

## Introduction

Wolfgang Riedel, in the Schiller-Handbuch of 2011, bemoans the fact that the philosophical currents of the period between 1750 and the mature phase of Kant's philosophy are, essentially, unexplored territory:

“Die deutsche Philosophie zwischen 1750 und 1780/1790, zwischen dem Ende der Wollfianischen Scholastik und KANTS vernunftkritischer Wende, ist philosophiehistorische Terra incognita.<sup>1</sup>”

On occasion, German germanists will indict themselves for failing to pay sufficient attention to international scholarship. In his book *Radical Enlightenment* Jonathan Israel pays detailed attention to this very era, particularly within Germany. He takes a view that is significantly different from that taken in most histories of philosophy, including the Schiller-Handbuch. Faring blindly on Israel might consequently be a risk: a risk that will be entered into in this paper.

Friedrich Schiller's *Geschichte der Abfall der vereinigte Niederlande* has been the subject of much research in the German-speaking world, for two reasons. On the one hand, it is an entry in the catalogue of Schiller's works, and is studied for that reason. On the other, it is considered to be an important step in the development of German historiography. Its relation particularly to the work of Leopold von Ranke is much discussed. On this matter, Jonathan Israel's work might offer a fruitful perspective. Israel presents the history of thought in this era as a struggle, or even a dialectic, between radical and moderate enlightenment. Although historians such as Leopold von Ranke are in most respects more conservative than Schiller was, in one crucial respect, the school of history as represented by Ranke was closer to the radical enlightenment of, for instance, Baruch de Spinoza. This, as will be argued here, means there is an abyss between history as practiced by Schiller and by Ranke.

Aside from Israel, reference will be almost exclusively to German scholarship. The main counterpoints will be the work of Daniel Fulda and Johannes Süßmann: the most important scholars to concern themselves with the place of Schiller within the history of historiography. Direct reference to Schiller's work will primarily come from two sources: aside from *Geschichte der Abfall der vereinigte Niederlande*, also the lecture *Was heißt und zu welchem*

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<sup>1</sup> Riedel, Wolfgang. 'Schiller und die popularphilosophische Tradition.' in: Helmut Koopmann ed. *Schiller-Handbuch. 2., durchgesehene und aktualisierte Auflage*. Stuttgart: Alfred Kroner Verlag. P. 162

*Ende studiert man Universalgeschichte?*. As a point of comparison, Ranke will be central, as founder and representative of the historicist tradition in German historiography. Direct reference will be to a short lecture of his, 'Geschichte und Philosophie'. Between these two texts, Israel's book, and the scholarship in German, an attempt will be made to establish whether there is underlying convergence or divergence between the ideas of Schiller and Ranke.

## 1. The development of German historiography

The humanities in general find themselves, by their very nature, in a position that could well be described as limbo, being neither of God's nor the devil's party. The humanities, by their nature, are too literary to count as science, and too scientific to count as literature. Instead, they are located in between, and are subject to constant oscillation between the two spheres. This oscillation could even be described as a dialectic: the humanities must achieve a synthesis between science and art. Whenever either science or art become too dominant, a counter-movement, emphasizing the opposing sphere, is required. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the choice between science and art begins to become more pressing. Goethe is often considered the last of the universal geniuses: of the great minds who did not feel obliged to specialize, but excelled in a number of different areas. The specialization has since proceeded, and rapidly, to a point where it was not merely impossible, for instance, to be a musician, a painter, and a writer at the same time, but where various types of literary practice became mutually exclusive. Although this change may well be rooted in the Enlightenment, it only took effect in full in the nineteenth century. It was possible, in the Age of Enlightenment, for a single author to be a dramatist, novelist, philosopher, and historian, as the example of Voltaire shows. Other examples of 18th-century literary figures who practice different, widely divergent genres, include David Hume, Denis Diderot, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, as well as Friedrich Schiller, who wrote poetry, drama, philosophy, and history. Beginning in the nineteenth century, the various literary disciplines become increasingly distinct. The disciplines of history and philosophy come close to being juxtaposed: the philosophical perception of history becomes contrasted to the historical perception of history. Karl Popper's juxtaposition of 'Historismus' and 'Historizismus' serves to illustrate the contradiction. Hegel, a 'Historizist', intended to

determine the underlying developments in history: a Leopold von Ranke was not necessarily opposed to this project, but was doubtful about its feasibility. According to him, historical events should be perceived first of all in their isolation.

Daniel Fulda draws an intricate picture of the interplay between literature and philosophy, and the discipline of history caught between the two, during the later Enlightenment. Literature, in this era, is strongly philosophical, but at the same highly critical of the established, positivist thought of the period. In his book *Wissenschaft aus Kunst*, Fulda argues that the development of historiography from a form of art to a scientific, or at least, academic, discipline, is a process that had to reverse itself in order to become viable. German historiography in the eighteenth century was dominated by the movement of pragmatism, the aim of which it is to discern the underlying causes of universal history. 'Causes' can be translated as 'laws'. Pragmatism is a direct heir to the philosophy of Gottfried Leibniz and Christian Wolff. In their philosophy, God had decided upon a number of natural laws at the moment of creation, which would lead to the emergence of the best of all possible worlds. These underlying laws are the direct expression of the divine purpose in the world: determining what they are is therefore the only worthy aim of any scientific pursuit. This attitude to scientific enquiry, which can be described as philosophical, led to spectacular results in the field of physics. In history, the results were inevitably more modest: a consensus could not be reached about the natural laws of history.

