

*Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller*  
*Das Ideal und das Leben*

Translated by Lord Edward Bulwer-Lytton



From *The Poems and Ballads of Schiller*. Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1844  
Translated by Lord Edward Bulwer-Lytton, BART.

## Preface by the Translator

'Twas not my nectar made thy strength divine  
But 'twas thy strength which made my nectar thine!  
— JOVE TO HERCULES

In Schiller's Poem of "The Ideal," a translation of which has already been presented to the reader, but which was composed subsequently to "The Ideal and the Actual," the prevailing sentiment is of that simple pathos which can come home to every man who has mourned for Youth, and the illusions which belong to it —

. . . for the hour

Of glory in the grass, and splendour in the flower.

But "The Ideal and the Actual" is purely philosophical; a poem "in which," says Hoffmeister, "every object and every epithet has a metaphysical background." Schiller himself was aware of its obscurity to the general reader: he desires that even the refining Humboldt "should read it in a kind of holy stillness — and banish, during the meditation it required, all that was profane." Humboldt proved himself worthy of these instructions, by the enthusiastic admiration with which the poem inspired him. Previous to its composition, Schiller had been employed upon philosophical inquiries, especially his *Letters on the Æsthetic Education of Man*; and of these *Letters* it is truly observed, that the Poem is the crowning Flower. To those acquainted with Schiller's philosophical works and views, the poem is therefore less obscure; in its severe compression such readers behold but the poetical epitome of thoughts the depth of which they have already sounded, and the coherence of which they have already ascertained — they recognise a familiar symbol, where the general reader only perplexes himself in a riddle.

Without entering into disquisitions, out of place in this translation, and fatiguing to those who desire in a collection of poems to enjoy the Poetical — not to be bewildered by the Abstract — I shall merely preface the poem, with the help of Schiller's commentators, by a short analysis of the general design and meaning, so at least as to facilitate the reader's *study* of this remarkable poem — study it will still require, and well repay.

The Poem begins (**Stanza 1<sup>st</sup>**) with the doctrine which Schiller has often inculcated, that to Man there rests but the choice between the pleasures of sense, and the peace

of the soul; but both are united in the life of the Immortals, viz., the higher orders of being. (Stanza 2<sup>nd</sup>) — Still it may be ours to attain, even on earth, to this loftier and holier life — provided we can raise ourselves beyond material objects. (Stanza 3<sup>rd</sup>) — The Fates can only influence the body, and the things of time and matter. But, safe from the changes of matter and of life, the Platonic Archetype, *Form*, hovers in the realm of the Ideal. If we can ascend to this realm — in other words, to the domain of Beauty — we attain (Stanza 4<sup>th</sup>) to the perfection of Humanity — a perfection only found in the immaterial forms and shadows of that realm — yet in which, as in the Gods, the sensual and the intellectual powers are united. In the Actual Life we strive for a goal we cannot reach; in the Ideal, the goal is attainable, and there effort is victory. With Stanza 5<sup>th</sup> begins the antithesis, which is a key to the remainder — an antithesis constantly balancing before us the conditions of the Actual and the privileges of the Ideal. The Ideal is not meant to relax, but to brace us for the Actual Life. From the latter we cannot escape; but when we begin to flag beneath the sense of our narrow limits, and the difficulties of the path, the eye, steadfastly fixed upon the Ideal Beauty aloft, beholds there the goal. Stanza 6<sup>th</sup> — In Actual Life, Strength and Courage are the requisites for success, and are doomed to eternal struggle; but (Stanza 7<sup>th</sup>) in the Ideal Life, struggle exists not; the stream, gliding far from its rocky sources, is smoothed to repose. Stanza 8<sup>th</sup> — In the Actual Life, as long as the Artist still has to contend with matter, he must strive and labour. Truth is only elicited by toil — the statue only wakens from the block by the stroke of the chisel; but when (Stanza 9<sup>th</sup>) he has once achieved the idea of Beauty — when once he has elevated the material marble into form — all trace of his human neediness and frailty is lost, and his work seems the child of the soul. Stanza 10<sup>th</sup> — Again, in the Actual world, the man who *strives* for Virtue, finds every sentiment and every action poor compared to the rigid standard of the abstract moral law. But if (Stanza 11<sup>th</sup>), instead of *striving* for Virtue, merely from the cold sense of duty, we live that life beyond the senses, in which Virtue becomes, as it were, natural to us — in which its behests are served, not through duty, but inclination — then the gulf between man and the moral law is filled up; we take the Godhead, so to speak, into our will; and Heaven ceases its terrors, when man ceases to resist it. Stanza 12<sup>th</sup> — Finally, in Actual Life, sorrows, whether our own, or those with which we sympathise, are terrible and powerful; but (Stanza 13<sup>th</sup>) in the Ideal World even Sorrow has its pleasures. We contemplate the writhings of the Laocoön in marble, with delight in the greatness of Art — not with anguish for the suffering, but with veneration for the grandeur with which the suffering is idealised by the Artist or expressed by the subject. Over the pain of Art smiles the Heaven of the Moral world. Stanzas 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> — Man thus aspiring to the Ideal, is compared to the Mythical Hercules. In the Actual world he must suffer and must toil; but when once he can cast aside the garb of clay, and through the Ethereal flame separate the Mortal from the Immortal, the material dross sinks downward, the spirit soars aloft, and Hebe (or Eternal Youth) pours out nectar as to the Gods. If the reader will have the patience to compare the above analysis with the subjoined version,<sup>1</sup> he will probably find little difficulty in clearing up the Author's meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> In which the Translator has also sought to render the general sense as intelligible as possible.

