

## Lecture Series on Comparative Aesthetics

### Lecture No. 3

#### **The Play Impulse in Schiller's Aesthetics and the *Lila* Concept in Indian Culture**

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### **Abstract**

This lecture attempts to read Schiller's 'play impulse' in the perspective of the doctrine of *lila* in Indian thought. In our cosmological speculation creation is explained or explained away as *maya* or *lila*. The universe is the expression of the bliss of Brahman; it is spontaneous, unmotivated and therefore can be described only as play, *lila*. The Vedantic doctrine of *maya* defined it as the power which keeps us under the spell of appearance which is mistaken for reality. This illusion is the play. Etymologically illusion is derived from *ludere*, to play. Placing the notion of play in the context of the theory of John Huizinga, expounded in his *Homo Ludens*, this paper correlates the Indian concept of *krida* (in dramaturgy) and that of *lila* (in philosophy) to Friedrich Schiller's central insight that man is truly a man only when he plays. Schiller, writing in the aftermath of the French Revolution argued that in order to build a community of integrated human beings political education should be supplemented with aesthetic education which would heal the schism between reason and sensuousness in human psyche. Man's fragmentation caused by the sense drive can be overcome by the play drive, the aesthetic impulse, which can restore him to a state in which all inner tensions would be resolved. The Marxist ideas of the kingdom of necessity and the kingdom of freedom are discussed in the context of Schiller's insistence that only a people who are aesthetically educated would be capable of constructing a free society.

## Lecture Hand-out

### **Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805)**

Schiller's key ideas on aesthetics can be found in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795) which consists of 27 letters he wrote to his Danish patron, the Duke of Augustenburg.

Some of his central doctrines are:

Letter 4: Every individual man, it may be said, carries in disposition and determination a pure ideal man within himself, with whose unalterable unity it is the great task of his existence, throughout all his vicissitudes, to harmonize. [p. 31]

Letter 8: It is, therefore, not enough to say that all intellectual enlightenment deserves our respect only insofar as it reacts upon the character; to a certain extent it proceeds from the character, since the way to the head must lie through the heart. Training of the sensibility is then the more pressing need of our age, not merely because it will be a means of making the improved understanding effective for living, but for the very reason that it awakens this improvement. [p. 50]

Letter 9: In the modest stillness of your heart you must cherish victorious truth, display it from within yourself in Beauty, so that not merely thought may pay homage to it, but sense too may lay loving hold on its appearance. And lest by any chance you may receive the pattern you are to give it from actuality, do not dare to enter its doubtful society until you are assured of an ideal following in your heart. Live with your century, but do not be its creature; render to your contemporaries what they need, not what they praise. Without sharing their guilt, share with noble resignation their penalties, and bow with freedom beneath the yoke which they can as ill dispense with as they can bear it. [p. 54]

Letter 14: The sense impulse requires variation, requires time to have a content; the form impulse requires the extinction of time, and no variation. Therefore the impulse in which both are combined (allow me to call it provisionally the *play impulse*, until I have justified the

term), this play impulse would aim at the extinction of time *in time* and the reconciliation of becoming with absolute being, of variation with identity. [p. 74]

Letter 15: For, to declare it once and for all, Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and *he is only wholly Man when he is playing*. This proposition, which at the moment perhaps seems paradoxical, will assume great and deep significance when we have once reached the point of applying it to the twofold seriousness of duty and of destiny; it will, I promise you, support the whole fabric of aesthetic art, and the still more difficult art of living. [p. 80]

Letter 20: The mind, then, passes from sensation to thought through a middle disposition in which sensuousness and reason are active *at the same time*, but just because of this they are mutually destroying their determining power and through their opposition producing negation. This middle disposition, in which our nature is constrained neither physically nor morally and yet is active in both ways, pre-eminently deserves to be called a free disposition; and if we call the condition of sensuous determination the physical, and that of rational determination the logical and moral, we must call this condition of real and active determinacy the *aesthetic*. [p. 98-99]

Letter 27: In the midst of the awful realm of powers, and of the sacred realm of laws, the aesthetic creative impulse is building unawares a third joyous realm of play and of appearance, in which it releases mankind from all the shackles of circumstance and frees him from everything that may be called constraint, whether physical or moral. [p. 137]

If in the *dynamic* state of rights man encounters man as force and restricts his activity, if in the *ethical* state of duties he opposes him with the majesty of law and fetters his will, in the sphere of cultivated society, in the aesthetic state, he need appear to him only as shape, confront him only as an object of free play. *To grant freedom by means of freedom* is the fundamental law of this kingdom.

### **Reference**

Reginald Snell (translated with an introduction), *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Dover Publication (New York 2004)

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