To make progress, history needed to depart from science, and be cross-fertilized by the new genre of the novel. The theory of the eighteenth-century novel, according to Fulda, took inspiration from Leibniz and Wolff as well. Literary art did not yet have permission to be an end in itself, as it would be granted by the *l'art pour l'art* movement in the nineteenth century, but should aim to depict, as Aristotle put it, not that which is, but that which is possible. Literature, as such, is still related territory to the sciences. Much as in physics, it was a sphere in which the underlying laws (in this case of human interaction, in the Leibnizian-Wolffian conception also given by God) could be discovered through experimentation. For the novel, this notion came under scrutiny with Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, which parodied John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, which expressed views that were, to a certain extent, similar to those of Leibniz and Wolff. The impact of Sterne's novel, according to Fulda, played an essential role in undermining the influence Leibniz and Wolff exerted on both the practice and the study of literature. Sterne awoke his German readership to the cognitive difficulties inherent in the practice of pragmatism within literature. Subsequently, Herder extended those reservations to the practice of pragmatism in history.

Herder became the philosopher of the particular at the expense of the universal. In his *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* of 1774, he maintained the writing of universal history, and discerning the motive forces of history in its entirety, to be impossible.

The two attitudes gradually become opposed and can no longer meet. In a certain sense, the problem is also practical in nature that the craft of writing history has become too sophisticated for a philosopher to master in addition to his own discipline: and the craftsman-historian no longer has the courage to draw generalisations. The necessities and shortcomings of their respective crafts make it inevitable that the two groups adopt opposing theories<sup>2</sup>.

## 2. The Enlightenment according to Jonathan Israel

In his trilogy on Enlightenment thought and society, Jonathan Israel perceives the development of Enlightenment thought as a reaction to the philosophy of Baruch de Spinoza. From the first publication of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* to the end of the eighteenth century, some were convinced by Spinoza's thought, but more were outraged. Either way, the challenge he posed had to be met. Israel argues that, even when Spinoza is suppressed, his legacy is present. The first, successful, reaction, in Germany, to Spinozism, is the Leibnizian-Wolffian system, which appeared to have put the measure to rest. Spinozism revived, first implicitly in the *Fragmentenstreit*, then, explicitly, in the *Pantheismusstreit*. This time, Immanuel Kant rose to the challenge, rescuing a traditional worldview. At this point, Spinozism once more falls into disrepute.

The distinguishing characteristic of Spinoza's thought when compared to scholasticism, Cartesianism, Newton-Lockeanism, Leibniz-Wolffianism, and finally also German idealism, is the idea of the single substance. There is but one world, and it is the material. If and insofar as there is a God, this God is present within this world. As the Biblical worldview cannot be maintained, in the scientific age, if God resides in this world rather than in a world beyond, the Biblical worldview becomes obsolete. Spinoza's philosophy is cogent to such an extent, that all those who wish to maintain a belief in God are forced into the defensive. One reaction,

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<sup>2</sup> Fulda, Daniel. *Wissenschaft aus Kunst. Die Entstehung der modernen deutschen Geschichtsschreibung 1760-1860*. European Cultures. Studies in Literature and the Arts. Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter. P. 100-145.

represented by Jacobi in the *Pantheismusstreit*, is to reject philosophy altogether. On moral and emotional grounds, faith in God is desirable. Philosophy is a threat to faith, and must therefore be abandoned.

The thought of both Leibniz and Kant are both complex intellectual constructs, to allow for the possibility of the existence of a world beyond this world, and therefore, of the existence of a God who rules over the world. Kant, unlike Leibniz, does not write a Theodicy: in his time, Spinozism has progressed to such an extent, that a philosopher can no longer simply aver the existence of an interventionist God. Rather, Kant argues that the possibility that there might be a God cannot be excluded, and indeed, that the intellectual constitution of the human race almost suggests a divine purpose. The world is unknowable, but, with a variant on Cartesianism, the mind possesses a set of innate ideas, 'Anschauungsformen', with which to understand the world. With this, the nature of the world, and its origins, divine or otherwise, is left open. He then relies upon his readers to make their own 'leap of faith' (a term coined by Jacobi), and decide that, as the truth cannot be known, they might as well believe what they want to believe. The core contention of Leibniz (that the world is ruled by principles which are external to the world) remains intact: the principles and their origins are merely reformulated, to improve the system's defenses against Spinozism. Essential to Spinozism, on the other hand, is that developments in the world are driven by forces inherent to the world. The system of Kant became pervasive in German philosophy, but not necessarily in German culture more generally, where partisans of Spinoza include Goethe and Friedrich Hölderlin. Spinozism, prior to Nietzsche, having become unfashionable once more, was largely pushed to the sidelines<sup>3</sup>.

### **3. Leopold von Ranke**

The founding figure of the modern academic discipline of history is often perceived to have been Leopold von Ranke. In the greater scheme of things, he stands out almost as a symbol rather than an intellectual figure: he becomes the second father of history, after the first father, Herodotus. Ranke's position within the discipline is ambivalent. As all historians, he is caught between art and science, and he repositioned his discipline with regards to both of them. His

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<sup>3</sup> Israel, Jonathan. *Democratic Enlightenment. Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2012.P. 684-740

name is associated with the institutionalisation of the discipline, and therefore also with the pressure on historians to specialise: to confess to the study of history, and not dabble in other disciplines on the side.

