

## Introduction

IN NOTES WRITTEN in 1765 bemoaning the wretched state of German literature, Johann Gottfried Herder took some comfort from the thought that though his country was devoid of “original geniuses in the realm of the ode, the drama, and the epic,” he was at least living in “the philosophical century.” Those nations lacking poetic inspiration and the political unity necessary for a mature literary tradition ought instead to devote themselves to developing a fuller understanding of the nature of art and the historical and cultural conditions under which it flourishes. Perhaps such a theory would enable writers to discover and mine new seams of poetic creativity. “Not *poetry*,” he concluded, “but *aesthetics* should be the field of the Germans.”<sup>1</sup>

In some ways this was already true. Despite—or perhaps because of—the painfully felt absence of a native literary culture, German critics were intensely preoccupied with new theoretical approaches to art and literature, and the mid-eighteenth century saw a number of important developments that helped shape an emergent public sphere in the German-speaking world: Johann Christoph Gottsched’s attempt to impose a local version of French neoclassicism; the long-running controversy between Gottsched and the Swiss critics Johann Jakob Bodmer and Johann Jakob Breitinger, who championed English literature and criticism, and, combining Addison with Leibniz, opened poetry to the unlimited worlds of the imagination; the birth of modern art history in Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s hugely influential interpretations of Greek sculpture; the critical writings of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Moses Mendelssohn, and Friedrich Nicolai. And perhaps most significant of all, the very term *aesthetics* was coined in 1735 by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (from the Greek *aisthanesthai*, “to perceive”) in his dissertation *Meditationes philosophicae*. Fifteen years later, in the first two volumes of his major work *Aesthetica* (1750–58), he went further and established aesthetics as an independent sphere of philosophical inquiry, cognate with, but separate from, the truths of logic and morality. By the 1760s this newly minted word had already become common currency, and treatises on the subject

<sup>1</sup> Herder, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Bernhard Suphan (Berlin: Weidmann, 1877–1913), 32:82 (hereafter *SWS*).

were growing so numerous that by 1804 Jean Paul Richter could observe: “There is nothing more abundant in our time than aestheticians.”<sup>2</sup>

Herder was certain that although this new discipline could be decisive for the development of German literary politics in the mid-eighteenth century, and for all that he hailed Baumgarten as a new Aristotle, Baumgarten’s premature death in 1762 had left his philosophical project incomplete. “O Aesthetics!” Herder exclaims with characteristic exuberance in the *Critical Forests*, his most comprehensive contribution to the subject, “in which cavern of the Muses is sleeping the young man of my philosophical nation destined to raise you to perfection!” Then in his early twenties and an ambitious though obscure clergyman in Riga awakening to the novelty of his own insights, Herder was beginning to think he might be that slumbering youth. Yet those hopes were never realized. Not only were some of his most important and original writings in this area not published during his lifetime, they were in any case soon overshadowed by Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790), that work which more than any other shaped the development of modern philosophical aesthetics and took it in a direction never envisaged by either Baumgarten or Herder. In later life, Herder would expend a great deal of energy in his *Metacritique* and *Kalligone* vainly seeking to refute Kant’s ideas, but his early work, which shows him assimilating a great deal of contemporary thought and synthesizing it into new constellations, sheds important light on aesthetics at a crucial stage in its evolution. The writings included in this volume, although by no means exhaustive, have been chosen to reflect the extent and diversity of his writings on art and aesthetics, covering as they do such contemporary debates as the nature of aesthetics itself, the debate over classification of the arts, genius, taste and the classical tradition, the relationship between art and morality, and the fable.

### Sense and Sensibility

Herder never accepted the critical turn in Kant’s philosophy. The Kant he had come to know in 1762, when as a precocious eighteen-year-old he arrived from the East Prussian provinces to study at the University of Königsberg, had yet to begin his *Critique of Pure Reason*. From Kant he learned to esteem philosophical rigor and the analytic method as the only genuine path to truth. If Kant was the very embodiment of the Enlightenment intellectual, then Johann Georg Hamann, another formative influence during Herder’s time at Königsberg, represented the other ex-

<sup>2</sup> Jean Paul Richter, *Vorschule der Ästhetik*, in *Werke*, ed. Norbert Miller, (Munich: Hanser, 1963), 5:22.

treme. Hamann, a deeply religious thinker who inveighed against the excesses of the eighteenth-century cult of reason, taught that the true source of knowledge was not logic and abstraction but faith and the experiences of the senses, for the outward splendor of the world, nature, and history was a living manifestation of the divine.

Herder spent most of the rest of his life striving to reconcile the opposing poles of Enlightenment thought represented by his early mentors. “A man who desires to be solely head,” he once wrote, “is just as much a monster as one who desires to be only heart; the whole, healthy man is both. And that he is both, with each in its place, the heart not in the head and the head not in the heart, is precisely what makes him a human being.”<sup>3</sup> Though many *Aufklärer* were prepared to accept the dissociation of the intellect and emotions as the price of progress, Herder most certainly was not. He strove to bridge the growing gap between the affective and rational sides of our nature, keep in check the enlightened despotism of Reason, and unleash the full potential of the human spirit. For this reason—and not only because he saw in Baumgarten’s new science a means of regenerating German literature—during the 1760s and 1770s, the period from which the majority of the writings included in this volume are drawn, aesthetics played a particularly significant role in his thinking. For art activates the totality of the organism; it is produced by the cooperation of our sensuous, imaginative, and intellectual faculties, by our interaction with the world around us, and so an analysis of art will inevitably shed light on the complexities of human nature and experience. Aesthetics, Herder realized, signaled the foundation of a new philosophical anthropology.<sup>4</sup>

Herder was one of the few contemporaries who seemed to grasp the revolutionary implications of Baumgarten’s enterprise. For aesthetics according to Baumgarten’s understanding is not just a philosophy of art but also—indeed, primarily—the “science of sensuous cognition.”<sup>5</sup> This was a bold and decisive break with tradition, because since Plato Western thought had been characterized by a profound suspicion and denigration of the senses—especially marked in the rationalist metaphysics of Christian Wolff, which had come to dominate academic philosophy in Germany. Wolff assimilated philosophy to mathematics: the only reliable

<sup>3</sup> SWS 9:504.

