viewed together, the two become different aspects of the same struggle. Schiller’s striving individual is, according to Heinrich Keller, a citizen of two worlds at once, made up of both spiritual and material elements. Although the spiritual/intellectual side of human nature is immortal and god-like, the material side is mortal and subject to fate.
People become free by controlling their material nature: «Als Geist beweist er dann seine Freiheit am herrlichsten, wenn er die Materie beherrscht» (Keller 26). From this perspective, Schiller’s project becomes the process of uniting a person’s limited mortal nature with the immortal nature of spirit, freeing the individual to be a part of both spheres at once. In the poem, one’s mortal existence becomes a struggle with the physical weakness inherent in earthly life. An individual can only succeed by submitting to a more transcendent ideal of one’s self. The physical struggle then progresses to an intellectual level, which unifies mind and body and eliminates the contradictions between the two spheres of human existence.

In Über die nothwendigen Grenzen beim Gebrauch schöner Formen, which appeared together with «Das Ideal und das Leben» in the same volume of Die Horen, Schiller offers further insight into the process of mutual submission of the mental and the physical. He makes a distinction in this essay between rational and sensual knowledge. The rational must by its nature break everything into its most elemental parts – thereby understanding specifics at the expense of the concept of wholeness. The rational person, says Schiller, would enter St. Peter’s Basilica and see only the pillars that hold up the structure, and not the artistic greatness of the edifice in its entirety (21: 14). On the other hand, the sensual (natural) observer is unwilling or unable to comprehend the parts for fear of losing the unity of the whole. He argues first that a work written for the sake of the beautiful has little worth to most students, since, entertained by its sensual approachability, they will willingly devour it and afterward be unable to give a report of its contents (21: 14). Schiller makes a distinction between this common type of beauty and the «Wahrhaft Schöne» or truly beautiful. This higher level of beauty is in complete harmony with the reason it supports because it speaks to the whole nature of Man. Even so, such a natural form of writing is still not appropriate for philosophical works, since it forces the logically thinking person to reinterpret the work in order to distill the individual elements out of it, thus missing the unified harmony of the whole (21: 14).

For Schiller, the poet who wishes to address both the rational and the sensual aspects of the ideal cannot rely on the reader to determine the form or the content of the poem: «Aber von der Beschränktheit und Bedürftigkeit seiner Leser empfängt der darstellende Schriftsteller niemals das Gesetz. Dem Ideal, das er in sich selbst trägt, geht er entgegen, unbekümmert wer ihm et- wa folgt und wer zurückbleibt» (21: 15). He thus makes an argument for the subtle complexity of «Das Ideal und das Leben,» which on the surface appears random and haphazard, yet upon careful examination reveals multiple layers both of meaning and of structure. In this context then, Schiller’s poem
becomes an attempt to intermingle harmoniously the rational with the emotional in one work to form a complete whole.

Schiller’s *Grenzen* essay may also explain why he seems to seek beauty in complexity instead of in simplicity. The poem favors the readers who, like the sculptor in the middle of the poem, are willing to put active effort into the reading. Only through active reading is it possible for the reader to truly acquire something from the reading that could be considered knowledge. Readers who simply react to a text with their senses are turned away from the text because they are forced to think about it rationally: «denn er legt ihnen die saure Arbeit des Denkens auf» (21: 15). However, those who only see the intellectual aspects of the work (the philosophers and the pillar-seekers) are incapable of comprehending the whole poem in its organic entirety. «Das Schöne thut seine Wirkung schon bey der bloßen Betrachtung, das Wahre will Studium» (21: 19). The complex chiastic structure accomplishes Schiller’s objectives in a number of ways. First, its elaborate structure only becomes visible after the kind of careful study Schiller advocates. The chiasmus also provides a mechanism that allows him to combine the polar opposites of the rational and the sensual in a way that they can coexist without canceling each other out. It further allows him to set up the problem in clear dualistic terms that can then unfold in all its pluralistic complexity. Finally, the chiasmus places the focus of the poem on the sphere of beauty in the central triad as the mediating force between the two extremes.

