

## FERDINAND CANNING SCOTT SCHILLER

1864-1937

LET the curious historian note that, at a time when Oxford, together with Scotland whence Oxford has drawn so many of its philosophers, was dominated by an absolutist metaphysic derived from Germany, it was left to a thinker of German extraction—though, to be sure, of English education—to champion the claims of the empiricism towards which the British genius has ever leaned. Not that at heart Oxford is tolerant of any systems. Rather it holds by the Socratic tradition, which treats philosophy as a perpetual process of discovery, with friendly conversation between older and younger learners as the chief means of advancing their common purpose. In such a school of free thought there is far too much activity of give and take for the over-confident finalities of dogma to prevail against the questioning temper. Schiller himself had cut his wisdom teeth at Balliol, where, however greatly Jowett and Green and Nettleship might revere Hegel, they certainly never sought to preach him. So, too, when later on he became a Tutor of Corpus, he would never have dreamt of distinguishing converts from heretics among the pupils whose intelligence he was helping to bring to birth.

Yet the Socratic tradition has its weak side. No doubt, a thorough training in dialectics serves admirably as an intellectual gymnastic. Moreover, apart from its function of sharpening the wits, it is well adapted to clear the mind of cant by revealing the contradictions latent in vulgar prejudice and loose thinking. But, while it exalts consistency, it tends to ignore the part played in the pursuit of truth by the appeal to the facts of experience. Verification was never a leading interest with the Greeks, brilliant as were so many of their speculative notions. Indeed, the charming persons who figure in a Platonic dialogue, eligible though they would be for the most exclusive of

our clubs, might well have turned up their noses at anything so 'banausic' as a modern laboratory. Since, however, all discussion must proceed from the given, whether offered as fact or as opinion, Oxford has always depended for a starting-point on the history of philosophy, in the form of certain prescribed texts, of every grade of literary excellence from Plato to Aristotle, from Hume to Kant. Now philosophers are the least gregarious of men, and no disciple can be trusted to spare the reputation of his master. Nevertheless, doctrines, methods, and even phrases, when consecrated by ancient usage and charged with esoteric meaning by a meticulous interpretation, are apt in practice to engender a bibliolatry, a kind of academic fetishism. *Vix enim datur authores simul et admirari et superare.*

These preliminary remarks are meant to afford some idea of the conditions more immediately responsible for Schiller's individual reaction to the philosophical tendencies of his day. He wrote *urbi et orbi*—so much so that Oxford, the *urbs* in question, having to bear the brunt of his criticisms, might well be less forward to acclaim him prophet than the wider world. Taken apart from their academic context his *adversaria* would lose much of their point. The actual school of philosophy in which he taught and examined throughout the best years of his life furnished the target at which his shafts were aimed; though others must suffer too if they got in the way. Stated briefly, his case against Oxford consisted in the twofold charge that it encouraged an excessive deference to authority, and paid too little attention to the natural sciences and, in particular, to psychology as studied on inductive lines. Just so Bacon had protested against this attitude of mind; a University with a medieval past being subject to periodic attacks of the same malady. Needless to add, in accordance with the general custom of the country, these vehement polemics left personal relations quite unaffected. *Odium philosophicum* at Oxford takes only bloodless abstractions into account.

Nay, at how many a symposium did Schiller supply not only the controversy but the port!

By right of his origin and upbringing he was entitled to a certain cosmopolitanism of outlook. He was born on 16 August 1864 in Schleswig-Holstein on the Danish side of the border. His father was a German merchant who carried on his business in British India, and gave his sons an English education. At Rugby Schiller proved himself a veritable polymath, since, by way of a unique record, he carried off all four of the Leaving Exhibitions, given severally for Classics, Mathematics, Natural Science, and Modern Languages. Thence he proceeded as a Senior Exhibitioner to Balliol, in itself a miniature *cosmopolis*, where he secured in due course his two Firsts in Classics, together with the Taylorian Scholarship for German. By that time the family had settled in Switzerland, occupying a comfortable villa at Gersau on the Lake of Geneva, where their friends were sure of a welcome, not to mention climbing and bathing without stint. These friends included so many of Schiller's boon companions in philosophy that the problem of the Universe might almost be said to be submitted annually to a Standing Committee, with Schiller or one of his two clever brothers in the Chair. Rumour has it, indeed, that *A Modern Symposium* by Lowes Dickinson commemorates and dramatizes one such gathering. For the rest of his life Schiller spent his summer holidays among and on Swiss mountains, developing into an expert climber, though never one of those who aspire to break-neck feats. Not only, then, was he accustomed almost literally to survey existence philosopher-fashion *tamquam ex rupe excelsa*, but, since Switzerland is the international heart of Europe, he could and did keep himself singularly well informed about political personalities and movements, regardless of national feuds or frontiers; conducive to this end being the fact that he was equally at home in the English, German, and French languages.