<sup>4</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), p. 353.

<sup>5</sup> Baumgarten defines *aesthetics* in the first paragraph of the *Aesthetica* as follows: “Aesthetics (as the theory of the liberal arts, as inferior cognition, as the art of beautiful thinking and as the art of thought analogous to reason) is the science of sensuous cognition.” Baumgarten’s major work has not been translated into either German or English; however, an abridged version has been produced by Hans Rudolf Schweizer, entitled *Theoretische Ästhetik* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1983).

basis of knowledge was neither empirical evidence nor actual experience, but the calculable and abstract certainty of deductive proof. Establishing an explicit hierarchy among the powers of the human mind, he insisted that only the ideas present to the higher faculties of cognition—reason and the understanding—belonged to the proper domain of philosophy, for they were clear and distinct; that is, they could be analyzed, abstracted, and defined. The impressions that the senses delivered into the mind, however, were either obscure (below the threshold of full consciousness) or “confused”—that is, too concrete, fragmentary, and fleeting to be distinguishable from other objects, and hence an obstacle in the pursuit of stable, abstract truth. Although Baumgarten retained Wolff’s distinction between the higher and lower faculties of cognition, for the first time he demanded that the means whereby we acquire and express sensory knowledge be subjected to systematic study. Just as logic is concerned with the operations of reason and the understanding, so a new discipline of aesthetics ought to be concerned with what we apprehend through the senses. Whereas logic arrives at clear and distinct concepts through a process of simplification and abstraction, and hence delivers an impoverished and partial perspective on the world, aesthetics exercises our capacity to grasp reality in all its concrete individuality and complexity. It celebrates the confusion of sensory knowledge, its particularity, vibrancy, and plenitude, precisely those qualities which are necessarily lost in translation from the specific to the general but embodied in exemplary fashion by works of art. Poetry, for example, which for Baumgarten was the paradigmatic form of artistic expression, does not pretend to discover universal laws or principles but lucidly represents individual things, persons, or situations, and the greater the vividness, richness, and inner diversity, the greater the value of the poem. So if logic is the means by which rational cognition is improved and human beings ascend to truth, then aesthetics aims at the perfection of sensuous knowledge; in other words, the creation or discernment of beauty. In short, Baumgarten insisted that sensuous cognition was not unreliable and inferior but possessed an intrinsic value and, in addition to the synthetic operations of pure reason, could constitute an object of serious philosophical inquiry. In fact, he argued, the logician who neglects the senses is a philosopher manqué, an incompletely developed individual unfavorably contrasted with the *felix aestheticus*, who is neither a purely rational nor a sensual being but accommodates within himself the full spectrum of human powers.

Baumgarten’s writings were among the many works on poetics and aesthetics that Herder studied intensively during the mid-1760s. From the outset Herder’s notes and fragmentary sketches, including a lengthy paragraph-by-paragraph discussion of the first twenty-five sections of the *Aesthetica*, show him moving ambivalently between praise and criticism,

teasing out the full implications of Baumgarten's ideas and seeking to move beyond them. One of the most polished pieces from this time is the *Monument to Baumgarten*, among the earliest works included here. In it, Herder recognized Baumgarten's achievement in opening the lower faculties to philosophical scrutiny and, in doing so, shifting the focus of study from the work of art to the psychological processes underpinning the aesthetic experience. That meant that he had put to an end once and for all both the belief that poetry consisted in rhyme or melody and the Aristotelian notion that the primary purpose of poetry was the imitation of nature. As "perfectly sensuous discourse," poetry was a form of expression that stirred the soul with a multitude of vivid and interconnected images. Hence, by studying poetry and discovering the rules of beauty, we learn more about ourselves as human beings than we do about the objective world, about the mysterious alchemy by which dark, unconscious feelings are transmuted into images of perception. If, as Baumgarten claimed, the fundamental principle governing art is not mimesis but the pursuit of sensuous perfection, then it amounts to nothing less than obeying the oracular injunction "Know thyself!"

Nevertheless, Herder viewed Baumgarten as no more than a thinker of the "second rank" who never wholly freed himself from the accepted practices and assumptions of institutional philosophy. As "Wolffian poesy," Baumgarten's aesthetics is still too heavily reliant on a priori deduction and speculation; though it is concerned first and foremost with sensory cognition, paradoxically it remains couched in the arid language and framework of rationalist metaphysics. If aesthetics is, as the derivation of the word suggests, truly the study of feeling, then it must follow Winckelmann's lead, embrace Greek sensuality, and be Hellenized. The aesthetician must not build castles in the air but descend to the level of concrete sensation, to the "ground of the soul," where the most obscure ideas reside, and only then begin to erect general principles. He must replace the nominal definitions of logic with a mode of thinking that enables us to uncover the network of experience that informs our most primitive concepts and to locate the origin of those concepts in the activity of particular senses. He must, finally, be alive not only to human sensibility but also to the manner in which its expressive resources are modified by the environment, history, and culture. These ideas Herder would attempt to put into practice in the *Critical Forests*.