He, therefore, represents a practice of historiography that takes leave of the anecdotal, and is more scientific, or systematic. In this wider perspective, Ranke abets a movement from art to science. When looked at within the framework of his own time, the perspective changes. He is not the historian who puts his discipline on an academic footing. Rather, he makes an adjustment to the institutionalisation of science that was already in progress. From this perspective, he appears to bring history closer to art. In a lecture on Leopold von Ranke, Wolfgang Hardtwig summarizes the distinction between Enlightenment historiography and the historicism introduced by Ranke:

„Damit vollzog er (Ranke) exemplarisch den Paradigmawechsel vom aufklärerischen zum historistischen ..... Sollte Ganzheit wirklich erfahrbar, d.h. anschaulich sein, so bedurfte das zerstreute Wissen der Transformation auf eine neue symbolische Ebene: die ästhetische. Ganzheit - so die Grundannahme des entstehenden Historismus - teilt sich unter den Bedingungen der Moderne nur über ästhetische Diskurse mit. Daher bedarf die Historie ästhetischer, d.h. genauer, literarische Verfahren. Die Literatur „spiegelt“ bekanntlich die gesellschaftliche Wirklichkeit nicht einfach nur wider, sie ist eine Praxis sui generis, der immer wieder die Aufgabe zufällt, unterschiedliche Praxis- und Erfahrungsbereiche zusammenzuführen<sup>4</sup>.“

What makes the science of this era unfamiliar, is that, while attempting to divorce itself from art, it was still tied to philosophy to a much greater extent than is the case today. The closing sentence of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* („Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen<sup>5</sup>“) it has become accepted that science can concern itself with smaller questions, with no bearing on an overriding philosophical worldview. This severance, Ranke still needs to achieve on his own, for his own discipline. In his lecture ‚Geschichte und Philosophie‘, Ranke draws a distinction between history and philosophy:

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<sup>4</sup> Hardtwig, Wolfgang. ‚Die Geschichtserfahrung der Moderne und die Ästhetisierung der Geschichtsschreibung: Leopold von Ranke.‘ in: Marlis Dürkop ed. *Vorträge anlässlich der 200. Wiederkehr des Geburtstages Leopold von Ranke*. December 14th 1995. Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Philosophische Fakultät I. Institut für Geschichtswissenschaften.

<sup>5</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus logico-philosophicus. Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag. 1971. P. 115.

“Es ist oft ein gewisser Widerstreit einer unreifen Philosophie mit der Historie bemerkt worden. Aus apriorischen Gedanken hat man auf das geschlossen, was da sein müsse. Ohne zu bemerken, daß jene Gedanken vielen Zweifeln ausgesetzt seien, ist man daran gegangen, sie in der Historie der Welt wiederzusuchen. Aus der unendlichen Menge der Tatsachen hat man alsdann diejenigen ausgewählt, welche jene zu beglaubigen schienen. Dies hat man wohl auch Philosophie der Geschichte genannt. Einer von den Gedanken, mit welchen die Philosophie der Historie als mit unabweislichen Forderungen immer wiederkehrt, ist, daß das Menschengeschlecht in einem ununterbrochenen Fortschritt, in einer stetigen Ausbildung zur Vollkommenheit begriffen sei.“

Noteworthy, however, is that Ranke claims to distance himself from philosophy in general, but his description of his philosophical attitude towards history reveals that what he really targets is more specifically the philosophy that dominated his own time: German Idealism. The one philosopher mentioned by name is Johann Gottlieb Fichte. The essay, while disavowing philosophy and not mentioning Spinoza, does end on a Spinozist note:

„Nun sind einige Völker vor den anderen auf dem Erdboden mit Macht ausgerüstet gewesen; sie vor allen haben eine Wirkung auf die übrigen ausgeübt. Von diesen also werden vornehmlich die Umwandlungen herrühren, welche die Welt zum Guten oder zum Bösen erfahren hat. Nicht auf die Begriffe demnach, welche einigen geherrscht zu haben scheinen, sondern auf die Völker selbst, welche in die Historie tätig hervorgetreten sind, ist unser Augenmerk zu richten.....6“

This echoes a debate Kant himself became involved in with Herder. Herder accused him of introducing teleological principles in biology. According to Israel:

“Kant, who viewed his transcendental idealism as the only coherent alternative to Spinozism, especially abhorred the hylozoic tendency in Herder, his notion that a general generic force in nature could govern the modification and transformation of species. Precisely the weightiest philosophical objection to such reasoning, he held, is that it blocks all teleology, removing all ‘purpose’ from nature, reopening the door to Spinozism7.“

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6 Ranke, Leopold von. ‘Geschichte und Philosophie.’  
<http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/3010/1>

7 Israel. Oxford 2012. P.737.

The implication: via the detour of Herder, Ranke is infected with certain tenets of Spinozistic thought, and as such is fundamentally opposed to idealism.

#### 4. Friedrich Schiller: history and philosophy.

Spinoza does not appear to have made a major impact upon the philosophical development of Schiller. According to Wolfgang Riedel in the *Schiller-Handbuch*, Schiller's encounter with Spinoza's thought remained 'ohne erkennbare Nachwirkung'. In the same period, around 1787, Schiller also encountered Kant for the first time, but the impact, in the first instance, was limited. At a later period, in 1793, after the writing of his works of scholarly history, Schiller became a follower of Kant. In the period prior to this conversion - the period that corresponds to his activity as a scholar of history - Schiller was mostly influenced by a variety of Enlightenment philosophers, Montesquieu and Shaftesbury among them. Also, the influence of Leibniz and Wolff still loomed large.<sup>8</sup> In the view of Israel, the impact of Kant on Schiller was not so much a revolutionary change in his view of the world. Rather, Kant's thought was sympathetic to Schiller, as it offered him a way out of the dilemma's thrown up by the *Pantheismusstreit*. As Jonathan Israel puts it:

„During these years, many young thinkers..... Schiller, at 32 in 1791, previously trapped by a painful sense of having to choose between orthodoxy and materialist determinism, underwent an exciting, liberating, and profound change through conversion to Kantianism.“<sup>9</sup>

In contradiction to Lessing, Herder, and Goethe, Schiller did not have affinity for Spinoza. He was a natural idealist, even before he became aware of idealist philosophy. The crucial distinction between the philosophies of Leibniz and Kant is that the harmony within the world order migrates into the human head. Leibniz defended God's design by claiming it resulted in the best of all possible worlds. By the time of Kant, it is no longer possible to maintain this. Instead, to Kant, the human brain becomes the ordering principle that can make the world harmonious. According to Johannes Süssmann, this is similar to the attitude Schiller brings to the writing of history, as has been said, prior to discovering Kant. Schiller sees history as

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<sup>8</sup> Riedel, Wilhelm. 'Schiller und die popularphilosophische Tradition'. In: Helmut Koopmann ed. *Schiller-Handbuch. 2., durchgelesene und aktualisierte Ausgabe*. Stuttgart: Alfred Kroner Verlag. 2011. P. 162-174.