To complete his contacts with Western civilization he

had but to make acquaintance with America; and this he was soon to do. Immediately after taking his degree, however, he took a temporary post as German master at Eton, holding it just long enough to finance himself for another year at Oxford. This he devoted entirely to the writing of his first book, *Riddles of the Sphinx*, which with undue caution—or was it modesty?—he published anonymously. Many will now agree that there is a touch of genius in this early work; yet, as so often happens, no one noticed it at the moment, though it reached a second edition within three years, and helped to earn him his D.Sc. in 1906. Perhaps, as it turned out, it was better so. The private tutorship that he must fain accept took him to the United States and led on to a lectureship at Cornell University. Hitherto little else than a metaphysician, classically trained and familiar with German philosophy—too familiar, in fact, to be able to regard it as verbally inspired—he now breathed the atmosphere of what was philosophically no less than geographically a New World. Here, for instance, there were psychological laboratories the like of which were not to be seen in Oxford. Moreover, although Schiller while realizing the importance of the psychological approach to philosophy was as little inclined as would be a Ward or a Stout to allow the last word to naturalism, yet he found in the American Universities a greater readiness to bring the physical sciences and the humanities together within one universe of discourse than was possible in Europe wherever the scholastic tradition survived. Now, too, he began his lifelong friendship with William James, philosophically his *alter ego*.

At length, in 1897, he received the call to Oxford for which his soul longed and his friends had long prayed and, it may be, schemed. It was appropriate that it should come from Corpus Christi College, since both Thomas Fowler, who was then President, and Thomas Case who succeeded him in that office, were not only philosophers of repute, but stout defenders of the empiricist faith, and

as such more ready to do honour to the *genius patriae* than to the *genius loci*. In this particular Society the Head enjoys an unusual prerogative in respect to the appointment of Tutors, and Fowler deserves full personal credit for inviting Schiller to join his exceptionally distinguished staff. Nay, had he lived long enough to witness more than the opening of the campaign against an authoritarian scheme of thought in which freedom must consist in non-resistance to necessity, there could be little doubt that as a good Baconian he would have joined in the fray on the same side. Meanwhile, once settled in at Oxford, Schiller had in practice, if not in theory, come to terms with the absolute. In other words, he had attained to as perfect a happiness as his spirit could desire. Biological adaptation could go no farther for one who asked only for plain, though not too plain, living, and high thinking without let or limit. In the domestic circle formed by his colleagues and his pupils he could count on an esteem which intimacy with one so void of guile must soon transform into affection. On the other hand, in the University at large he by no means confined his friendships to those whose opinions were of a colour that he approved; for the Oxford philosophers in a body recognized in him a very prince of hosts. Apart from the hours spent in teaching, or in attending the evening discussions that he personally did so much to organize, he was generally to be found at his writing-table, his facile pen covering sheet after sheet; for his was an easy and flowing style, though in no way diffuse. He could always be tempted out, however, for a stroll round the Christ Church meadows, when he would either moot some philosophic topic, or would enlarge on the latest discovery announced in *Nature*, of which he was a constant reader. Sport, apart from mountaineering, was hardly in his line, though he played some tennis and golf with a distressing lack of seriousness. He used to tell the story against himself that a certain golf professional at the end of a lesson painful to both thus delivered his soul: 'It's no good, Sir! You

haven't the mind for it.' Yet he was a strongly built man and vigorous up to middle life or even beyond it. His very abstemious habits helped to keep him sound, though he was the kind of ascetic who can be jovial on a lenten fare. Never, indeed, was any one more even-tempered, or fonder of his little joke, be it subtle or be it crude. In fact, he embodied the *Gemütlichkeit* of the old-world German scholar.