For Schiller, true beauty only reveals itself in a combination of form and substance that stimulates both the intellect and the senses. He establishes the conflict between these two along a vertical axis in the poem as he portrays the opposition of Olympus above and Hades below. Obtaining freedom within the limits of mortality is associated with ascending into the heavens. For Schiller, however, such freedom is only possible after one has passed with a great deal of effort through mortal trials, represented in the second triad of the poem and by Hercules journey through the underworld. The conflict has its analogy in the world of art in the central triad, as the sculptor works the stone to triumph over its formless mass: «Nur des Meißels schweren Schlag erweicht sich des Marmors sprödes Korn./Aber dringt bis in der Schönheit Sphäre, und im Staub bleibt die Schwere mit dem Stoff, den sie beherrscht, zurück.» As the statue begins to emerge out of the block of marble, the mass of heavy stone is replaced by a form that is independent – free of the effects of gravity that so recently defined it. Instead, it appears «Schlank und leicht,» contrary to its former nature. The ideal of freedom through great effort occurs at various points throughout <Das Ideal und das Leben.> He associates this freedom with lightness and with flying or floating on heavenly wings.
Writing to Gottfried Körner during the time that his Ästhetische Briefe were taking shape, Schiller elaborates in his Kallias Briefe on his understanding of beauty as an aspect of freedom. Sabine Roehr explains how Schiller’s concept of beauty in this essay represents a manifestation of artistic nature (Natur in der Kunstmäßigkeit), in which natural and man-made objects are beautiful because they appear to be «determined from within themselves, by their own nature» (120). Therefore, beauty is that which exists as a result of its own laws: «was durch seine eigene Regel ist [...] Regel in der Freiheit, Freiheit in der Regel» (26: 203). As Schiller’s first reaction to Kant’s aesthetic theory, the main purpose of the Kallias Briefe is to argue against Kant’s assertion that an objective concept of beauty was not possible (Roehr 120). Although Schiller would later abandon some aspects of his argument, Roehr maintains that he did not give up on the idea of moral beauty in humans (121). As it is this moral beauty that appears to be at the heart of «Das Ideal und das Leben,» the core of Schiller’s argument in the Kallias Briefe can provide some insight into the poem. Schiller describes nature as that which exists of itself, and art as that which exists in accordance to a law (26: 203). Beauty is then the expression of nature in a being or object that is in harmony with its self-determination. Beauty is accordingly an act of free will (Roehr 121). Freedom, in turn, entails the often laborious effort of subjecting the will to the necessities of the law of one’s existence. The result of this endeavor is a human being who acts freely from a sense of duty in such a way that it appears as if the person acted easily and from mere instinct (121). The ideal of Schiller’s poem – the perfect combination of one’s rational and sensual natures – can be achieved best through the mediating abilities of art and beauty.

One of the primary laws with which Schiller associates nature in this letter is the law of gravity. One sees beauty in nature, argues Schiller, where gravity does not dominate the form as an alien force, but where an object exists in harmony with the law and thus gains a measure of independence from its necessity. Schiller’s first argument on this subject is perhaps the clearest. He compares two vases and their relationship to the law of gravity. The first vase, short and squat, has given its form over to the dictates of gravity. There is no effort, no struggle, only a sullen acquiescence to the law’s necessity entirely lacking in beauty. The second vase, with a narrow base and long, elegant lines, is equally subject to gravity, but is not dominated by it. Instead, it finds its own way to come into harmony with the law. The tall vase appears to determine its own form (26: 203–04). The combination of natural and artistic beauty therefore reveals itself as the «reine Zusammenstimmung des innern Wesens mit der Form, eine Regel, die von dem Dinge selbst zugleich befolgt und gegeben ist» (26: 208). It represents a level of perfection not possible in its
individual parts. «Bey dem Naturschönen sehen wir mit unseren Augen, daß es aus sich selbst ist: daß es durch eine Regel sey, sagt nicht der Sinn, sondern der Verstand» (26: 210). This suggests that natural beauty emanates from the object, or from an idea itself, and that beauty is revealed as an act of will, or the evidence of self-will.

Schiller draws a connection in his philosophical writings between flying and freedom and, in turn, with beauty. He argues in another example that birds are the best examples of a naturally beautiful creature precisely because they represent a form that has overcome the determinism of gravity: «Ein Vogel im Flug is die glücklichste Darstellung des durch die Form bezwungenenen Stoffes, der durch die Kraft überwundenen Schwere» (26: 205). This last phrase is remarkably similar to the ninth stanza: «im Staube bleibt die Schwere mit dem Stoff, den sie beherrscht, zurück.» Schiller remarks that flight and freedom are often associated with one another throughout literature (26: 205), but he takes it one step further and associates the flying form with artistic or aesthetic beauty. It is important to note here that Schiller also sees the overcoming of gravity as a process that requires extreme effort. It is this effort in the poem that is the key to escaping the limitations of a mortal existence.