<sup>9</sup> Israel. Oxford 2012. P. 723



chaos, in which the historian needs to bring order, this in distinction to what the historians of the Enlightenment had believed:

„Für alle Erzählprobleme, über die die Aufklärungshistoriker seit Jahrzehnten diskutieren: welche Begebenheiten ausgewählt und in welcher Reihenfolge sie erzählt werden sollen, wie sie verknüpft und zu einem Ganzen zusammengefügt werden können, ergibt sich durch Schillers neue Gegenstandsbestimmung eine Lösungsregel: Der Geschichtsschreiber hat so zu erzählen, daß das historisch Richtige als etwas Notwendiges erscheint. Nicht indem er zusammenlaufende Kausalketten nachzeichnet, sondern wie „im Roman oder in einer anderen poetischen Darstellung.<sup>10</sup>“

Süssmann is undoubtedly correct here, purely where the procedure followed by Schiller is involved. Where he enters dangerous territory, however, is when he describes the impact this new approach had on German historiography generally:

„Schillers Neugründung (der Geschichtsschreibung) entfernt sie vom realen historischen Geschehen..... Aber sie gibt der noch jungen deutschen Öffentlichkeit - einer allgemeinen Öffentlichkeit, deutschsprachig, kulturnational, literarisch sich verständigend - eine Geschichtsschreibung..... Er gibt ihr eine kulturnationale Funktion, die sie nur als literarische, nur wenn sie auf die Allgemeinheit wirkt, wahrnehmen kann, daher die Rhetorik, der Parabelcharakter, die Moralität seiner Geschichtsschreibung. .... Erst nachdem es in Deutschland eine literarische Geschichtsschreibung gab, erst nachdem die Historiker gelernt hatten, Fragen von allgemeinem Interesse zu stellen, wurde der Historismus möglich. Nicht zuletzt Schiller hat ihm den Weg gebahnt.<sup>11</sup>“

In order to be able to claim that Ranke follows in Schiller's footsteps, Süssmann provides an extensive analysis of *Geschichten der deutschen und romanischen Völker*, and claims the work is narrative and idealistic, rather than scientific in a strict sense. He then claims:

„Nichts Anderes meint Rankes berühmtes, so hartnäckig Mißverstandenes Wort aus der Vorrede, er wolle „bloß sagen, wie es eigentlich gewesen“ (vi) Nicht die Tatsachen sind damit in erster Linie gemeint, sondern der darin verborgene Zusammenhang, nicht eine vermeintlich

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<sup>10</sup> Süssmann, Johannes. *Geschichtsschreibung oder Roman? Zur Konstitutionslogik von Geschichtserzählungen zwischen Schiller und Ranke (1780-1824)*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag. 2000. P. 85.

<sup>11</sup> Süssmann. Stuttgart 2000. P. 111-112.

voraussetzungslose Empirie, sondern die Konstruktion des Historikers im empirischen Material, nicht wie es *wirklich*, sondern wie es *eigentlich* gewesen- und dieses eigentliche Wesen der Geschichte, dieses „es“ das Ranke darstellt, sind historische Ideen.<sup>12</sup> “

Interpreting Ranke's sentence on a lexical level, Süßmann is correct. ‚Eigentlich‘ commonly refers to ‚Wahrheit‘, ‚truth‘, rather than to ‚Wirklichkeit‘, ‚reality‘. Therefore, the sentence can be interpreted to support an idealist view of the world. This, however, clashes with Ranke's pronouncements in ‚Geschichte und Philosophie‘. The dictum ‚wie es eigentlich gewesen ist‘ might not be as important. Posterity has lifted it out of a longer lecture, and taken it to be a programmatic statement regarding Ranke's thought. This should not be taken to mean that it was intended as such: if Ranke had intended to make a single programmatic statement to summarise the entirety of his philosophy of history, he might well have formulated it more carefully.

The way to determine Schiller's position within the discussion on the study of history is to read his inaugural lecture as professor at the University of Jena, *Was heißt und zu welchem Ende studiert man Universalgeschichte?*, of 1789. He outlines the challenges faced by historians. History, for any number of reasons, is hard to document. Only written sources can be relied upon, and most of these are lost or corrupted. Historians only have access to a fraction of the information they need. But there is hope:

„So würde denn unsere Welt nie etwas anders als ein Aggregat von Bruchstücken werden, und nie den Namen einer Wissenschaft verdienen. Jetzt also kommt ihr der philosophische Verstand zu Hülfe, und, indem er diese Bruchstücke durch künstliche Bindungsglieder verkettet, erhebt er das Aggregat zum System, zu einem vernunftmäßig zusammenhängenden Ganzen. Seine Beglaubigung dazu liegt in der Gleichförmigkeit und unveränderlichen Einheit der Naturgesetze und des menschlichen Gemüts, welche Einheit Ursache ist, daß die Ereignisse des entferntesten Altertums unter dem Zusammenfluß ähnlicher Umstände von außen, in den neuesten Zeitläufen wiederkehren; daß also von den neuesten Erscheinungen, die im Kreis unserer Beobachtung liegen, auf diejenigen, welche sich in geschichtslosen Zeiten verlieren, rückwärts ein Schluß gezogen und einiges Licht verbreitet werden kann.“<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Süßmann. Stuttgart 2000. P. 248.