## The ideal and the actual life

1

For ever fair, for ever calm and bright,  
Life flies on plumage zephyr-light,  
For those who on the Olympian hill rejoice —  
Moons wane, and races wither to the tomb,  
And 'mid the universal ruin, bloom  
The rosy days of Gods —  
With Man, the choice,  
Timid and anxious, hesitates between  
The sense's pleasure and the soul's content;  
While on celestial brows, aloft and sheen,  
The beams of both are blent.

2

Seek'st thou on earth the life of Gods to share,  
Safe in the Realm of Death? — beware  
To pluck the fruits that glitter to thine eye;  
Content thyself with gazing on their glow —  
Short are the joys Possession can bestow,  
And in Possession sweet Desire will die.  
'Twas not the ninefold chain of waves that bound  
Thy daughter, Ceres, to the Stygian river —  
She pluck'd the fruit of the unholy ground,  
And so — was Hell's for ever.

3

The Weavers of the Web — the Fates — but sway  
The matter and the things of clay;  
Safe from each change that Time to Matter gives,  
Nature's blest playmate, free at will to stray  
With Gods a god, amidst the fields of Day,  
The FORM, the ARCHETYPE,<sup>2</sup> serenely lives.  
Would'st thou soar heavenward on its joyous wing?  
Cast off the earthly burthen of the Real;  
High from this cramp'd and dungeon'd being spring  
Into the Realm of the Ideal.

4

Here, bathed, Perfection, in thy purest ray,  
Free from the clogs and taints of clay,  
Hovers divine the Archetypal Man!

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<sup>2</sup> "Die Gestalt" — Form, the Platonic Archetype.

Dim as those phantom shapes of life that gleam  
And wander voiceless by the Stygian stream, —  
Fair as it stands in fields Elysian,  
Ere down to Flesh the Immortal doth descend: —  
If doubtful ever in the Actual life  
Each contest, — *here* a victory crowns the end  
Of every nobler strife.

5

Not from the strife itself to set thee free,  
But more to nerve — doth Victory  
Wave her rich garland from the Ideal clime.  
Whate'er thy wish, the Earth has no repose —  
Life still must drag thee onward as it flows,  
Whirling thee down the dancing surge of Time.  
But when the courage sinks beneath the dull  
Sense of its narrow limits — on the soul,  
Bright from the hill-tops of the Beautiful,  
Bursts the attained goal.

6

If worth thy while the glory and the strife  
Which fire the lists of Actual Life —  
The ardent rush to fortune or to fame,  
In the hot field where Strength and Valour are,  
And rolls the whirling thunder of the car,  
And the world, breathless, eyes the glorious game —  
Then dare and strive! — the prize can but belong  
To him whose valour o'er his tribe prevails;  
In life the victory only crowns the strong —  
He who is feeble fails.

7

But Life, whose source, by crags around it piled,  
Chafed while confin'd, foams fierce and wild,  
Glides soft and smooth when once its streams expand,  
When its waves, (glassing, in their silver play,  
Aurora blent with Hesper's milder ray),  
Gain the still BEAUTIFUL — that Shadow-Land!  
Here, contest grows but interchange of Love,  
All curb is but the bondage of the Grace;  
Gone is each foe, — Peace folds her wings above  
Her native dwelling-place.

8

When, through dead stone to breathe a soul of light,  
With the dull matter to unite  
The kindling genius, some great sculptor glows;  
Behold him straining every nerve intent —  
Behold how, o'er the subject element,

The stately THOUGHT its march laborious goes!  
For never, save to Toil untiring, spoke  
The unwilling Truth from her mysterious well —  
The statue only to the chisel's stroke  
Wakes from its marble cell.