Schiller makes the point that those forms are not free or beautiful because they have overcome the law of gravity, but because the form reveals a certain freedom from its dominance by finding a way to work within the bounds of the law. The free form thereby discovers a realm of freedom through submitting to the law without being completely controlled by it. Schiller applies this concept to a more universal definition of freedom that can be discovered, as the central stanza of the poem describes, through the process of subjecting the elemental Stoff to the shape give to the elemental by thought (Form). This free-floating region of thought and harmonic form is related to Schiller’s «Schönheitsphäre» – an ideal aesthetic space that is free because it accepts its own limits.

This concept of aesthetic freedom resists a narrower definition because it deals with resolving a paradox within Schiller’s system. The material in a poem has to be subject to the thoughts it conveys, but it is still the material that gives shape to the thought. In the terms of the poem, when one remains focused on the ideal – even though it may not be achievable – the realities of life follow harmoniously. Viewed from another perspective, the gravity of life can do nothing but weigh the individual down. The captive often lives in a self-imposed confinement, seeing only the limitations and fighting against them instead of finding the freedom within those constraints. In Schiller’s system, the free are free because they can see the beauty in the law and the possibilities for beauty and freedom through working with the law instead of against
it. This does not preclude hard work and striving – these are still necessary if one is to follow the «innere Notwendigkeit der Form» (26: 207). However, in art and in life the effort must be in harmony with nature and with the law.

An jeder großen Komposition ist es nöthig, daß sich das einzelne einschränke, um das Ganze zum Effekt kommen zu laßen. Ist diese Einschränkung des Einzelnen zugleich eine Wirkung seiner Freiheit, d.i. setzt es sich diese Grenze selbst, so ist die Komposition schön. Schönheit ist durch sich selbst gebändigte Kraft; Beschränkung aus Kraft. (26: 213, emphasis added)

Beauty in this definition is that which willfully sets its own limits and makes them a strength, rather than that which fights against outwardly imposed limits and is weakened in the process. To return to the flight analogy: a bird is free of the constrictions of gravity because its form allows it to be so. Even so, flight requires enormous effort and will. Likewise Hercules gains his reward at the end of the poem both by great striving and by a paradoxical exercising of his free will in submission to the gods.

The interrelationship between the ideal and reality as it appears in this poem is a recurrent theme throughout Schiller’s writings. In his essay Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung, Schiller sets up an opposition between «Ideal» and «Wirklichkeit.» It becomes necessary to recover the ideal through reality. Schiller describes this process as the resolution of the conflict between the two: «Ihr Charakter besteht also darin, daß aller Gegensatz der Wirklichkeit mit dem Ideale, der den Stoff zu der satyrischen und elegischen Dichtung hergegeben hatte, vollkommen aufgehoben sey, und mit demselben auch aller Streit der Empfindungen aufhöre» (20: 472). The real and the ideal remain connected in such a way that, according to Gerhard Friedl, it is only possible to salvage the ideal through first experiencing its loss (114). An individual is able to resolve the differences between the real and the ideal not by passively acquiescing to reality’s limitations, but by actively removing one’s self from them, an act that comes through a willful submission to reality (115). Schiller’s theories therefore have implications beyond the creation of works of art. His arguments point to an attempt to create through his art a concept of freedom and harmony in the wider social sphere. A community is free when it can agree on certain social limitations – which requires a degree of conformity in the community. When, however, a member of the community fights against the limitations, or sees the limitations as imposed from the outside, then an antagonistic relationship develops between the rebelling individual and the society to which that individual formerly belonged. Once the individual begins to strive against the community, that person removes himself or herself from it, and so long as the individual remains physically
part of the community but emotionally and philosophically opposed to it, then the individual is no longer free within it.

This does not imply that the individual cannot strive to change and improve his or her community. Schiller’s poetry and his philosophy make the case for exactly the opposite of passive submission to the status quo. Schiller wrote during a period in European culture that experienced a series of social and political upheavals in which the role of the individual in society underwent a process of reevaluation. Throughout this period, he maintained an abiding faith in the ability of art and education to elevate the human condition. His theories suggest that through willful submission the individual may break loose from the limitations imposed by the physical sphere and become free to explore the realm of the ideal. The enlightenment gained there can then be used to institute change in the «real» world in such a way that the new «freedom» does not do more harm than the limitation it attempts to abolish.