<sup>13</sup> Schiller, Friedrich. „Was heißt und zu welchem Ende studiert man Universalgeschichte?“ in: idem. *Werke. Band 4. Schriften*. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag. 1966. P. 427

Here, Schiller appears to subscribe to the pragmatist conception. Crucial is the reference to the 'Gleichformigkeit und unveränderliche Einheit der Naturgesetze und des menschlichen Gemüts'. The implication is that the human mind is ruled by immutable laws as well: it is simply the case that no one has as yet been able to work them out and catch them in mathematical formulas. Schiller's claim that the human mind is immutable across time appears to contradict a pronouncement he made a few pages earlier:

''Wenn wir über eine Begebenheit, die sich heute erst, und unter Menschen mit denen wir leben, und in der Stadt die wir bewohnen, ereignet, die Zeugen abhören, und aus ihren widersprechenden Berichten Mühe haben die Wahrheit zu enträtseln: welchen Mut können wir zu Nationen und Zeiten mitbringen, die durch Fremdartigkeit der Sitten weiter als durch ihre Jahrtausende von uns entlegen sind?''<sup>14</sup>

This is a pronouncement that appears to doubt the immutability of the human character, and certainly does not offer much hope for determining the laws underlying it. Towards the end of his lecture, Schiller offers more reservations, in which he echoes Kant:

''Einen Erscheinung nach der anderen fängt an, sich dem blinden Ohngefähr, der gesetzlosen Freiheit zu entziehen, und sich einem übereinstimmenden Ganzen (das freilich nur in seiner Vorstellung vorhanden ist) als ein passendes Glied anzureihen. Bald fällt es ihm schwer, sich zu überreden, daß diese Folge von Erscheinungen, die in seiner Vorstellung soviel Regelmäßigkeit und Absicht annahm, diese Eigenschaften in der Wirklichkeit verleugne; es fällt ihm schwer, wieder unter die blinde Herrschaft der Notwendigkeit zu geben, was unter dem geliehenen Licht des Verstandes hatte ein so heitre Gestalt zu gewinnen. Er nimmt also diese Harmonie aus sich selbst heraus. und verpflanzt sie außer sich in die Ordnung der Dinge d.i. er bringt einen vernünftigen Zweck in den Gang der Welt, und ein teleologisches Prinzip in die *Weltgeschichte*.''

What would appear to the casual reader as blistering sarcasm is rather a Kantian resignation to the cognitive difficulties involved in any science. Knowledge is uncertain: the thing itself is beyond the reach of the scholar. He is forced to use what is in him to shape history, from what would otherwise be a chaos of events. What appears to be the most obvious criticism of the idealist approach - that they are given to fantasizing - is deflected here. Fantasizing is all a

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<sup>14</sup> Schiller. 'Wozu studiert man Universalgeschichte?'. Frankfurt am Main 1966. P. 425.

historian can do, in the light of the sheer chaos of the facts. According to Schiller, when the historian considers his generalisations about the past:

„Er sieht es durch tausend beistimmende Fakta *bestätigt*, und durch eben so viele andere *widerlegt*; aber so lange in der Reihe der Weltveränderungen noch wichtige Bindungsglieder fehlen, so lange das Schicksal über so viele Begebenheiten den letzten Aufschluß noch zurückhalt, erklärt er die Frage für unentschieden, und diejenige Meinung siegt, welche dem Verstande die höhere Befriedigung, und dem Herzen die größere Glückseligkeit anzubieten hat.<sup>15</sup>“

Schiller owns up to the speculative nature of the practice of history. This would imply that, to him, history is more an art than a science. If Schiller were to hold forth on any other academic discipline, however, he would likely discern very similar cognitive problems. This is as far as the theory is concerned.

## 5. Schiller as practitioner of history

As mentioned, Friedrich Schiller who has not yet made his final decision between literature, history, and philosophy: he could still practice all three next to each other. The combination of these functions undoubtedly led to shortcomings in his work. At the same time, he does not suffer the disadvantages of academic specialisation. His work is radical and contains any number of ideas that point towards the future, towards both developments in history and philosophy. The man who wrote it was close to the point of becoming an anachronism nevertheless.

A lively discussion has been waged about the question whether Schiller, as a practicing historian, is already a 'Historist', or still belongs to the tradition of Enlightenment historiography: the general conclusion being that he is somewhere in the middle. As he must be: many of the tendencies of Enlightenment historiography have been continued into the nineteenth century, but in philosophy rather than in the academic discipline of history. Ironically, the fact that he was also a poet and dramatist almost appears less important by comparison. The difference seems more significant: but the craft of poet and dramatist does not imply a vision of history. Being on the border between literature and scholarship does not

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<sup>15</sup> Schiller. 'Wozu studiert man Universalgeschichte?'. Frankfurt am Main 1966. P. 428

necessitate the mixing of two discourses, as being on the border between history and philosophy does.

The one thing that Schiller does, which runs most contrary to Ranke's prescriptions, is that he draws analogies that, from a more empirical perspective, must seem dubious. An example of such an arguably dubious inference presents itself in the introduction to *Abfall der Niederlande*. In order to demonstrate similarities in history across long periods of time, he draws an analogy between the Dutch Rebellion of the sixteenth century, and the Batavian Rebellion, which broke out in the same geographical area, in the first century AD:

“Die Geschichte der Welt ist sich selbst gleich, wie die Gesetze der Natur, und einfach wie die Seele des Menschen. Dieselben Bedingungen bringen dieselben Erscheinungen zurück. Auf eben diesem Boden, wo jetzt die Niederländer ihrem spanischen Tyrannen die Spitze bieten, haben vor fünfzehnhundert Jahren ihre Stammväter, die Batavier und Belgen, mit ihrem römischen gerungen.<sup>16</sup>”

