
Transpositionen:
Australische Studien zur deutschen
Literatur, Philosophie und Kultur

Transpositions:
Australian Studies in German Literature,
Philosophy and Culture

Herausgegeben von / Edited by

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50 Jahre Germanistik an der Monash Universität

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50 Years of German Studies at Monash University

Herausgegeben von / Edited by

Franz-Josef Deiters, Axel Fliethmann, Christiane Weller



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**"... atop a single plank on the wide,
open sea" – Johann Gottfried
Herder's Concept of Poetry as a Medium
of Cultural Identity and the Problem
of a Hermeneutic Anthropology¹**

FRANZ-JOSEF DEITERS

I.

The modernization process which has shaped European societies since early modern times can be described, along the lines of what system theorist Niklas Luhmann contends, as a process of conversion in terms of social forms of organization with a functional form replacing a stratificatory one (cf. Luhmann), and in doing so effecting a profound symbolic decentralization. The corporative order with its religious legitimization, an order in which all of us have our God-given place, is replaced by a society of mobilized individuals who are expected to actively promote integration by forming a collective identity. One of the most prominent, successful and influential models for self-description brought forth by European societies has been the Nation, and in 18th-century Germany in any case, literature was the medium which did the most to transport this model (cf. Schröder; Giesen; Berding). One could say that in the process of creating a sphere of its own (cf. Schmidt) and adopting a mode of permanent self-ascertainment, literature laid claim to this task and appropriated it completely. When Johann Gottfried Herder introduces the term

1 This paper was originally given at the *First German-American Frontiers of the Humanities Symposium "Identities – Four Dialogues,"* jointly hosted by the American Philosophical Society and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, held at the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, October 7-10, 2004.

of a "National-Litteratur" [national literature] (Herder, *Sämmtliche Werke* II, 18; see Koch, 89-116) into the German language, this can be seen as an attempt (not unlike Lessing's earlier attempt to establish a national theatre) to come to terms with the consequences of the turn towards functional differentiation and the accompanying emancipation of the individual, the strategy being to formulate a concept of collective identity. In this sense one can concur with John H. Zammito when he claims:

As a "patriot," Herder was vitally concerned with the creation of a German national culture. The backwardness his generation felt in relation to Western Europe represented a burning motivation for his work (Zammito, 155).

Yet, Herder's concept of a national literature would remain totally underdetermined if one were to foreground aspects of 19th-century intellectual history, in particular political Romanticism, and reduce it to an inclusionary concept used to describe a society caught up in a process of modernization which extended to Germany's fragmented territories. One indication that Herder's concept of a national literature cannot be functionalized in this way can be derived from the fact that his *Volkslieder* anthologies, unlike those put together by the German romantics (cf. Arnim, Brentano), were by no means designed to establish an exclusive German cultural and literary tradition, but rather to bring together poetic products of diverse, not even exclusively European origin.² Here German texts are found alongside English and Spanish ones, and lore from Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Greenland and Iceland is represented as well as that of Italy and France. Even the Gaelic tradition finds its way into Herder's collections (see *HW* III). As I see it, Herder's concept serves as a differential category formulated in opposition to the concepts generated by universalistic rationalism and the Classicist aesthetics which is

2 Several scholars have shown that Herder's concept of a national culture and a national literature has no chauvinistic implications (see Adler; Herrmann; Dann).

based on it, this being an aesthetics which is incapable of accommodating cultural difference. Thus Herder's concept is to be read primarily as one looking for ways of conceiving cultural difference synchronically as well as diachronically. For this reason, modern anthropology understandably celebrates Herder as one of the most important founders of the discipline. As the eminent anthropologist Eberhard Berg claims, it was primarily Herder who paved the way for the study of foreign cultures in the sense of modern ethnology, since, as Berg argues, he developed, in connection with his philosophy of history, a concept of culture which included 'primitive' as well as 'civilized' peoples and the core of his approach was so innovative that he can still be prevailed upon to serve as a guide for the discipline in theory and practice (see Berg, 85, 94; Poltermann; Heinz).

II.

Just how formative this aspect is for Herder's thought is already signaled by the polemical gesture with which he confronts Enlightenment philosophy, in particular as it is represented by Voltaire, in his so called Bückeberg philosophy of history. He ironically attributes to it an "*allgemeine Völkerliebe voll toleranter Unterjochung, Aussaugung und Aufklärung*" [universal love of all peoples full of tolerant subjugation, blood-sucking, and enlightenment]³ (*HW* IV, 19). And in the same passage he makes reference to the "Betrüge unsrer Zeit" [our age's deceit], by which he claims that we attribute features to other cultures "nach unsern europäischen Begriffen (und vielleicht Gefühlen)" [in our European terms (and perhaps emotions)] which "wir uns aus unserm Zustande an [ihnen] träumen" [we dream up on account of our own condition] (15). In other words, what he chides Enlightenment thinkers for is their propensity towards projection. In *Über die neuere deutsche Literatur* [On modern