It is important when positioning Schiller’s work within his cultural environment to give particular attention to the structural complexity of his writing. Doing so reveals an artist who thought carefully about the issues of his day, and, far from providing banal and trivial (von Wiese 565) solutions to unanswerable questions, his works display a keen awareness of the multiple shades of possibility in his argument. In Schiller’s works there is a constant tension between the dualism described in rational philosophy and the pluralism he discovered in nature. The conflict between the two helps explain the complexities of his poetry. Wilkinson and Willoughby, in their introduction to Schiller’s Ästhetische Briefe, elaborate on the multiple facets of Schiller’s writing:

To dismiss [Schiller] as a Kantian dualist has been a recurrent failing of Schiller scholarship: it has obscured his life-long inclination to think of the psyche as an organic unity. But to attempt to correct this by denying his evident dualism altogether is to fall into an error almost as unfortunate. For it is to miss his most characteristic, and his most valuable, contribution to our understanding of human nature: his insight into the dynamic interplay – and interstrife – of opposing forces in the life of the psyche.» (xxx)

Schiller sets up another dualism in «Das Ideal und das Leben» between simplicity and complexity. It seems clear that Schiller tries to describe the world in terms of opposing forces. At various places in the Aesthetische Briefe he argues for a mutual submission of these forces to one another. The interaction between these opposing forces is characterized in Schiller’s works as a process in which a series of conflicts leads to an eventual resolution.

However, Schiller’s poem describes the mortal existence not as a struggle between two opposing forces, but a whole multitude of opposing forces, each
exerting pressure on the needs and attentions of the individual from different directions. As a result, the world Schiller envisions is more the interwoven, symbiotic reality of nature than the Kantian rational-sensual dualism. His approach is reflected in the structures of the poem. A simple chiasmus suggests a dualism, a symmetric opposition of ideas. Further, the title «Das Ideal und das Leben» points to a simple opposition of two ideas. But as the dualistic structure repeats, overlapping and folding in on itself, evolving from one idea to another, it becomes ever more complex, resembling the organic nature of real life without abandoning the original concept of struggle between opposing forces.

When one takes the time to immerse one’s self as an active reader in Schiller’s poetry, especially those poems such as «Das Ideal und das Leben» that overtly attempt to incorporate his philosophical writings into an aesthetic form, one discovers that Schiller has left nothing to chance. The poem is not so much rigidly constructed as it is extraordinarily disciplined. If one looks at each of the elements separately, the structures in «Das Ideal und das Leben» may mean little. Each layer is relatively simple by itself, but when combined with and integrated into the other layers, the simplicity becomes extremely intricate. As the complexity of the intertwining structures emerges, they reveal the effort that went into its creation, and one gains a greater appreciation for a poem that integrates complicated and abstract ideas into concrete illustrations and structures to create a unified, coherent, and often surprisingly beautiful argument.

Notes

1 See, for example, Hans H. Schulte, Werke der Begeisterung; Matthijs Jolles, Dichtkunst und Lebenkunst; and Lesley Sharpe, Friedrich Schiller.

2 For more information about the use of chiasmus in western literature, see Ralf Norrmann, Samuel Butler and the Meaning of Chiasmus.

3 The terms «Stoff» and «Form» in Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen are closely related to Ideal and Leben in the poem. All four words appear numerous times in the poem.

4 Wilkinson and Willoughby describe Schiller’s use of chiasmus in the Ästhetische Briefe both in their introduction to his work (lxviii ff.) and in Appendix III (348–50).

5 There are other linguistic markers as well. Perhaps the most persistent of these is the river imagery that flows from the beginning of the poem to the end, taking various forms as it does so. Bildung finds expression in various forms of the word Bild, and freedom and beauty are expressed in images associated with flying.

6 Heinrich Keller describes the function of Seele in «Das Ideal und das Leben» in more detail (28).
Edgar Landgraf’s definition of Bildung offers an interesting dimension to the entire Bild-complex in «Das Ideal und das Leben.» He argues that Bildung is central to the eighteenth-century idea of aesthetic autonomy because it allowed people «to picture a self-constituting process that is nevertheless «authored» by the artist-genius» (168). He defines the concept as «a mediating process that allows the negotiation and reversal of temporal, spatial, and causal relations between the artist and the emerging artwork» (167). Bildung therefore becomes an «increasingly complex and significant concept […] which in its mediation between conscious and unconscious acts provides no less than the necessary precondition for the possibility of an autonomous work of art to be created» (169–70).

8 Dated 23 February 1793.

9 Note the chiastic symmetry of this argument.

10 According to Leslie Sharpe, this balance of opposites in art is a key component of Schiller’s concept of sentimental poetry: «Schiller expressed his idea of the poet’s relation to the work in terms of «serious play». The work of art aims to create an equilibrium produced by the perfect balance of opposites» (191).

Works Cited