Drawing a parallel between the two events is problematic. The Dutch Rebellion of the sixteenth century is a decisive event in Spanish history as well, being perceived as a significant catalyst in the end of Spain's ascendancy in Europe. From the perspective of Roman history, the Batavian Rebellion was a flash in the pan. It lasted slightly over a year; could erupt only within the context of a Roman civil war; was entirely suppressed right after the civil war ended; and was followed by another three hundred years of undisputed Roman rule in what is now the Netherlands. The significance in the history of the Netherlands of these events is simply that it is the oldest well-documented occurrence on the territory of the Netherlands. The Dutch Republic, and particularly the province of Holland itself, in the seventeenth century, attempted to magnify and distort the parallel, to confirm the legitimacy of its own recent Rebellion. The contingencies of art history were most effective in sealing the Batavian uprising in popular consciousness, when the city of Amsterdam commissioned relatively little known Rembrandt van Rijn to paint a central event in the runup to the uprising. Schiller here surrenders to the dilemma he has drawn in his inaugural lecture. In a search for constants and laws within world history, he has to reach back to a time that is insufficiently

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<sup>16</sup> Schiller, Friedrich. ‘Abfall der Niederlande.’ in: idem, *Werke. Band 4. Schriften*. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag. 1966. P. 131.

documented for truly valid parallels: and so, he is forced to adapt the one well-documented event of the time, and make it fit the pattern.

## 6. The Dutch Rebellion

Much as there was a seemingly logical, but in reality dubious parallel between the Batavian and the Dutch Rebellion, so there were equally seemingly logical but actually dubious parallels between the Dutch Rebellion and contemporary events. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the Dutch rebellion against Spain, which took place primarily in the final decades of the sixteenth century, suddenly, and for a brief period of time, became a topic of central interest among intellectuals. Two likely reasons for this sudden interest can be identified. Firstly, it fit well with an era in which the legitimacy of monarchies, and the preconditions for the legitimacy of monarchies, came to be questioned.

In the American War of Independence, the United States of America renounced the rule of king George III, without replacing him with another monarch. Such an event had few precedents. To Enlightenment thinkers such as David Hume, the establishment of the English Commonwealth of 1651, following on the execution of Charles I, was a distinctly unpropitious event. The Glorious Revolution of 1688, culminating in the signing of the Bill of Rights of 1689, the primary precedent of the American Declaration of Independence, did not replace a monarchy with a republican form of government, but rather circumscribed the powers of the monarch. The historical record of the establishment of the Old Swiss Confederacy is confused, and imbued with legendary elements. This leaves the Dutch Rebellion, and particularly the Act of Abjuration of 1581, as the most fitting analogy. Some scholars perceive this Act of Abjuration as a direct inspiration for the American Declaration of Independence: this, however, remains a minority position<sup>17</sup>.

Another possible reason for the suddenly increased interest in the Rebellion is the increasing popularity, especially in Germany, of the philosophy of Benedict de Spinoza. This is the explanation Johathan Israel gives. Having been deemed too radical for a long time, German

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<sup>17</sup> Stephen E. Lucas, "The 'Plakkaat van Verlatinge': A Neglected Model for the American Declaration of Independence", in Rosemarijn Hofte and Johanna C. Kardux, eds., *Connecting Cultures: The Netherlands in Five Centuries of Transatlantic Exchange* Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press. 1994. P. 189–207.

Enlightenment figures such as Lessing and Herder discovered Spinoza's philosophy in the middle of the eighteenth century. To Goethe, he was the pre-eminent philosopher of the modern (post-classical) age.

Spinoza had been a controversial thinker, even in the context of the relatively progressive Dutch Republic of the 1600s. One aspect of his thought that was not controversial within that context, but all the more so within the context of other nations prior to the American and French Revolutions, was his lionizing of the Dutch Rebellion. To Dutch readers, Spinoza merely confirmed the right of abjuration, which the worldly authorities had assumed close to a century earlier. Beyond the Dutch Republic, however, this still counted as a radical idea<sup>18</sup>.

The renewed interest in the Dutch Rebellion led to a brief, intense engagement with the subject on the part of the two major figures of German classicism, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller, who between them published three major works inspired by the subject within the space of a few years. Goethe wrote the tragedy *Egmont*, Schiller the tragedy *Don Carlos* and a scholarly work, the *Abfall der Niederlande*. These three works have one thing in common, albeit partly through coincidence. The title of the last work notwithstanding, they do not deal with the Dutch Rebellion as such, but with the preamble to said Rebellion. This sets these works apart from two of Schiller's other plays, *Die Verschwörung des Fiesco zu Genua* and *Wilhelm Tell*, in which we are presented with a successful revolution, from a monarchy to a republican form of government, which is depicted from its inception to its conclusion. The three works dealing with the Dutch Rebellion, on the other hand, all end with the year 1568: that is, at the Rebellion's low point, with suppression reigning supreme, and liberty being a distant hope. The two plays end with the deaths of their respective protagonists: Thomas Carlyle points out that the note on which *Abfall der Niederlande* ends is uncommonly despairing for Schiller, saying that, in other works, there are some bleak pronouncements, but:

„We scarcely meet with one so happy as that in the *Revolt of the Netherlands*, where he finishes his picture of the gloomy silence and dismay that reigned in Brussels on the first entrance of Alba, by this striking simile: Now that the City had received the Spanish General

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<sup>18</sup> Israel. Oxford 2012. P. 741-759.

within its walls, it had the air of a man that has drunk a cup of poison, and with shuddering expectation watches, every moment, for its deadly agency.<sup>19</sup>

The timing of the writing of these works is highly significant. They not only follow only a few years upon the American Revolution, they are written directly prior to the French Revolution. As Dieter Borchmeyer points out, Schiller wrote his two historical works with the greatest apparent relevance to contemporary events, very briefly prior to the events in question. He completed the first part of the *Abfall der Niederlande* right before the outbreak of the French Revolution, and did not return to it. Borchmeyer suggests the subject had simply become too topical. Likewise, he finished his *Geschichte des driessigjährigen Krieges* in 1792, right at the outset of a new European conflagration, the Revolutionary Wars.<sup>20</sup>

The fact that the *Abfall der Niederlande* precedes the French Revolution has consequences for the interpretation of the work. The understanding of what a revolution means changed as a consequence of the events in France. A revolution, in the first instance, was a term from astronomy, referring to a planet coming full circle, and returning to its starting point.