3 All translations by F.-J. D. if not otherwise indicated.

German literature] he is particularly harsh in his repeated criticism of French philosophy, which dominated his age:

Die Franzosen, zu stolz auf ihren Nationalgeschmack, nähern demselben alles, statt sich dem Geschmack einer andern Zeit zu bequemen. Homer muß als *Besiegter* nach Frankreich kommen, sich nach ihrer Mode kleiden, um ihr Auge nicht zu ärgern: sich seinen ehrwürdigen Bart, und alte einfältige Tracht abnehmen lassen: französische Sitten soll er an sich nehmen, und wo seine bäurische Hoheit noch hervorblickt, da verlacht man ihn, als einen Barbare (*HW I*, 307).⁴

Herder's acerbic criticism aims at a form of appropriating foreign cultures which in terms of post-colonial studies might be called an imperialistic operation which 'translates' the foreign into the familiar. This is the gesture Herder has in mind when he criticizes the 'Ossian' translation done by the Viennese Jesuit Denis, writing that it did, to be sure, show signs of "viel Fleiß und Geschmack" [much industry and taste], but that "[t]rotz alles Fleißes und Geschmacks und Schwunges und Stärke der deutschen Übersetzung" was "unser Ossian gewiß nicht der wahre Ossian mehr" [despite the industry and taste and verve and vigor of the German translation, Ossian was certainly no longer the authentic Ossian] (*HW II*, 447). In articulating his objections to Denis he justifies them on reasons analogous to those he cites when he upbraids the French for their appropriation of Homer:

Meine Gründe gegen den deutschen Ossian sind nicht bloß [...] Eigensinn gegen den deutschen Hexameter überhaupt:

4 The French, too proud of their national taste, appropriate everything to their taste rather than to accommodate the taste of other times. Homer must come to France as one who has been *defeated* and clothe himself as their fashion dictates so as not to be an eyesore, must let them remove his dignified beard and old, simple costume. He is to adopt French manners, and whenever his countrified lordliness shows he is ridiculed as a Barbarian.

[...] aber freilich [...] der Klopstocksche Hexameter bei Ossian? freilich auch hinc illæ lacrimæ! Hätte der Herr D. die eigentliche Manier Ossians nur etwas auch mit dem innern Ohre überlegt – Ossian so kurz, stark, männlich, abgebrochen in Bildern und Empfindungen – Klopstocks Manier, so ausmalend, so vortrefflich, Empfindungen ganz ausströmen, und wie sie Wellen schlagen, sich legen und wiederkommen, auch die Worte, die Sprachfügungen ergießen zu lassen – welch ein Unterschied? und was ist nun ein Ossian in Klopstocks Hexameter? in Klopstocks Manier? (447f).⁵

Such a culturally imperialistic translation, which pays tribute to the poetic conventions of the target language and the taste of the time, schooled by Klopstock, is described by Herder in his *Briefen zu Beförderung der Humanität* [Letters towards the Advancement of Humanity] as an attitude which transforms everything "durch *Artefacta* und *chemische Operationen* in Eins" [through artefacta and chemical operations into One] (*HW VII*, 654) and from which as such one could gain no insights concerning the culture which the 'Ossianic' epics originated in. As Herder writes in the Bückeberg philosophy of history, the consequence of leveling the alterity of the foreign is that the European "Philosoph alsdenn am meisten *Tier* [sei], wenn er am zuverlässigsten *Gott* sein wollte" [philosopher is most like an animal when he wishes to be like God] (*HW IV*, 81). The Enlightenment philosophers' notion that one could gain an understanding of foreign cultures from an Archimedian position and judge over them while adopt-

5 My objections to the German Ossian do not merely derive from resistance against German hexameters *as such*: [...] but really [...], rendering Ossian in Klopstockian hexameters? It is truly also hinc illæ lacrimæ! Had Mr. D. only used the mind's ear to think a bit about what Ossian's style is actually like – so short, strong, masculine, broken off in images and sensations – Klopstock's manner so amplifying, so exquisite, letting sensations gush out – and how they make waves, settle down and return – and letting the words, the arrangements of words flow – what a difference! And what now is an Ossian in Klopstock's hexameters? in Klopstock's style?