### *Critical Forests: the First Grove*

Whereas Baumgarten wrote—already somewhat anachronistically—in a terse Latin, using the technical vocabulary of scholastic philosophy, and

in short, syllogistic paragraphs, Herder, who thought it “a weakness of human nature that we wish always to construct a system,”<sup>6</sup> perfected a style that is essayistic, exclamatory, and digressive; he wrote quickly, sometimes clumsily, but always avoiding the appearance of a conventional scholarly work. Not for nothing did he call his first major work *Fragments*; the title of his second, *Critical Forests*, is no less apt. A “sylva” is a collection of occasional poems or miscellanies, “composed, as it were, at a Start; in a kind of Rapture or Transport,”<sup>7</sup> and arranged haphazardly rather than according to some overall plan. Though Herder presumably derived his title from either Martin Opitz or Christian Gryphius, both of whom produced *Poetical Forests* (in 1625 and 1698 respectively), the model for his practice as a critic is partly inspired by the very work to which the *First Grove* is devoted: Lessing’s influential essay *Laocoön* (1766), which Lessing himself described as a collection of “*unordered notes*.”

Both *Laocoön* and the *First Grove* are chiefly concerned with an issue that exercised a great many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers on art: the relation between painting and poetry, and in particular the long-established tendency to equate the poetic and visual arts. This is epitomized in the indiscriminate appeal to Horace’s well-worn phrase “*ut pictura poesis*” (as is poetry so is painting), which was taken to mean, by Addison and later by Bodmer and Breitinger, that the aim of poetry was to excite vivid images in the mind of the reader. Graphic description was therefore the basis of poetry, and accordingly the Swiss critics were lavish in their praise of descriptive poets such as Barthold Heinrich Brockes, Albrecht von Haller, and Ewald Christian von Kleist.

Lessing bridled at this widespread talk of “poetic pictures” and the “descriptive mania” which seized modern versifiers. Though he was by no means the first to distinguish clearly between the separate domains of each art—important influences on his work include James Harris, Denis Diderot, and Moses Mendelssohn—*Laocoön* stands out for the deductive brilliance by which he arrives at the separate rules governing each art form and the unusual severity with which he draws the proper boundaries of poetry and painting. Lessing’s point of departure is Winckelmann’s celebrated description in *Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works* of the statue of the Trojan priest Laocoön and his sons, who is depicted wrestling with serpents sent by the gods to punish his disobedience. The Laocoön group embodies for Winckelmann the “noble simplicity and tranquil grandeur” of the Greek soul, which finds expression in the priest’s supposed calm and self-restraint in the face of mortal danger.

<sup>6</sup> SWS 32:182.

<sup>7</sup> Ephraim Chambers, *Cyclopaedia; or, An Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* (London, 1728).

Lessing accepts Winckelmann's assertion that the pain registered in Laocoön's face is not expressed with the intensity that we would expect. But he does not agree with Winckelmann's reason for claiming so, nor does he think it applies universally to all forms of Greek art. Why does the Laocoön in Virgil's *Aeneid* scream and the statue only sigh? The answer cannot lie, as Winckelmann suggests it does, in the moral superiority of the Greek over the Roman, for the heroes of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and Homer's *Iliad* all cry out in pain and do not consider it unmanly to do so. Rather, it is a natural consequence of Winckelmann's own insight that beauty was the supreme law governing the visual arts in antiquity. To depict Laocoön with his features contorted in the act of screaming would offend the rule of beauty, for the ugliness of the scream would be frozen forever in the stone. Because the visual arts can represent only a single moment in time, the expression of the statue was toned down to a sigh in order to suggest pain and yet not impair the beauty of the human form. As poets, Virgil, Sophocles, and Homer are free to treat subjects forbidden to painters and sculptors because in poetry, where each moment is fleeting, the representation of actions rather than beauty is the highest law. Although the objective of both arts may be the same—that is, the imitation of reality—their various means for achieving this goal are entirely different. Poetry uses words that succeed one another in time to represent actions; art uses shapes and surfaces, which coexist in space, and thus depicts objects or bodies that also coexist in space. At bottom, poetry and art are distinguished by the types of signs they employ. A natural sign, like the shapes and colors employed by figurative sculpture and painting, resembles the object it represents. An arbitrary sign has no necessary connection, only a conventional one, with its object, and all language consists of tokens based on such contingent agreements. Now, since the aim of all art according to Lessing's mimetic theory is to present the imitated object to the intuitive cognition of the recipient in as direct a manner as possible, it follows that poetry must endeavor by all possible means to transform its arbitrary signs into natural ones. That is, poetry must be as concrete and immediate as possible, dispensing with abstractions, restricting itself to depicting only actions, and refraining from describing bodies. Lessing therefore establishes clear borders separating painting and poetry, which enables him to outlaw any instance of one trespassing on the other's territory: excessively descriptive poetry, for example, or allegorical and historical painting. But such clarity comes at the expense of diminishing their respective domains, and it is this narrowness and simplicity which Herder wants to challenge.

Herder had been fascinated with *Laocoön* since its publication in 1766, when, he confessed to his friend Johann Georg Scheffner, he read it

through three times in a single sitting.<sup>8</sup> Two years later, in 1768, Herder saw that Lessing's attempt to derive the essential characteristics of the visual arts and poetry from their differences offered him the opportunity to formulate his own ideas about the nature of poetry and language and to test them against those of Lessing. As a number of critics have observed, the *First Grove* stands in the same relationship to *Laocoön* as Lessing's work stands to Winckelmann. It is, as Herder was at pains to point out in a deferential letter to Lessing, and as the many warm and respectful remarks in the work make clear, neither a critique nor a refutation of his predecessor. He agreed with Lessing that it was possible to establish a classification of the arts based on the various signs they employ to achieve their effect, but he aimed to elaborate and expand the practical and theoretical applications of Lessing's conclusions from the deliberately simplified and one-sided treatment they received in *Laocoön*.