Schiller's personal relations with his pupils may be gathered from the testimony of one of them, Mr. E. L. Woodward, Fellow of All Souls College, who writes thus:

I am delighted to have a chance of saying how much I owe to Schiller as a tutor. It is no exaggeration to say that I am more grateful to him than to any of the people to whom I brought essays. He took immense pains over his pupils, and, as a tutor, displayed nothing of that rather facetious cleverness which irritated a good many people. He would never try to evade difficulties you might put to him—in fact, he encouraged you to state any difficulties you had, and never tried to 'come it over you'. I must have been a considerable trial to him because I had no special bent for philosophy, and yet I was both argumentative and desperately sincere about it all. It would have hurt my feelings very much indeed if I had thought either that Schiller was not troubling to answer my arguments, or that he wasn't as anxious as I was to find out what things meant. Undergraduates are very quick to notice any indifference or flippancy of this kind in their tutors, and I never had the least feeling that I was being played with. I used to look forward to my essay hours and to the general discussion-classes which Schiller held, and I learned a great deal from them which went far beyond the immediate technical subject-matter.

I was also most grateful to Schiller for his general kindness. He was most hospitable to his pupils. He used to ask them to breakfast when he had people staying with him whom he thought they might like to meet. I remember meeting Bergson, Lowes Dickinson, H. G. Wells, in this way—each of them most exciting for an undergraduate like myself who had never met any one of this kind, and, apart from Schiller, would never have had the least chance of hearing them talk.

It was said by some people (not by Schiller's own pupils) that he forced his own views on his pupils. In a certain sense this is true, but in so far as it is true, it was due not to any wish to proselytize or to domineer, but to Schiller's own fundamental sincerity and

simplicity. Moreover, it was not true in the sense that he tried to conceal arguments against his own views or to discourage his pupils from going to tutors or lectures where they would hear other points of view. As I have said, I never once heard Schiller try to evade a question, or to give the kind of clever, unconvincing answer which a don can always give to an undergraduate's questions if he wants to burke the issue. Finally, though I cannot pretend to know the developments of philosophy in the last twenty years, it seems to me that, in his general method of approach, Schiller was fundamentally right, and that, if a great deal of his work now seems a little crude and exaggerated, this crudeness and exaggeration were inevitable at the time because his standpoint was new and original. Others would know far more than I know how much Schiller owed to William James; but I used to think at the time, as I still think, that Schiller gave to William James's philosophy something which only a man of wide *European* culture could give. He interpreted it in the light of an older and subtler civilization than that in which James grew up, and he gave it this interpretation without any loss of vitality.

About ten years ago my wife and I met Schiller and his brothers in Switzerland, and went for some long walks with them. I was interested to see how Schiller was much more European than English—more European in his emphasis on what one might call intellectual integrity, or, if you like, the moral importance of clear thinking. He was in small things more at home in Switzerland than in England, and the simplicity of his character—like that of an old-fashioned German professor—was more evident. (I shall never forget watching his elder brother talking to a cow in the Arolla peasant dialect: one of the few times I have ever seen a cow really satisfied by human speech!)

I have always felt it regrettable that Schiller had so little recognition in Oxford. I believe that he was a little hurt by this lack of recognition, but he was never soured or embittered by it, as many men might have been, and I always felt that he was far more anxious to get his particular method of approach to philosophical questions accepted as valid than to obtain honours for himself.

A later portrait reveals what are essentially the same features. It is provided by Dr. E. G. C. Poole, Fellow of New College, and represents Schiller as he was towards the close of his life, when his tutorship at Corpus had already come to its appointed end, and he was dividing his time between the duties of his American Chair and the amenities of Europe.

After explaining that he used to spend several weeks of each summer, from 1927 to 1935, with Schiller and his brothers in the same hotel at Pontresina, Dr. Poole goes on to say:

F. C. S. Schiller was always intellectually the most interesting member of the party, but he was extremely modest and self-effacing when anybody else wanted to talk. His mind revelled in paradox and he could be counted on to produce several new jokes in the course of any long expedition or in an evening's idle talk. When the conversation was on a trivial level, the jokes took the form of puns, mostly bad but sometimes good. But when the discussion turned to topics of real substance, he would come out with comments of real Voltairean pungency and illuminate the subject with a lapidary phrase. In the course of our walks we would sometimes exchange views on our respective subjects, and naturally we did not get down to professional philosophy or mathematics; but I enjoyed hearing his views 'out of school' on Plato, William James, and Bertrand Russell. He was deeply interested in eugenics, and active in bringing the subject before the public; but (speaking as an outsider) I suppose that subject is now being reduced to a more rigorous mathematical and biological basis by J. B. S. Haldane, Carr Saunders, &c. Schiller had a curious and extraordinary knowledge of the diplomatic history of the years preceding the war and could talk for hours about the doings of Aehrenthal or Isvolski and other East European statesmen. His excursions into botany were restricted by my own complete ignorance, but I think he knew more than most amateurs. I found his conversation an unending source of interest and pleasure.