ing an auctorial stance, which is to say the desire to be "God," is seen by Herder as the blind spot in their way of thinking. In contradiction of their ambitious claim, it keeps them ensnared, he says, like an "animal," in the perspectivity of their own standpoint. For Herder's diagnosis, formulated in the Bückeberg philosophy of history, holds for 18th-century universalistic thought as well. He writes, "Man bildet nichts aus, als *wozu Zeit, Klima, Bedürfnis, Welt, Schicksal, Anlaß gibt*" [One does not develop anything but that for which time, climate, need, world, fortune gives occasion] (35). Taking all this into consideration, it would be completely wrong to designate Herder as an anti-Enlightenment thinker. On the contrary, he judges the standpoint of his own culture, as it is formulated in Enlightenment thought, according to its own defining principle, namely the principle of reflection. When Herder relativizes his own culture by criticizing the auctorial gesture, all he does is to rigorously perpetuate Enlightenment philosophy and exceed its principles, as Jürgen Brummack has shown in particular in some highly differentiated analyses. For when, as Brummack points out, Herder "die großen Namen der westeuropäischen Aufklärung in seiner Polemik [...] zu Reihen zusammenstellt und etwa mit einem 'etc.' oder anders zu einem Kollektiv des Üblichen, der grassierenden Meinungen vereint" [lists the names of major Western European Enlightenment thinkers in his polemic and groups them together by adding an 'etc.' or unites them in some other way under the collective banner of prevailing, if not to say rampant notions of the day], there is no doubt that "historisch wichtige Unterschiede eingegeben, und [...] Abhängigkeiten, in denen Herder selbst steht, verdeckt [werden]" [historically significant differences are leveled and relationships of dependency on the part of Herder are concealed] (Brummack, 284; see Gaier; Bollacher). Yet beyond the rhetorical strategy of asserting his own position by means of polemical distancing, a substantial difference between Herder's ideas and those expressed in Montesquieu's theory of climate zones (see Montesquieu) or Rousseau's phantasma of the 'l'homme naturel' (see Rousseau), for example, can be identified which proved to be

of crucial importance for the formulation of Herder's own position. This difference primarily involves the method of inquiry, the emergence of which I will concentrate on in the following while refraining from detailed contextualization.

III.

Herder expresses his demand for relativization of one's own attitude in the image of the ship voyage: "Sie wissen das Abenteuer meiner Schifffahrt," he writes in the *Auszug aus einem Briefwechsel über Ossian* [Abstract from a correspondence on Ossian]⁶,

aber nie können Sie sich die Wirkung einer solchen, etwas langen Schifffahrt so denken, wie man sie fühlt. Auf Einmal

6 Here Herder is alluding to the introductory passage of the *Journal meiner Reise im Jahr 1769* [Journal of my travels in 1769]: "[...] was gibt ein Schiff, das zwischen Himmel und Meer schwebt, nicht für weite Sphäre zu denken! Alles gibt hier dem Gedanken Flügel und Bewegung und weiten Luftkreis! Das flatternde Segel, das immer wankende Schiff, der rauschende Wellenstrom, die fliegende Wolke, der weite unendliche Luftkreis! Auf der Erde ist man an einen toten Punkt angeheftet; und in den engen Kreis einer Situation eingeschlossen. [...] Nun trete man Einmal heraus, oder vielmehr ohne Bücher, Schriften, Beschäftigung und Homogene Gesellschaft werde man herausgeworfen – Welch eine andre Aussicht! Wo ist das feste Land, auf dem ich so feste stand? und die kleine Kanzel und der Lehnstuhl und das Katheder, worauf ich mich brüstete? [...] O Seele, wie wird dir sein, wenn du aus dieser Welt hinaustrittst? Der enge, feste, eingeschränkte Mittelpunkt ist verschwunden, du flatterst in den Lüften, oder schwimmst auf einem Meere – die Welt verschwindet dir – ist unter dir verschwunden! – Welch neue Denkart!" [what immense spheres for thought does a ship open up, hovering, as it does, between heaven and sea! Here thoughts are given wings and motion and a wide aerial expanse! The flapping sail, the constantly rocking ship, the roaring waves, the flying clouds, the wide, boundless sky! On the earth one is anchored to a dead spot; and locked up inside the closed circle of a situation. [...] Now for once one leaves the circle, or rather is thrown out of it without books, writings, occupation and homogenous society – what a different view now! Where is the solid land on which I stood so squarely? And the small desk and the elbow chair and the lectern which I preened myself on? [...] O Soul, how will you feel when you pass out of this world? The narrow, solid, limited center has vanished, you flutter in the air, or swim on an ocean – the world disappears before you – has disappeared below you! – What a new way of thinking!] (HW IX.2, 14f).

aus Geschäften, Tumult und Rangespossen der bürgerlichen Welt, aus dem Lehnstuhl des Gelehrten und vom weichen Sopha der Gesellschaften auf Einmal weggeworfen, ohne Zerstreungen, Büchersäle, gelehrten und ungelehrten Zeitungen, über Einem Brette, auf offnem allweiten Meere, in einem kleinen Staat von Menschen, die strengere Gesetze haben, als die Republik Lykurgus, mitten im Schauspiel einer ganz andern, lebenden und webenden Natur, zwischen Abgrund und Himmel schwebend, täglich mit denselben endlosen Elementen umgeben [...] – glauben Sie, da lassen sich Skalden und Barden anders lesen, als neben dem Katheder des Professors (HW II, 456f).⁷