The first eight sections of the *First Grove* are devoted to a minutely detailed examination of the first six chapters of *Laocoön*. Herder returns to the original sources that Lessing cites in support of his arguments, tests his claims, questions his interpretations of his sources, and shows no sign of hurry in wanting to inspect the main theoretical portions of *Laocoön*. It is tempting to dismiss these antiquarian excursions on the tears of Greek heroes, on why Bacchus was represented with horns, on the stature of the Homeric gods, and so on, as hairsplitting, as precisely the kind of schoolmasterly pedantry that Herder was only too ready to condemn in others. But this would be unfair, for these animadversions have a strategic purpose. For a start, this somewhat circuitous and leisurely journey to the heart of *Laocoön*, with Herder sometimes tracing Lessing's steps and arriving at different conclusions, sometimes reaching the same destination by another route, and sometimes getting lost entirely, is precisely in keeping with the ambling and idling character of a critical *sylva*. What is more, the early chapters of Herder's work are designed to reveal a fundamental difference in approach between both men: where Lessing was content to simplify and generalize for the sake of economy, Herder broadens the inquiry, calling attention not only to Lessing's alleged misreadings of sources but marshaling a great deal of additional evidence also. Where Lessing tends to argue deductively, Herder prefers inductively to review the facts before reaching a conclusion and insists on taking into account the historical and cultural determinants of even the most apparently straightforward and incontestable of Lessing's initial assumptions. Is a cry really the natural expression of physical pain, or is pain expressed differently in different societies and in different epochs? And what value was attached

<sup>8</sup> Herder, *Briefe*, ed. Wilhelm Dobbek and Günter Arnold (Weimar: Böhlau Nachfolger, 1977–2004), 1:62.

to such utterances in these various cultures? Was beauty really the supreme law of the ancients? But when? For how long? And under what conditions?

Herder chooses to begin his constructive criticism of Lessing's differentiation of the arts by calling into question his precept that because visual art can represent only a single moment in time, it is barred from representing anything transitory because repeated viewing will cause disgust in the recipient at the object thereby rendered unnatural. By itself this principle is insufficient to explain the modes of representation of the arts, for impermanence belongs to the fundamental nature of the world, and any figure engaged in any action is unnaturally prolonged by art. But if art cannot imitate truthfully, Herder reasons, then its very essence is destroyed and the question of the limits between painting and poetry becomes meaningless. Therefore the reason why painting is restricted to a single moment must lie not in the viewer's subjective response to what it depicts but in the very nature of visual art itself. To clarify Lessing's own train of thought, Herder borrows the distinction between work and energy (*ergon* and *energeia*) first made by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and then taken up and applied to art by James Harris (1709–1780) in his *Three Treatises*, which had appeared in German translation in 1756. For Harris and thus for Herder, an energy is “every *Production*, the *Parts of which exist successively*, and *whose Nature hath its being or Essence in a Transition*.” An energetic art operates through time. It does not deliver a completed object that can be surveyed at once; rather, its effect lies precisely in a succession of moments because each moment is effective only as a link in this chain. A “work,” on the other hand, is “every *Production*, whose *Parts exist all at once*.”<sup>9</sup> Its essence consists not in change, in the succession of its constituent parts, but rather in their coexistence: the totality of the whole can be immediately and instantaneously apprehended at a single glance. In that glance, time is as it were suspended; we are removed from the transience of the world and enfolded in the beautiful illusion created by the artist.

So Herder is able to propose this fundamental distinction: there are those arts which deliver a work (painting and sculpture), and there are “energetic” arts (music, dance, poetry). But this simple division is not sufficiently fine, for it does not bring out the obvious differences between music and poetry, for example, both of which operate energetically and successively. In fact, in one respect music has more in common with painting than it does with poetry, for both music and the visual arts employ natural signs. What is more, these two arts depend for their effect on the

<sup>9</sup> Harris, *Three Treatises: The First Concerning Art, the Second Concerning Music, Painting and Poetry, the Third Concerning Happiness* (London, 1744), p. 33.

characteristic distribution of these signs: in music the notes unfold in time, and in painting the colors and shapes coexist in space. So for all their differences, there is nevertheless a basis on which these arts can be fruitfully compared. But the case of poetry is different. It cannot be compared with painting (or music) in terms of the particular configuration of its signs. For unlike music (an art that Lessing chooses to neglect entirely), poetry is more than a simple sequence of sounds: its successive quality is certainly a necessary condition but not a sufficient one of its effect. In fact, what differentiates poetry from the other arts is that its essence is not exhausted by the merely musical and material properties of its signs. Its signs are not natural but arbitrary: words can express abstract meanings precisely because their significance is not determined solely by their sensuous form. The poet, then, by virtue of the arbitrariness of his signs, has more freedom, a greater range of representational possibilities than the artist—a point that Lessing does not fully exploit precisely because he ignores music and simplifies the issue by concentrating solely on poetic and visual art.<sup>10</sup>

But how do the signs of poetry acquire their meaning, and how is this meaning conveyed to the reader or listener if not through their merely spatial or temporal arrangement? Herder's answer is what he calls force, and this force—not time or space, coexistence or succession—constitutes the essence of poetry. Herder never bothers to explain exactly what he means by this term, but it seems that he saw this force as analogous to those operative in the natural world: as one kind of force is responsible for charging a storm cloud with electricity and discharging it through lightning, so another is the mechanism by which words are invested with meaning and that meaning communicated to a reader or listener.