9

But onward to the Sphere of Beauty — go  
Onward, Child of Art! and, lo,  
Out of the matter which thy pains control  
The Statue springs! — not as with labour wrung  
From the hard block, but as from Nothing sprung —  
Airy and light — the offspring of the soul!  
The pangs, the cares, the weary toils it cost  
Leave not a trace when once the work is done —  
The Artist's human frailty merged and lost  
In Art's great victory won!<sup>3</sup>

10

When human Sin confronts the rigid law  
Of perfect Truth and Virtue,<sup>4</sup> awe  
Seizes and saddens thee to see how far  
Beyond thy reach, Perfection; — if we test  
By the Ideal of the Good, the best,  
How mean our efforts and our actions are!  
This space between the Ideal of man's soul  
And man's achievement, who hath ever past?  
An ocean spreads between us and that goal,  
Where anchor ne'er was cast!

11

But fly the boundary of the Senses — live  
The Ideal life free Thought can give;  
And, lo, the gulf shall vanish, and the chill  
Of the soul's impotent despair be gone!  
And with divinity thou sharest the throne,  
Let but divinity become thy will!  
Scorn not the Law — permit its iron band  
The sense (it cannot chain the soul) to thrall.  
Let man no more the will of Jove withstand,<sup>5</sup>  
And Jove the bolt lets fall!

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<sup>3</sup> More literally translated thus by the Author of the Article on Schiller in the *Foreign and Colonial Review*, July 1843 —

“Thence all witnesses for ever banished  
Of poor Human Nakedness.”

<sup>4</sup> The LAW — *i.e.*, the Kantian Ideal of Truth and Virtue. This stanza and the next embody, perhaps with some exaggeration, the Kantian doctrine of morality.

<sup>5</sup> “But in God's sight submission is command.”

*Jonah*, by the Rev. F. Hodgson. Quoted in *Foreign and Colonial Review*, July 1843 — Art. “Schiller,” p. 21

12

If, in the woes of Actual Human Life —  
If thou could'st see the serpent strife  
Which the Greek Art has made divine in stone —  
Could'st see the writhing limbs, the livid cheek,  
Note every pang, and hearken every shriek  
Of some despairing lost Laocoön,  
The human nature would thyself subdue  
To share the human woe before thine eye —  
Thy cheek would pale, and all thy soul be true  
To Man's great Sympathy.

13

But in the Ideal Realm, aloof and far,  
Where the calm Art's pure dwellers are,  
Lo, the Laocoön writhes, but does not groan.  
Here no sharp grief the high emotion knows —  
Here, suffering's self is made divine, and shows  
The brave resolve of the firm soul alone:  
Here, lovely as the rainbow on the dew  
Of the spent thunder-cloud, to Art is given,  
Gleaming through Griefs dark veil, the peaceful blue  
Of the sweet Moral Heaven.

14

So, in the glorious Parable, behold  
How, bow'd to mortal bonds, of old  
Life's dreary path divine Alcides trod:  
The hydra and the lion were his prey,  
And to restore the friend he loved to day,  
He went undaunted to the black-browed God;  
And all the torments and the labours sore  
Wroth Juno sent — the meek majestic One,  
With patient spirit and unquailing, bore,  
Until the course was run —

15

Until the God cast down his garb of clay,  
And rent in hallowing flame away  
The mortal part from the divine — to soar  
To the empyreal air! Behold him spring  
Blithe in the pride of the unwonted wing,  
And the dull matter, that confined before,  
Sinks downward, downward, downward as a dream!  
Olympian hymns receive the escaping soul,  
And smiling Hebe, from the ambrosial stream,  
Fills for a God the bowl!

## Appendix

### Translation of Stanza 13 by Paul Carus

Aber in den heitern Regionen,  
 Wo die reinen Formen wohnen,  
 Rauscht des Jammers trüber Sturm nicht melir.  
 Hier darf Schmerz die Seele nicht durchschneiden,  
 Keine Träne fließt hier mehr dem Leiden,  
 Nur des Geistes tapferer Gegenwehr.  
 Lieblich, wie der Iris Farbenfeuer  
 Auf der Donnerwolke duftgem Tau,  
 Schimmert durch der Wehmut düstern Schleier  
 Hier der Rube heitres Blau.

In yon region of pure forms,  
 Sunny land e'er free from storms,  
 Misery and sorrow cease to rave.  
 There our sufferings no more pierce the soul,  
 Tears of anguish there no longer roll,  
 Nought remains but mind's resistance brave.  
 Beauteous as the rainbow's coloured hue  
 Painted on the canvas of the cloud,  
 E'en on melancholy's mournful shroud  
 Rest reigns in empyrean blue.



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