Herder names elbow chair, sofa and lectern as loci for reading texts from foreign cultures and contrasts them with his own reading experiences “über Einem Brette, auf offnem allweiten Meere” [atop a single plank on the wide, open sea]. This passage indicates that the argument which he brings forth is essentially mediological in the sense used by Albrecht Koschorke.⁸ The 18th-century poetry of the European Enlightenment is fundamentally mediated by the written word. Hence, the reception of poetry from other cultures also involves a mortification of the body. Herder views this mode of reception, which reduces reading to a purely intellectual activity, as the origin of rationalistic thought, or what he

7. You know about the adventure of my ship voyage but you will never be able to imagine what the effect of such a long ship voyage is, of how one feels. To be all of a sudden removed from the affairs, tumult and scramble for status in civil life, removed from the elbow chair of the scholar and the soft sofas of the societies, with no distractions, no libraries, no scholarly or unscholarly journals, atop a single plank on the wide, open sea, in a small State of people with laws stricter than those of the Republic of Lykurgus, caught up in the spectacle of nature, but a completely different kind of nature, a living and weaving nature, oneself hovering between abyss and heaven, surrounded by the same infinite elements every day [...] – believe me, scalds and bards are read differently here without the professor's lectern at one's side.

8. Koschorke agrees with Niklas Luhmann in his assessment of the modernization processes of modern times as having been determined by a shift in the social framework from direct bodily *interaction* to medially conveyed *communication* (see Koschorke).

calls the “Sucht” [compulsion] “aus Nominalerklärungen alles herzuleiten, was folgt und nicht folgen kann” [to derive from nominal explanations everything which can or cannot follow] (HW IX.2, 110). Herder sees the formulation of a universalistic rationalism, which culminated in the establishment of the Leibniz-Wolff school, and the Classicist aesthetics which is based on it as rooted in the medial writerliness of modern European culture. This he counters critically, however, contending that “ohne Körper ist unsre Seele im Gebrauch nichts: mit gelähmten Sinnen ist sie selbst gelähmt: mit einem muntern proportionierten Gebrauch aller Sinne ist sie selbst munter und lebendig” [without body, our soul is nothing; with paralyzed senses it is itself paralyzed, but with a spirited, well-proportioned use of all senses it is spirited and lively] (119; see Braungart). These words show that Herder's criticism of what he deems to be a misguided appropriation of foreign cultures, misguided because it negates the alterity of what is being appropriated, is rooted in the anthropological premises, inspired by Spinozan monism (see Herz), which Herder himself formulates and the epistemological theories which follow from these premises. When he refers to the human being in his treatise on the origins of language as a “denkendes *sensorium commune*” [thinking sensorium commune] (HW I, 743f.), Herder views all human knowledge (including self-knowledge) as being founded on, and not merely originating in – as the post-1781 critical rationalist Kant would have it – knowledge of the senses.⁹ Herder sees 18th-century European book culture, for him a form of acquiring knowledge which limits itself to intellectual activ-

9. See John H. Zammito: “Herder proposed to approach that domain under an new conception of empirical psychology. For Herder, ‘aesthetics,’ that ‘new science’ that Baumgarten had named and set the frame for, constituted the essential project. [...] From 1765 his plans to develop this ‘science’ were firmly in place. The essential impulse was to advance beyond what in Baumgarten was still preponderantly a *poetics* to a full-fledged *aesthetics*, in other words, to encompass all the fine arts. [...] Herder proposed to achieve what remained unfulfilled in Baumgarten's project. But like Baumgarten, Herder saw this project not primarily as an investigation aimed at the objects of fine art but rather *through* them at the mysterious nature of human subjectivity” (Zammito, 156f).

ity, as a practice which amputates the roots and foundation of all knowledge, which is to say the senses. Thus for Herder, the appropriation of foreign cultures within the horizon of rationalistic theoretical concepts, something which he clearly criticizes, is ascribable to the medial conditions of writerly culture. If one follows Panayotis Kondylis in identifying the "Rehabilitierung der Sinnlichkeit" [rehabilitation of sensuality] as the "Grundfrage" [key issue] of the Enlightenment Age, it can be said that this critique of Enlightenment thought as being shaped by a writerly tradition is a feature of Herder's concept which is in itself determined by the basic tenets of the Enlightenment (Kondylis, 21).