Politically, the first event widely referred to as a revolution was the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The Glorious Revolution was a revolution in a modern sense: a sudden change of government causing a significant change in social circumstances, leading to a new societal constellation without precedent in the past. It was legitimated in very different terms. The Glorious Revolution was a progressive revolution, taking place in an era that did not yet believe in progress. It was perceived by its supporters, not as a radical political change, but rather as a reaction to the absolutist political changes king James II intended to implement. Freedom was not portrayed as a new thing, but something that had existed all along. Supposedly, the old societal constellation was being restored by the revolution. English society had revolved back to its starting point.

The American Revolution was a similar case. In retrospect, it represents a radical change, a step towards an entirely new social order. `Conservative` revolutionaries did not see it as such. To them, the Glorious Revolution was an example, as having saved the old freedoms against absolutist, royal tendencies. In the New World, the British government had since betrayed the Glorious Revolution, trying to establish something, once more, that smacked of absolute government. Some who partook in the Revolution, such as Tom Paine, and Thomas Jefferson

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<sup>19</sup> Carlyle, Thomas. *The Life of Friedrich Schiller comprehending an examination of his works*. London: Chapman & Hall. 1888. P. 91.

<sup>20</sup> Borchmeyer, Dieter. ‚Goethes und Schillers Sicht der niederländischen Revolution‘. in: Otto Dann, Ernst Osterkamp and Norbet Oellers eds. *Schiller als Historiker*. Stuttgart & Weimar: Verlag J.B. Metzler. 1995. P. 149-156.



in radical moments, did have a vision of progress. As Jonathan Israel has shown, these were the minority. The French Revolution was the first revolution in which progress and a break with the past were the stated aims.

Although the Dutch Rebellion is not normally referred to as a revolution, it is intellectually linked to the Glorious Revolution, and therefore a revolution in the old sense of the word. The Glorious Revolution, in part, was a military action on the part of the Dutch Republic, to share the benefits of its own Rebellion against an absolute monarch, Philip II, with another nation, Great Britain. The Dutch Rebellion also began as a defense of old privileges against the new, absolute style of government, and continued to be justified as such. Prior to the reign of Philip II, local authorities in the Netherlands were the highest judicial institutions. The introduction of the Inquisition, to counter Protestantism, would have placed a judicial authority above local magistrates. Prior to Philip II's reign, the king had no ability to impose taxes in the Netherlands. He could ask local authorities to fund his plans: local authorities had every right to say no. These two issues, the establishment of the Inquisition and the imposition of taxes, were the direct causes of the Dutch Rebellion. There was no hope of progress towards new privileges: maintaining the old privileges was the aim.

Enlightenment thought is profoundly ambivalent on the idea of progress. Whereas progress is first conceived of during the Enlightenment, many thinkers could only conceive of progress as a form of regress. Rousseau is the most extreme example: the state of nature was ideal, civilisation has corrupted it. What is needed is a revolution to the original state. In *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung*, Schiller presents a more sophisticated version of this idea. The original, naive state was to be preferred over the present state of civilisation, but the process of civilisation was, unfortunately, not to be reversed. The bliss of the natural state could only be recovered after the process had completed itself. Happiness can be found in two places, at the beginning and at the end of history.

Ernst Osterkamp perceives the entirety of the *Abfall der Niederlande* as a failure to live up to the pragmatist ideal. As he shows by the example of the introduction to 'Verbrecher aus verlorener Ehre': in fiction as in historical works, the principles governing underlying events are to be found within the minds of the actors in those events. The laws of personality are the historical equivalent to the laws of physics. Consequently:

„Schiller fordert also vom Historiker, dem Bericht über die historischen Ereignisse Charakterportraits voranzustellen. Sie erlauben es dem Leser, im geschichtlichen Extremfall das Menschlich-Allgemeine und im großen Individuum die Gattung zu erkennen, sie erschließen ihm mit dem Blick in die Seele die Motive des geschichtlichen Handelns und fungieren zugleich als das Medium, das die überlieferten Ereignisfragmente vernunftmäßig in einen Erklärungszusammenhang zu bringen erlaubt: aus dem Aggregat ein System werden läßt.<sup>21</sup>“

In his introduction to *Abfall der Niederlande*, Schiller emphasizes that history does not function on the level of individuals, but on that of nations. However, according to Osterkamp, he fails to deliver on this statement. He does, ultimately, write the history of a few individuals as personifications of the larger whole. On the Spanish side, this is justifiable. The Spaniards have unified political leadership, and are at any rate not the nation that is at the centre of this narrative. With the Dutch, it is more problematic:

„Die erzählerische Inszenierung des Gegensatzes von niederländischer Freiheit und spanischer Tyrannei läßt es historiographisch schlüssig erscheinen, daß die >>spanische Regierung<<, von der die Niederländer abfallen, sich tatsächlich nur in einer einzigen Person verkörpert: in Philip II, in dem der politische Wille Spaniens monopolisiert erscheint.....“