The concept of force allows Herder to reopen the ground for the comparison of painting and poetry which Lessing had declared out of bounds, yet at the same time to retain the contrast between the obviously different ways in which they produce their effect. On the one hand, poetry is different from painting inasmuch as it is an energetic art and does not deliver a work. But it is like painting because, even though its signs are successive, they are able to conjure images of spatial objects before the imagination by virtue of the abstract meaning they contain (and without recourse to the artistic devices that Lessing claims to find in Homer), just as painting delivers a picture to our eyes through colors and figures. The subject of poetry is not confined to actions, as Lessing suggests, a position to which he is forced both by his insistence on mere succession as its

<sup>10</sup> That said, there are other, more important reasons why Lessing does not do so; for example, he does not want to be pushed into defending didactic poetry and so on, which deal in abstractions.

essence and by his excessively narrow and doctrinaire definition of what constitutes poetry. In his desire to exclude the “descriptive mania” of modern poets, he goes too far, banishing the idyll, the ode, the lyric, from the realm of the poetic in favor of the epic, the only genre (along with drama) that might be said to be concerned primarily with actions. By contrast, Herder believes he has arrived at a more moderate and plausible account of the operations of poetry and its relation to the other arts.

So Herder distinguishes three types of arts: the plastic arts, which deliver a work and operate in or through space; the energetic or successive arts, which unfold in time; and poetry, which produces its effect through “force.” Like Lessing’s, Herder’s ulterior motive is to reassert the supremacy of poetry over other arts; but rather than radically delimit the boundaries of the poetic and effectively narrow its domain, Herder suggests that it is superior because it both shares territory with painting and music, and has a realm all to itself. But already by the time he came to write the *Fourth Grove*, Herder realized that this semiotic theory needed to be supplemented by a more nuanced one that foregrounds the relation of the arts to particular senses.

### The *Fourth Grove*

Herder’s *Fourth Grove* is arguably his most important and fundamental work on aesthetics, a work that, had it ever been published in his lifetime, might, in the opinion of Robert T. Clark, “have changed the entire course of German aesthetics.”<sup>11</sup> Regardless of whether this claim is true or not, it is certain that when the work finally appeared in 1846, the current had shifted in philosophical aesthetics, and Herder’s attempt, building on the typology of the arts he had sketched in the *First Grove*, to derive the modes of representation particular to each art from the manner in which they are perceived had ceased to have any immediate relevance. As with the earlier *Grove*, Herder developed his ideas through critical dialogue with other thinkers. But the respectful tone with which he had sought to expand Lessing’s ideas gives way in the *Fourth Grove* to withering contempt and sarcasm. The objects of his opprobrium are Friedrich Just Riedel (1742–1785), professor of philosophy at Erfurt, and, to a lesser extent, Riedel’s mentor Christian Adolf Klotz (1738–1771), professor of rhetoric at Halle and the victim of Herder’s abuse in the *Second* and *Third Grove*. The intemperate tenor of Herder’s philippics is partly the consequence of the lingering resentment he felt at the underhand behavior of

<sup>11</sup> Clark, *Herder: His Life and Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), p. 88.

both men in connection with the second edition of the first collection of *Fragments*: Riedel had quoted from the then unpublished work in his *On the Public*, and, at the beginning of 1769, Klotz reviewed the volume on the basis of a copy obtained from the printer by illicit means. But Herder's opposition to Riedel did not stem just from a personal grudge. Riedel was also the author of *Theory of the Beaux Arts and Belles Lettres* (1767), a work that along with his *On the Public*, was in Herder's view so utterly misconceived that it presented him with an irresistible opportunity to elucidate his own ideas about the proper form that an aesthetics should take.

In Herder's view Riedel's theory represents a particularly egregious example of what he calls an "aesthetics from above." That is, he combines, like Baumgarten, a number of already familiar and untested ideas to construct a system on a purely deductive basis, starting where he ought to have ended up, with the most abstract or general concepts. For example, Riedel argues that beauty—like the good, like truth—is an innate, entirely subjective, and ultimately indefinable notion that is communicated to the mind without the intervention of conscious thought. We are immediately and unreflectively "convinced" of that which is true or false, good or bad, beautiful or ugly, by virtue of certain "inner feelings" or fundamental faculties: the *sensus communis*, conscience, and taste. These, Riedel declares, are the basic categories of the human mind through which we apprehend the world. In the first part of the *Fourth Grove*, Herder is eloquently contemptuous of this naive psychology. There is, he insists, no such thing as immediate conviction; no sensation could be conveyed into the mind without passing through some reflective process. Herder shows, by constructing a developmental history of the mind, that from our earliest childhood the act of perception is always supported by the understanding, always involves judgment; the soul combines, differentiates, and compares the flood of impressions relayed by the senses, and these, over time, congeal and are then overlaid with new judgments, ultimately forming concepts. Habit has obscured these individual operations of our consciousness so that they have become second nature, so that what we take to be a simple, immediate act of cognition is in reality the product of a complex procedure of which we are no longer consciously aware. The task of philosophy—and in this particular instance, aesthetics—as Herder sees it, is precisely to undo the work of habit, to scrape away the sediment that has accreted around our concepts so that we can follow the inferential steps in their gradual evolution.

Another salvo is aimed at Baumgarten himself. Though in the *Fourth Grove* Herder generally speaks warmly of the author of the *Aesthetica*, defending him against his detractors such as Riedel, he censures Baumgarten for including in his definition of aesthetics the phrase the "art of thinking beautifully" (*ars pulchre cogitandi*). This implies that aesthetics

should instruct or guide artistic activity by supplying a system of rules for connoisseurs or virtuosi. But that is not the concern of aesthetics. Herder draws a clear line between the theory and the practice of our innate aesthetic powers, between the artist or man of taste and the philosopher, between the production or appreciation of beauty and its systematic study. Aesthetics must remain a rigorously descriptive discipline, a science, and as such it proceeds on the basis of analysis, proofs, and argument rather than through intuition. Where the artist embraces the pleasure of the confused sensation of the beautiful, the philosopher coolly examines this feeling in order to discover the hidden laws of human psychology, takes apart our sensuous concepts, renders them distinct, and resolves beauty into truth.