What Herder propagates is a mode of reception which brings the body, i.e. the potential of sensuous knowledge into play. The image of the ship voyage which he used to illustrate his concept must therefore not be interpreted as a metaphor for a purely intellectual relativization of one's own standpoint, one which can be reformulated in logical-conceptual terms without any loss of substance.¹⁰ Rather, this image constitutes a metonymy which represents Herder's epistemological mode, a mode based on sensuous experience. As such, it also serves as a paradigm for the practice of translation which Herder suggests, or rather demands of us when we encounter texts from foreign cultures. According to Herder, by activating our senses and not only our intellect, we cultivate fundamentally new modes of understanding. It is necessary for us as recipients to activate our senses, Herder says, in order to grasp the pragmatic connections of life in which the poetry of such cultures is embedded, cultures which, unlike our own, have an oral tradition. In this vein Herder writes in his treatise entitled *Ähnlichkeit der mittlern englischen und deutschen Dichtkunst* [The Similarity between Middle English and German Poetry]:

10 Herder's image of the ship voyage is interpreted as a metaphor by Irmscher, 280-283.

Alle unpolizierte Völker *singen und handeln*; was sie handeln, singen sie und singen Abhandlung. Ihre Gesänge sind das Archiv des Volks, der Schatz ihrer *Wissenschaft und Religion*, ihrer *Theogonie und Kosmologien* der Taten ihrer Väter und der Begebenheiten ihrer Geschichte, Abdruck ihres Herzens, Bild ihres häuslichen Lebens in Freude und Leid, beim Brautbett und Grabe (HW II, 560).¹¹

For this mode of reception, which integrates intellectual and sensuous activity, Herder uses the term "Einfühlung" [empathy]. Thus in his Bückeburg philosophy of history he formulates his instructions on how to read to audiences as follows:

11 All unpoliced cultures *sing and act out*; what they act out, they sing, and they sing acts of inquiry. Their songs are the archive of the people, the treasure chest of their *science and religion*, their *theogony and cosmogonies*, the deeds of their fathers and the events in their history, the imprint of their heart, the image of their domestic life with its joys and sorrows, in the bride's bed and the grave. – Cf. the following passage from the 'Ossian' correspondence: "Alle Gesänge solcher wilden Völker weben um daseiende Gegenstände, Handlungen, Begebenheiten, um eine lebendige Welt! Wie reich und vielfach sind da nun Umstände, gegenwärtige Züge, Teilvorfälle! Und alle hat das Auge gesehen! Die Seele stellet sie sich vor! Das setzt Sprünge und Würfe! Es ist kein anderer Zusammenhang unter den Teilen des Gesanges, als unter den Bäumen und Gebüsch im Walde, unter den Felsen und Grotten in der Einöde, als unter den Szenen der Begebenheit selbst. Wenn der Grönländer von seinem Seehundfange erzählt: so redet er nicht, sondern malet mit Worten und Bewegungen, jeden Umstand, jede Bewegung: denn alle sind Teile vom Bilde in seiner Seele. Wenn er also auch seinem Verstorbenen das Leichenlob und die Totenklage hält, er lobt, er klagt nicht: er malt, und das Leben des Verstorbenen selbst, mit allen Würfen der Einbildung herbeigerissen, muß reden und bejammern" [All the songs of such wild peoples weave around existing objects, actions, events, a lively world! How rich and manifold now are situations, current pageants, partial occurrences! And the eye has seen it all! The soul imagines it! That produces leaps and turns! The connection between the parts of the song is no other than that under trees and bushes in the forest, under crags and in grottos in the wilderness, in the scenes of the event itself. When the Greenlander tells of his seal catch he does not speak, but rather paints with words and motions every circumstance, every movement, for all of these are parts of an image in his soul. When he holds the funeral oration for the deceased, he praises and does not lament: he paints, and the life of the deceased itself, pulled forth by all turns of his imagination, must speak and bewail] (HW II, 486f).

Gehe hin, mein Leser, und fühle noch jetzt hinter Jahrtausenden die so lang erhaltne *reine morgenländische Natur*, belebe sie dir aus der *Geschichte der ältesten Zeiten*, und du wirst *'Neigungen antreffen, wie sie nur in dem Lande, auf die Art, zu den großen Zwecken der Vorsehung aufs Menschengeschlecht hinab gebildet werden konnten'* – Welch ein Gemälde, wenn ich's dir liefern könnte, *wie es war!* (HW IV, 19).¹²

For Herder, poetry involves cultural self-description of the society it originates in and as such it has to be reconstructed by reading it empathetically. Consequently, his anthropological concept is based on a hermeneutic concept of text which conceives of it as a medium whose reception takes into account the pragmatic circumstances of its emergence, a text model, in other words, which commits the written text to the model of oral interaction. Numerous passages in Herder's works document this notion. In his treatise entitled *Über die neuere deutsche Literatur* [On modern German literature], he programmatically declares that reading a book does not entail "zu wissen, was andre vor uns gedacht und gesagt: sondern es sich eigen zu machen, wie sie es gedacht und gesagt" [knowing what others have thought and said before us, but rather adopting the manner in which they thought and said it] (HW I, 422; see Simon, 153-225; Schnur; Birus, 158-160; Weimar). As opposed to the Enlightenment thinkers, who in his eye never go further than to mirror the parameters of their own cultures (which for them possess universal validity) in the medium of texts from foreign cultures precisely because they never get beyond the written word, i.e. the medial nature of