The urge to find overriding patterns, and justifying finding them in spite of the overwhelming confusion of sources, is one of the factors that make it problematic to qualify Schiller as a historicist historian. Another issue is his way of dealing with sources. In Otto Dann's portrayal, Schiller stresses the emphasis of the careful use of sources in theory, but in practice lacks the diligence to work with sources the way a historicist historian would. His desire to be a diligent historian is clear, to the extent where, in his two earliest historical dramas, he mentions his historical sources in his introduction. He does so in the introduction to *Die Verschwörung des Fiesko zu Genua*, and in the Thalia-Fragment of 1785, an informal introduction to *Don Karlos*, he goes so far as to recommend the readership should first page through the *Geschichte des Dom Karlos* by Abbe S. Real<sup>22</sup>. This diligence is almost unheard of among the authors of literary representations of the past. At the same time, he does not aspire to the standards of professional historians either. Nor does he aspire to those standards in the two works of

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<sup>21</sup> Ernst Osterkamp, P. 161

<sup>22</sup> Schiller, Friedrich. Thalia-Fragment 1785. P. 20.

history that ought to have established his reputation as an academic historian. He excuses himself, in the introduction to the *Abfall der Niederlande*, that he was unable to work through the entirety of the source material, and proceeds to use only other historiographies. In his *Geschichte des dreißigjährigen Krieges*, he then commits the deadliest of academic sins: the work is devoid of footnotes. In the historical dramas he writes subsequently, the Wallenstein-trilogy, the *Jungfrau von Orleans*, *Wilhelm Tell*, *Maria Stuart*, and *Demetrius*, he no longer takes the trouble to mention his sources. In both instances, according to Dann, this is not necessarily to be seen as a programmatic shift. Schiller simply realised he was a poet rather than a historian: he never mastered the historian's craft, and found it more arduous as time went on.<sup>23</sup>

Thomas Prüfer documents the ways in which Schiller tries to place the Dutch Rebellion in the context of world history as he conceives of it. This world history being the realisation of freedom in the world: the world historical project that we will eventually see in the work of Kant and Hegel, and explicitly not in the work of Ranke. The key here, once again, is that Schiller deliberately confuses the rights the rebels were attempting to defend, with the rights the Enlightenment wanted to elevate to law. What Schiller fails to do, according to Prüfer, is realise that the word freedom is also a historical term, and that freedom in different contexts means different things. The very fact that the playwright can be seen behind the historian, that the whole has the feel of a five-act tragedy, strengthens this act of ideological forgery, rather than counteract it:

“So steht im Zentrum aller Ereignisse das Ringen um die niederländische Verfassung, die Schiller nicht alteuropäisch als Vielfalt provinzieller Privilegien, sondern modern als auf Menschenrechten aufruhende Konstitution einer sich bildende Nation deutet. Den sich in diesem Kampf manifestierenden welthistorischen Konflikt zwischen Freiheit und Despotie interpretiert Schiller geschichtsphilosophisch als Moment einer doppelten Dialektik des Fortschritts der Menschheit zur Humanität und stellt ihn dramatisch strukturiert von den antiken Anfängen bis zum Triump Albas dar.“

The fact that, as Carlyle so eloquently pointed out, the affair ends in failure, does not undermine this conception. Freedom remains the final end of history. Schiller draws an

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<sup>23</sup> Dann, Otto. `Schiller, der Historiker und die Quellen.` in: Otto Dann, Norbert Oellers & Ernst Osterkamp eds. *Schiller als Historiker* Stuttgart & Weimar: Verlag J.B. Metzler. 1995. P. 109-126.

analogy between the present and future struggles for freedom and the Dutch Rebellion, which, strictly speaking, is incorrect, just as he had drawn an incorrect analogy between the Dutch and the Batavian Rebellions. Prüfer quotes a letter by Schiller to Christian Gottfried Körner of 13 October 1789, in which it says:

„Es ist ein armseliges kleinliches Ideal, für *eine* Nation zu schreiben; einem philosophischen Geist ist diese Grenze durchaus unerträglich..... Er kann sich nicht weiter dafür erwärmen, als soweit ihm ihm diese Nation oder Nationalbegebenheit als Bedingung für den Fortschritt der Gattung notwendig ist.<sup>24</sup>“

It is noteworthy that Schiller defines himself as a philosophical mind. The distinction between philosophy and history, so important to Ranke, is not something with which he concerns himself. Indeed, this pronouncement leads to the suspicion that Schiller might well have looked down on the kind of diligence applied by historians of the Rankean ilk

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<sup>24</sup> Letter from Friedrich Schiller to Christian Gottfried Körner, 13 October 1789, quoted after Prüfer. Amsterdam 2010. P. 89.

## Conclusion

It has been suggested that Schiller's historical works are crucial to the history of German historiography. They represented a step away from the strict, scientific approach to history, and therewith prepared the way for Leopold von Ranke's approach. The key problem with this proposition is, that at the time there was no clear distinction between a scientific and a philosophical method. The key distinction at the time, following Jonathan Israel, was between a teleological approach, taking its cues from thinkers such as Leibniz, Locke, or Kant, and a non-teleological approach, taking its inspiration, ultimately, from Spinoza. If anything, Ranke's approach comes closer to the latter. Even before immersing himself in the philosophy of Kant, Schiller was strongly drawn to a teleological approach. Ranke does not acknowledge Schiller, possibly because there is a fundamental distinction between them.

These teleological tendencies are clearly perceptible in Schiller's *Abfall der Niederlande*. The choice of subject in itself is crucial. Out of the chaos of European and world history, he picks an event, the Dutch Rebellion, that he can construe as if it is typical of the direction the world, according to his philosophy, ought to be taking. In actual fact, the importance of the events in the Netherlands in the sixteenth century were magnified, in the consciousness of Schiller and his contemporaries, by current events, among them the American Revolution.

The matter is complicated, as Schiller is not, in a real sense, a philosopher, or a historian, but a playwright, and simply lacks the talent to be the kind of historian he might want to be.