The second part of the *Fourth Grove* represents Herder's attempt to apply the principles he had defined in the first part of the treatise; though the work does not represent a complete, fully worked out theory of art, Herder intends his argument to exemplify the notion of an "aesthetics from below" in which abstract concepts such as beauty, sublimity, and grandeur are traced back to their origins in our experience. By undertaking what he calls a "physiology of the senses," Herder hopes not only to reveal how each of the three higher senses—sight, hearing, and touch—shapes our perception of the world and of aesthetic objects in particular, but also, by building on the typology he had elaborated in the *First Grove*, to offer yet another means of distinguishing the arts: by relating their different modes of representation to the particular ways in which we perceive them. Only by such a procedure, he believes, can we both recognize and account for the distinctive forms of beauty produced by painting, sculpture, and music.

In the philosophical history of the senses, sight has always seemed self-evidently the most important and refined one, and this was especially true in the age of reason. In his *Essays on the Pleasures of the Imagination* (1709), Joseph Addison was typical in describing sight as "the most perfect and most delightful of all senses."<sup>12</sup> Vision delivers the external world in the most direct and objective way. Enlightenment, one might say, consists in opening one's eyes and believing what one sees rather than placing one's faith in illusion and superstition. Though Herder does acknowledge that vision is the "most philosophical sense," that its objects are the clearest, he sets himself against the dominant visualism of his age. By itself, Herder claims—building on ideas first expressed by Diderot and Condillac and drawing on well-known case studies of blind individuals such as the mathematician Nicolas Saunderson—sight delivers only an incomplete, two-dimensional picture of the world consisting of planes, colors,

<sup>12</sup> Addison, *Works* (New York: Putnam, 1856), 6:322.

contours, and degrees of light and shadow. The eye glides off surfaces; we are mere observers without any contact with the objects around us. Only touch furnishes us with ideas of space, extension, and solidity; it is through the hand that we truly grasp the world in all senses of that word, by enabling us to perceive objects in three-dimensional space. Indeed, vision is a relative newcomer. Feeling is the first of our senses to develop, our original mode of perception, and the one that delivers the earliest and most certain knowledge not only of the world but of ourselves as sentient beings. Consciousness of our own existence as subjects is—as it is for Descartes—rooted not in the self-awareness of a disembodied intelligence but in the intuitive immediacy of sensation. As Herder puts it—subtly rewording the Cartesian *cogito*—in “On the Sense of Touch,” an unpublished fragment written around this time, “I feel! I am!”

That we think we see the world in three dimensions is due to the fact that no sense works alone. The mind coordinates and orders them into a system, constantly analyzing, comparing, and synthesizing the impressions they communicate, so that when we learn concepts of distance and volume, for example, we automatically integrate them into our visual, planar representation of the world. Hence we see what originally we could only have felt. Only habit obscures this connection between the senses and encourages us to downplay the role of touch in the formation of our knowledge of the world and denigrate that sense as “coarse.” Sight may indeed be a more recent evolution and a refined form of sensory perception, but it is also a secondary, inauthentic feeling, an irresponsible extension of touch forgetful of and unfaithful to its foundation. Where sight is swift, cold, and superficial, touch is slow, thorough, and intimate. Though Herder pleads for a reevaluation of the sense of touch, he does not demand that it be restored to its original rights. His aim—at least in the *Fourth Grove*—is rather more modest: to investigate the significance of this understanding of touch for aesthetics, to return to the hand those aspects of aesthetic perception which the eye has arrogated to itself.

In the *First Grove* Herder followed Lessing in choosing not to distinguish between painting and sculpture; both were lumped together as visual arts dependent for their effect on natural, coexistent signs. But there are obvious differences between the two, and Herder now possesses the theoretical framework to do justice to these differences. What separates sculpture from painting (or any other art of design), he now points out, is that a statue is a three-dimensional body in space, whereas a picture consists of shapes and colors juxtaposed on a flat canvas or panel. In other words, a painting is an object of sight and sculpture an object of touch; each is perceived by and addressed to a different sense, and it is in this that their fundamental difference consists. Thus where painterly beauty consists in the pleasing arrangement of lines and colors on a surface,

sculptural beauty resides in graceful form. Yet it is important to recognize that Herder does not mean to suggest that we best appreciate sculptural form by groping the marble with our eyes shut. Rather, the psychology of the aesthetic state here is a complex operation involving both vision and touch, a heightened form of the perceptual processes underpinning our relationships with everyday objects in the world. A painting can be viewed only from a single point of view. A statue, however, is a body inhabiting space; we must walk around it and inspect it from multiple perspectives. Though sight alone must thereby necessarily reduce the statue to a polygon, a grid of planes and angles, the mind imaginatively recuperates the three-dimensionality of the object on the basis of ideas such as mass and extension originally furnished by touch. Herder therefore speaks figuratively of the eye being transformed into a hand as it follows the elliptical line that describes the beautiful roundedness of the corporeal whole, and here his understanding of the connoisseur's relation to plastic art deliberately recalls Winckelmann's erotically charged descriptions in *Description of the Torso in Belvedere in Rome*. The theory of the interaction between sight and feeling also allows him to account for the development of specific techniques in painting and sculpture, such as perspectival painting and colossal statuary.