12 Go ahead, my reader, and feel, even now, the pure Oriental nature that has been preserved for so long behind the millennia; revive it for yourself by studying the history of the most ancient times, and you will encounter inclinations that could only have been formed and set upon the human species in that land, in that manner, for the great purposes of Providence. What a painting, if only I could present it to you as it was!

writerly culture, Herder, the anthropologist, considers it his duty to make himself the medium of the Other:

Ein Volk *schildern*, heißt eigentlich nichts, als die Sitten und Denkart desselben, so möglich, *durch sich selbst* zeigen: da man aber nicht Alles zeigen oder aufzeichnen kann, eben das ausmerken, was – nicht am lärmendsten ist, am meisten in die Augen fällt – sondern *am tiefsten sitzt*, gleichsam die Geburts-Stamina des Volks enthält und am innigsten *charakterisieret*. Wer die Kunst hat, sich dahin *ein zu setzen*, am tiefsten zu *zeichnen*, sich und andre ganz und damit zu *familiarisen*, der ist *Volks Kenner* und *Zeichner*: das andre sind *Farbenreiber* und *Schmierer!* (HW III, 61).¹³

This passage from the prefaces to the *Volkslieder* project sketches Herder's position as concisely as to be possibly wished for. For him the task of the anthropologist is to select from the store of semantic material supplied by poetry that which is characteristic, i.e. the material in which a culture describes itself in the densest way. Thus Herder views the task of the anthropologist as a process of abstraction. This concept of abstraction must not be understood in the sense of ontological abstraction in the Platonic tradition, which completely ignores sensuous perception, nor is it meant in the sense of logical abstraction in the Aristotelian tradition, which remains within the realm of the sensuous and takes a classificatory approach (see "Abstraktion"), but instead involves an operation which, on closer examination, can be described as

13 Depicting a people actually means nothing more than showing, if possible, its customs and ways of thinking through oneself. But since one cannot show and record everything, take note – not of that which is most brawling, which is most conspicuous – but rather of that which has the deepest roots, which contains birth stamina of the people, as it were, and of what most deeply characterizes. Whoever possesses the art to put oneself in that place, to draw most profoundly, to totally familiarize oneself and others with it, is the people's adept and portraitist: the others are daubers and smearers!

an act including a metonymic shift.¹⁴ From the store of collected poetic material, one delegates to one element the task of representing the diversity which it is taken from, investing it with the status of a sign which stands for the multiplicity of all the other material which is represented by it. If this is the case, then the process of shifting an element from the syntagmatic to the paradigmatic level will be the act which forms the multiplicity of the collected material into the totality of the culture. But this is the very totality which Herder assumes to precede the act of signification when he claims that "jede Nation [habe] ihren *Mittelpunkt* [...] *in sich*, wie jede Kugel ihren Schwerpunkt!" [every nation [...] has a *center* [...] *within itself*, as every ball has its center of gravity!] (HW IV, 39). What this means is that Herder's anthropologist is the one who constructs the symbolic order, which he then invests with the status of a self-description of the Other. Only within the framework of his concept of a national literature do the folk songs and epics collected by Herder become invested with the status of a self-description of the culture in which they originated. Herder inadvertently makes a false, naturalistic conclusion here.

IV.

This epistemological problem which his concept raises can be concretized historically if it is taken into consideration that in structural terms, the role of Herder's anthropologist exactly corresponds to that which the poet has to play in the creation of cultural self-descriptions. For Herder these do not originate in the anonymity of a collective. On the contrary, he clearly person-

14 When Paul de Man speaks of the "organic coherence of the synecdoche" as the most important component of an aesthetic of the symbol and mentions Herder in this context, he basically means what I refer to as metonymy. In my view, the concept of metonymy is more appropriate, however, as it covers a wider spectrum of semiotic operations than those involving only 'pars pro toto' and 'totum pro parte', to which the term synecdoche is limited (see de Man).

alizes the question of origins. Although he frequently emphasizes in general terms the important task which bards and rhapsodists fulfill when it comes to holding together cultures with oral traditions,¹⁵ Homer in particular is taken as an exemplary figure when it comes to determining the role played by the poet in the symbolic constitution of a people. In the prefaces to the *Volkslieder* he writes, for example:

Der größte Sänger der Griechen, *Homerus*, ist zugleich der größte *Volksdichter*. Sein herrliches Ganze ist nicht Epopee, sondern επος, Märchen, Sage, lebendige Volksgeschichte. Er [...] sang was er gehöret, stellte dar was er gesehen und lebendig erfaßt hatte (HW III, 231).¹⁶