The most abstemious of men, a teetotaler in practice if not in theory and a small eater, he was in his own way something of an epicure. He used to say there were three reasons for going to Switzerland, the air, the water, and the butter. He was as fastidious about the temperature and flavour of the Alpine springs as some others about the vintages of port, and, when he dined off a little fish and cauliflower, he would expect them to be cooked to a turn!

He never discussed with me the personal rivalries connected with his own career; but I gathered from his brothers that eminent Continental philosophers had expressed surprise that he never held an Oxford chair.

These impressions are very slight and one-sided, but perhaps may serve to illustrate another aspect of a very brilliant and charming personality.



Schiller became a Fellow of the British Academy in 1926, at the moment when his tutorial activities came to an end, after twenty-nine years of service; though by a special arrangement with the College he retained the status and privileges of a Fellow up to the time of his death. But Oxford's loss was America's gain. Nay, by crossing the Atlantic, Schiller himself gained two crowning satisfactions hitherto denied him—a professorial Chair and a very happy marriage. As so often, accident lent a helping hand. Schiller happened to attend the Harvard Congress of Philosophy in the autumn of 1926, and was invited to go on to visit the University of Southern California for a short spell of lecturing. Here not only did he devote a course to a condensed account of his own Humanism, but within earshot of profane Hollywood unfolded the higher mysteries of the Oxford Greats School, expounding Plato's *Republic* to a crowded and appreciative audience. There soon followed an official Professorship, crowned with an Honorary LL.D.

Here, too, he found time to carry on his favourite pursuits of climbing and botanizing in the neighbouring mountains, with an exploring party that included his future wife. Her maiden name was Louise Strang, of Denver and, ultimately, of Knickerbocker stock that had reached New York, or rather New Amsterdam, in 1632. She was an Assistant Professor in the University; which presently offered Schiller a permanent Chair on the easy terms that he should do duty every other Semester. His reasons for accepting the post were thus no doubt various. Later on, when he had married, he could say: 'I now have three things I never hoped for: a woman to love, a house to live in, and a garden to plant.' Though increasing blood-pressure and consequent heart trouble had been slowly and almost secretly sapping his vitality, his spirit continued to defy the flesh. Up to within a year of his death, on 7 August 1937, he had piously revisited his old haunts—his Oxford rooms and his Swiss mountains—summer after summer, drifting luxuriously back to his work by way of the Panama

Canal. He had likewise never ceased to pour out his soul in speech and writing of every kind—lectures, broadcasts, books, articles, reviews. That excellent quarterly of the University, *The Personalist*, is surcharged with Schiller's wit and wisdom, some of it, alas! posthumous. Thus he fulfilled his own idea of the philosophic life as one that unites speculation with action.

This is not the place in which to examine Schiller's views as set forth in his voluminous writings. Even to draw up a full list of these would prove too lengthy a task. At the head of it comes *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1891), already mentioned. Though it dates from a period when he had not yet made contact with American 'pragmatism', or had developed his own 'humanism' in sympathy with it, the same line of thought is pursued in a more tentative way; and the revised edition of 1910 shows how little alteration was needed to bring it into harmony with his maturer convictions. On the other hand, the campaign for humanism definitely opens with the pioneer essay 'Axioms as Postulates' in *Personal Idealism*, ed. H. Sturt, 1902. He quickly followed up this attack on apriorism in *Humanism*, 1903, afterwards translated into German, and *Studies in Humanism*, 1907, presently translated into French. A lesser work, *Plato or Protagoras?* 1908, deserves mention, if only because it tries to bring home to classically minded Oxford how a philosophy of Man as the Measure compares favourably with the Platonic idealism, if the validity of our standards is to consist in their power of helping us to live here and now. An elaborate analysis of these standards, so far as they are supposed to guarantee pure reasoning, and thus to rule experience rather than to serve it, is furnished in *Formal Logic*, 1912. Whereas this work is mainly critical, *Logic for Use*, 1929, gives the constructive side of the argument. So much for his more technical publications, though it is hard to say of so lucid a style of exposition at what point it is meant to be popular. Thus *Problems of Belief*, 1924, or *Must Philosophers Disagree?* 1934, may count as serious