In addition to sculpture, Herder discusses in some detail another art form he had all but ignored in the *First Grove*: music. Music is related to the third sense on which he bases his systematic aesthetics, hearing, which Herder describes as the most profound of the three main senses. Where the objects of sight lie outside us, arranged side by side, the objects of hearing seem to lie deep within us and appear successively; because of their interiority, they possess the power to move the soul directly. In the several sections that he devotes to the "fine art of hearing," Herder is concerned to construct a new foundation for musical aesthetics, which leads him to polemicize against the dominant acoustical and mathematical paradigms of pioneering musicologists such as Rameau and d'Alembert (for they explain nothing about the subjective nature of musical experience). The true task of aesthetics must be to understand how music affects the psychological state of the listener. Accordingly, Herder insists on a sharp distinction between tone—the simple elements of music—and sound—a larger aggregate of tones. Whether it be a chord produced by simultaneously striking notes in a regular harmonic series or a discordant noise generated by depressing random keys on a piano, sound affects only the sense organs of hearing: the outer ear, the auditory nerves, and so on. Only tone, Herder claims, yields an "inner feeling" and operates directly on the soul. This is because, as he explains, looking forward to the prizewinning *Essay on the Origin of Language* (1771), music originated as a kind of intensified speech, as a language designed to communicate sentiment. As such,

Herder—like Rousseau before him—flatly denies that musical beauty is expressed through harmony or polyphony (since the latter depends on the temporal coexistence of sounds); only melody, which consists of tones in succession, manifests the beautiful in music and must therefore be the basis of a properly scientific understanding of it.

Herder did not intend the *Fourth Grove* to be a complete system; he claimed to be offering only “ideas and lineaments” for a theory of the beautiful. This is especially obvious in the rather perfunctory discussions of art forms other than music, painting, and sculpture, which relate most obviously to a particular sense. Nevertheless, he does not ignore them entirely. Thus, he is able to accommodate dance by describing it, in a phrase borrowed from John Brown, as “music made visible”; but architecture and landscape gardening find no place in his theory and are dismissed as merely mechanical arts. Briefest of all is his treatment of poetry, which nevertheless retains the special status it was granted in the *First Grove*. There, poetry was different from the other arts because the signs it employs bear no natural relationship to the things they signify; here, its uniqueness resides in the fact that it has no relationship to a specific sense and that sense’s necessarily limited apprehension of the world. Rather, poetry is the only art addressed directly to the imagination and hence is able to draw on every sense and every other art form, combining tones, images, and feelings in its discourse.

Ultimately, Herder’s truly original ideas toward a philosophical aesthetics collapse under the weight of the polemics heaped on the hapless Riedel. At the end of the *Fourth Grove*, Herder regrets his vituperative tone, for it has overwhelmed his original contribution to aesthetics; and in his *Journal of My Travels in 1769*, written shortly after completing the *Fourth Grove*, when he fled the intellectual confines of provincial Riga for France, he complained that he had wasted his recent years on “critical, useless, crude, and wretched forests.”<sup>13</sup> Though he acknowledged that the demolition of unsound theoretical edifices such as Riedel’s was necessary for the construction of new ones, Herder’s frustration and weariness are probably some of the reasons the *Fourth Grove* never saw the light of day during his lifetime. Furthermore, though he certainly recognized the importance of his ideas about the sense of touch, his awareness of the extent of the task facing him, which he recorded in his *Journal*, may have contributed to his reluctance to publish the *Fourth Grove* as it stood. Nevertheless, he continued to work on the ideas developed therein, producing a number of sketches that culminated in the first draft of *Plastic Art* in 1770, finally published, after significant revision, in 1778. When that essay appeared, incorporating significant amounts of material originally

<sup>13</sup> SWS 4:363.

used in the *Fourth Grove* (and hence not included here), Herder presumably regarded the earlier polemic as obsolete. But that does not mean that he abandoned the problem of the differentiation of the arts altogether. A later and lighthearted dialogue, *Does Painting or Music Have a Greater Effect?*, returns to the same issue.

## Shakespeare and Genius

When Herder arrived in Strassburg in 1770 to undergo what would turn out to be a complicated and painful eye operation, he had, after a year or so spent in Nantes and Paris, grown weary of French culture and literature. Confined to his room, he threw himself into an enthusiastic study of Ossian and Shakespeare and encouraged others to do the same—among them his future wife, Caroline Flachsland, and his new friend Goethe. The rude vigor of Ossianic and Shakespearean poetry, it seemed to Herder, was poles apart from the mannered artfulness of French literature or the anemic German imitations thereof advocated by literary reformers such as Gottsched. Like Homer, like the poets of the Old Testament, these northern European poets were unconstrained by rules or literary conventions and could therefore, Herder realized, serve as models to regenerate German letters.

These intuitions were by no means uncommon in the eighteenth century. Like that of many young Germans, Herder's response to Shakespeare owed a great deal to Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759), which was published in two separate German translations in 1760. Young's work did much to popularize in Germany the new artistic concept of genius, which had become fundamental to French and especially British critical discourse during the early and mid-eighteenth century. For Young (and for Shaftesbury) the genius was a second Creator, a Promethean figure who imitated not the ancients or other writers but only nature. Rather than be guided by elegance and learning, the genius created intuitively, immediately, and through God-given powers. His activity was not mechanical and artificial but organic and natural: "An *Original* may said to be of a *vegetable* nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of Genius; it *grows*, it is not *made*."<sup>14</sup> Inevitably, Shakespeare was for Young—as he was already for Joseph Addison—the prototype of an original genius who had no call for the rules of neoclassicism (which, "like Crutches, are a needful aid to the lame, tho' an impediment to the strong"), and it was as such that through Young's mediation he came to be regarded in Germany, though Wieland's idiosyncratic translations of

<sup>14</sup> Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition* (London: Dodsley, 1759), p. 12.

twenty-two Shakespearean dramas into prose between 1762 and 1766 also helped to underscore his apparently wild and exuberant style.

Not until 1773 was Herder, by now court preacher in Bückeburg, able to refine his thoughts on Shakespeare and genius, in an eponymous essay included in *On German Art and Character*, a collection compiled by Herder himself and often described as the manifesto of the Sturm und Drang movement of the 1770s. Herder's *Shakespeare* is a milestone in the history of literary theory, showcasing the historical-genetic approach to cultural artifacts that he developed as a counterweight to the normative injunctions of Enlightenment aesthetics. Herder rejects as flawed the contemporary dispute between Shakespeare's champions (such as Lessing) and detractors (for example, Voltaire) because, regardless of whether they heap praise or mockery on him, both parties take as their starting point and criteria for judging him the very conventions that Shakespeare quite evidently disregards. Instead, Herder wants to show *why* Shakespeare could not be bound by neoclassical rules and hence *why* he can serve as a new, freer model for modern European drama. Herder seeks to account for Shakespeare, to understand him, to enter into emotional dialogue with him, and thereby to "bring him to life for us Germans."