These lines, which scholars quote time and again, essentially contain Herder's entire concept of the genesis of cultural self-description. The poet is affected by the imagination of the masses, but as

15 Thus he writes, for example, on the period of the migration of the peoples: "Alle nordischen Völker, die damals wie Wellen des Meers, wie Eisschollen oder Walfische in großer Bewegung waren, hatten Gesänge: Gesänge, in denen das *Leben ihrer Väter*, die *Taten derselben*, ihr *Mut und Herz lebte*. So zogen sie nach Süden, und nichts konnte ihnen widerstehen: sie fochten mit Gesänge wie mit dem Schwert. Den nordischen Gesängen haben wirs also mit zuzuschreiben, daß sich das Schicksal Europens so änderte, und daß wir da, wo wir itzt sind, wohnen. Daß Rom über Deutschland nichts vermochte, haben wir ihren Helden und Barden zu danken: dem Schlacht- und Freiheitsgesänge der zwischen den Schilden ihrer Väter tönte" [All Nordic peoples, who were constantly in motion, like the waves on the sea, like ice floes and whales, had songs: songs in which the *life of their fathers*, the *fathers' deeds*, *courage and heart lived*. In this way they migrated South and nothing could resist them: they fought with songs as they did with swords. The Nordic songs are in part to be accredited with the fact that the fate of Europe changed as it did, and that we now live where we live. We owe much to their heroes and bards, and have the battle songs and liberty chants of their fathers which resounded from behind their shields to thank for the fact that Rome could not conquer Germany] (HW IV, 184f).

16 The Greeks' greatest singer, *Homerus*, is at the same time the greatest *Volksdichter*. The magnificent whole is not epopea, but rather επος, myths, legends, the living history of a people. He [...] sang what he heard, depicted what he had seen and perceived intensely.

Herder remarks in an early fragment, this imagination is "lebhaft, nicht deutlich" [lively, not clear] (*Wie die Philosophie zum Besten des Volks allgemeiner und nützlicher werden kann*; HW I, 122). This implies that the masses do not succeed in bringing together the multiplicity of their notions to form a coherent whole. As Herder sees it, this is the competence which distinguishes the poet, as an individual, from the masses to whom he belongs. The poet shifts the most striking elements he perceives from the flow of consciousness circulating in the masses metonymically to the paradigmatic level and thus constructs the symbolic order which governs the collective's realm of life and action from then on (see Deiters, 35-61). Within the framework of his *Volklieder* project, Herder describes the operation which the poet performs in this sense as a dual movement of "Belauschens" [eavesdropping] and "Idealisierens" [idealizing] (see HW III, 45). For Herder, Homer's epic work is what united the Greek people and hence for him it constitutes, although the product of individual authorship,¹⁷ the valid self-description of Greek culture. 'Ossian' fulfills this function for the Celtic world. By ascribing this status to Homer and Ossian it is possible for Herder to define these poets and poetry in general as the primary object of the anthropologist. Thus it can be argued that Herder's concept of anthropology is based on the model of literary communication which developed within the framework of the hermeneutic turn as it manifested itself in 18th-century scientific inquiry.

This insight into the nature of Herder's anthropology has far-reaching consequences, however, for although Herder formulates his concept in opposition to the presumptuous Eurocentrism of Enlightenment thinkers, the strategic premises he bases his theories on, which he hopes will liberate him from this limited perspective, lead him to adopt a specifically modern, European

¹⁷ Herder believes in the construction of an individual author 'Homer'. In 1795 Friedrich August Wolf published his "Prolegomena ad Homerum sive de operum homericum prisca et genuina forma variisque mutationibus et probabili ratione emendandi," which provoked a discussion on the so-called Homeric question (see Wohlleben, 15-26).

perspective on foreign cultures. This holds true insofar as the hermeneutic paradigm constitutes a part of the general modernization processes which have shaped European societies in modern times. Ralf Simon has shown convincingly that the "Projekt einer Ausweitung der Hermeneutik von einer theologischen zu einer allgemeinen Verstehenslehre [...] im Laufe des 18. Jahrhunderts" reacted "auf die fortschreitende Ausdifferenzierung der Wissensstrukturen und auf ein dadurch entstehendes Erklärungsdefizit" [project which entailed expanding the scope of hermeneutics from an exclusively theological to a general doctrine of understanding [...] reacted to the progressive differentiation of structures of knowledge in the course of the 18th century and the need for explanation which resulted from this process].¹⁸ It is within the horizon of this need for explanation that the hermeneutic approach to poetry develops an approach which delegates to this sphere with its increasing systemic differentiation the task of producing collective concepts of identity. In other words, the poet as