contributions to philosophy, even if it be a philosophy without tears. On the other hand, *Tantalus or the Future of Man*, 1924; *Cassandra or the Future of the British Empire*, 1926 (rewritten, 1936); *Social Decay and Eugenical Reform*, 1932, reveal the philosopher who is likewise a citizen of the world. Of his innumerable papers, whether laborious or light, it would be endless to take stock.

Moreover, it would be no less presumptuous than unprofitable to attempt to sum up his philosophy in a few words. The only excuse for so doing that might be offered is that, apart from his interest in a few side-issues, such as psychical research, or the advocacy of eugenics as a cure for a declining civilization, he concentrated wholeheartedly on a single problem—how the logical process of truth-seeking is influenced by its psychological conditions. The school of thought that he opposed assumes the logical process to possess a validity independent of its psychological origin; but on Schiller's view this is to put the cart before the horse, as if being, once for all liberated by sheer reflection from the control of becoming, could thereupon direct experience without further reference to its changing and expanding needs. Thus he stood for a biological, evolutionary, dynamic interpretation of knowledge, or rather of that knowing process of which our so-called knowledge is but a precipitate, unstable as all would agree as regards its matter, and, as Schiller would urge, in respect to its formal organization as well. To treat these informing principles as axioms, in the style of the absolutist philosopher, rather than as working hypotheses, after the manner of the man of science, involves a claim to infallibility much too flattering, he argues, to the human mind as we know it in ourselves—after all, the only way of knowing mind at all, short of apotheosis. He denies that by some miracle of projection on the part of the pure intellect we can pass from the earthly level of mere probability to some heaven where certitude reigns even if it cannot govern. On his showing, the futility of the transcendental point of view is

made plain by the fact that it can afford no explanation of error, and thus can make no sense of the scientific advance by 'trial and error' from the known to the unknown. He insists that we must work up to deity from our end, not start from an arbitrary definition of deity and work backwards to ourselves. The personal and voluntary effort in attaining truth alone yields a true, as contrasted with a sham, teleology. No theory of an automatic process as if deity were recovering its lost memory in and through us will do justice to the reality of the purposive human struggle towards the light. Schiller, as notably in his earliest book, is ready with a theology, based on faith rather than on knowledge, that represents the deity, not as all in all, but rather as a finite being standing towards us other finite beings of lesser degree in such a moral relation that we may expect help from a divine source in proportion as we help ourselves.

By way of objection to such a philosophy too much, perhaps, has been made of its failure to provide a satisfactory test of truth. Schiller instinctively shied off the word pragmatism, which appears to find such a criterion in the homely fact that truth may be supposed to be practically useful—in a word, to pay. Schiller would no doubt agree with the biologist that it must have a certain 'survival-value' for the human race, inasmuch as man's chief asset is the high intelligence of some, perhaps most, of its members. But a case could likewise be made out for the biological utility of lying in season; just as 'shamming dead' has protective value for certain animals of the weaker sort. That the element of objective truth in our beliefs, religious and moral no less than logical, is the sole ground of their survival-value for the race—and for Schiller the race consists of individual persons, viewed in a genetic succession of which the maintenance by no means constitutes their entire interest in living—is an extreme position which he nowhere adopts. Probably, if pressed, he would have allowed that there was no conceivable test of truth that could be applied off-hand and with complete success even to our

most cherished opinions. Thus, then, the most cherished of them all, namely, the philosopher's assurance that truth is great and will prevail—being part of his more comprehensive assurance that good must conquer evil in the end—remains just as real as our practical faith makes it so. We make truth, Schiller would say, just as we make beauty or moral goodness, by striving to realize it more and more.

Such, then, being his creed, it remains but to add that he did his best to live up to it. Never was a man more honest alike with himself, with his neighbour, and with the facts of life as he met them half-way with the full force of his resolute will and his powerful understanding. Multiple as were his interests and his gifts, a certain grand simplicity of character sublimated them into a single-minded pursuit of truth—that divine truth which he loved none the less intensely and purely because he felt that it must ever elude a human embrace.

R. R. MARETT