¹⁸ Simon continues: "In dem Maße, in dem sich Wissensgebiete aus dem epistemischen Kontinuum einer topica universalis ausgliedern und zunehmend eigenen Argumentations- und Beobachtungsstrukturen folgen, entsteht eine Leerstelle. Die Frage nach dem Zusammenhang der Wissenschaften, die als Repräsentation der Welt auch deren Einheit repräsentieren sollten, bricht als Problem in dem Moment auf, in dem mit dem einheitlichen Konzept einer Universalwissenschaft auch die von ihr mitgeleistete Einheitsfunktion verloren geht. Als Lückenbüsser tritt die Hermeneutik ein. Einerseits soll sie die entstehende Leerstelle durch eine Professionalisierung der Techniken des Verstehens sinnkompensatorisch schließen. Andererseits folgt sie aber genau der Ausdifferenzierung der Wissensgebiete: als eigenes Wissensprojekt ist auch sie Teil jener Spezialisierung, die zu überwinden sie angetreten ist" [As areas of knowledge continue to separate themselves from the epistemic continuum of a topica universalis and follow their own structures of argumentation and observation to an ever increasing degree, a void is formed. The question as to what connections exist between the sciences, which as a representation of the world are expected to represent its unity, becomes a real problem as soon as the uniform concept of a universal science is lost and with it the unifying function which it had served. In this situation, hermeneutics is used as a stopgap. For one, the void which has been created is to be filled compensatorily by developing professional techniques of understanding. On the other hand, it itself cultivates the increasing differentiation of the sciences, constituting a 'scientific' project in its own right and as such promoting the kind of specialization it came on the scene to overcome] (Simon, 153).

singer of the people constitutes a specifically modern figure (see Deiters).

When Herder transfers the dynamics of modern communication and the societal roles which it defines – including that of the poet – to cultures which have not participated in these modernization processes, he overwrites them with the parameters of his own culture and negates the alterity of the foreign while at the same time posing as its advocate. Thus Herder's work prefigures a fundamental problem which also manifests itself in 20th-century hermeneutic approaches to anthropology like Clifford Geertz's concept of "thick description" (see Geertz), ultimately calling them into question.

Geertz, who is hailed as the "Vater der modernen Kulturanthropologie" [father of modern cultural anthropology] (Bachmann-Medick, 87) – a figure whom I can only give marginal attention to in this context – invests cultural practices such as the Balinese cockfight with the status of self-descriptions of the communities in which they emerge, just as Herder does in the case of poetry. In doing so, such phenomena are defined as the central object of anthropology, which is accordingly conceived of as the attempt to "read a manuscript." As Geertz writes, "doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of 'construct a reading of') a manuscript" – albeit not a manuscript written "in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour" (Geertz, 10). In contrast to Herder, Geertz does not use the term 'text' in the narrower sense of the word, but rather transfers it metaphorically to the entire realm of cultural practices. When he designates the cultural practices of a community as "a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon and knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit," and which the cultural anthropologist must therefore "contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render" (10), he is thoroughly aware of the metaphorical character of his concept of text. And yet his approach is problematical precisely because it entails a metaphorical transfer of the concept of the text to the entire realm

of culture; like Herder, Geertz ascribes a model of the text to foreign cultures which was developed within the context of a systemic differentiation of literature in European modernism. In other words, Geertz's "thick description" of the Balinese cockfight, for example, constitutes an operation which does not merely render a reading of Balinese culture as the anthropologist intends to do, but rather it 'textualizes' the phenomena of a foreign culture which the anthropologist focuses on from the social-evolutionary perspective of Western societies. By this very act of ascription he himself constructs the manuscript which he then attempts to decode as the self-description of the foreign culture in question. Thus Geertz can rightfully be accused of "Positivismus des Symbolischen" [positivism of the symbolic mode] (Fechner-Smarsly, 97), this being a reproach which one can make of Herder as well. The desire of the hermeneutic anthropologist to communicate with the foreign realm ends – in the 18th as in the 20th centuries – time and again with the sound of his or her own voice, for what the hermeneutic anthropologist discloses as an understanding of the self-description of the Other constitutes a text which answers questions concerning the modern individual struggle to communicate with the self on a personal and a collective level.

Now I have come full circle. At the beginning of my essay I had contended that one would take a very reductionist view were one to look upon Herder's concept of a national literature as one involving social inclusion, the aim being to promote the construction of a German national identity. Yet, in his attempt to accommodate cultural difference, Herder inadvertently ascribes to foreign cultures a certain need for identity formation (the concept of national identity this is) and he assigns a certain function to their epics and songs (this is the concept of a national literature) which cannot be divorced from modern-European forms of socialization. Is there any escape from this involuntary, almost tragic kind of solipsism? I cannot think of any. To me it seems to be the fundamental paradox and ambiguity of any anthropological thinking which simply cannot be avoided.

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