This is possible only on the basis of a proper understanding of the historical and cultural context within which art and genius emerge. Though poetic inspiration is universal, the manner in which it is expressed is not. By comparing Greek tragedy (as typified by Sophocles) and the northern European drama of Shakespeare, Herder shows that each emerged under vastly different environmental conditions and from different antecedents; because each was shaped by different social, political, and material forces, they could not but be different and guided by different rules. Greek tragedy evolved from the preexisting dithyramb and chorus, taking as its subject matter simple mythical events that gradually became more complicated through the introduction of a more intricate plot. The classical unities of time, place, and action, which Aristotle merely "discovered" rather than proclaimed *ex cathedra*, were no arbitrary imposition on the creative artist; they were an entirely natural and necessary product of the simplicity of Greek life and character. To attempt to replicate Sophoclean tragedy, or to apply its rules, in the entirely different milieu of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France amounted to a refusal to acknowledge the historical and cultural specificity of Greek drama, and as such was not only absurd but harmful. The plays of Voltaire and Corneille are true neither to their own time nor to that of the Greeks from which they purport to derive their legitimacy; they are but an elegant and decorous parody of the originals, mere simulacra lacking the soul, the living spirit of the original. Shakespeare, by contrast, reflects his own historical reality. The greater complexity and diversity of social life in early

modernity are manifested in the sheer variety of events, times, localities, and characters in his plays, precisely those features which seemed to men like Gottsched to offend against the proprieties of dramatic art. Where Sophoclean drama, born of myth, remained abstract and universal, Shakespeare's theater, the roots of which lie in the popular history plays of the Renaissance, discloses his world in all its vibrancy and individuality.

But although Sophocles and Shakespeare may be outwardly dissimilar, they have a spiritual kinship that all artistic geniuses share: they are true not only to nature (as Young argued) but also to the popular culture from which they emerged (which is Herder's decisive contribution to the concept of genius). Both are mouthpieces of their nation's collective genius, expressing its thoughts and sentiments, manners and morals; in each case their art is a development of traditional modes of expression. Though their purpose is the same, their means are necessarily different. Yet each dramatic form has its own legitimacy, and—this is the crux of Herder's argument—so might any other literature that is unfettered and loyal to its national character. Hence Herder's concluding apostrophe to Goethe, whose first major success, the Shakespeare-inspired drama *Götz von Berlichingen*, which is set in medieval Germany, put into practice Herder's ideas and heralded a new literature rooted in native traditions and forms.

But there is more to it. As the expression of popular culture, the genius is also part of the very mechanism of the universe. In *Yet Another Philosophy of History*, which was published in 1774, Herder views history as an apparently aimless process whose plan is inscrutable and known only to God. He repeatedly compares history to a mighty drama in which props and players are moved about on a universal stage so that the great dramatist's purpose may be achieved, even if the characters are only dimly aware of it. In *Shakespeare*, Herder reverses this analogy and suggests that Shakespeare dramatizes history, but not just in the ordinary sense of writing historical plays. The poet is a creator in miniature, a mediator between the world and God, whose work is akin to Revelation. By making history live again, by reconstructing and reproducing its modes of operation, by re-creating the divine plan on the stage, Shakespeare enables humanity to glimpse the workings of God in nature.

## Taste

When Herder returned to the concept of genius a few years later, he had grown tired of the excesses of the *Stürmer und Dränger*, and his tone was altogether cooler and more sober. The essay *On the Causes of Sunken Taste* was written in 1774 in response to a competition on that subject an-

nounced by the Berlin Academy of Sciences and Letters, and much to the surprise of Herder, who dismissed his work as a “belles-lettres school exercise,”<sup>15</sup> he was duly awarded the prize in 1775—something of a sensation, for just four years previously his *Essay on the Origin of Language* had been honored by the same academy. Though it was not the first time Herder had concerned himself with the problem of taste—he discusses the problem in *Is the Beauty of the Body a Herald of the Beauty of the Soul?* and in the *Fourth Grove*—this essay shows him wrestling with a question fundamental to eighteenth-century aesthetics: what is the relation between genius and taste?

The modern concept of taste first emerged through the writings of Baltasar Gracián.<sup>16</sup> He and almost every relevant thinker up to the first quarter of the eighteenth century used the term *taste* to designate the means by which one could lead a graceful and exemplary life. For Christian Thomasius, who introduced the term *bon goût* into German in 1687, the man of taste, as opposed to the pedant or *homme galant*, showed discrimination in the affairs of everyday life; he did not slavishly follow fashion or cultivate an air of idiosyncrasy but rather demonstrated decorum, elegance, and self-confidence. Already in the late seventeenth century, French thinkers such as Dominique Bouhours were occasionally linking taste to discussions of art, but in Germany it was not systematically employed as an aesthetic category until 1727, the year in which both Johann Ulrich König’s *Inquiry into Good Taste in Poetry and Rhetoric* and Bodmer’s *Letters on the Nature of Good Taste* were published. For both writers taste signified a kind of instinctive or intuitive judgment, independent of but nevertheless ultimately in accord with reason, which teaches us to “esteem that which . . . reason would infallibly have approved if it had had the time to examine it sufficiently” and by virtue of which it is thus the “leader and steward of the other noble powers of the human soul.”<sup>17</sup> Though taste was inevitably subject to local variations among different peoples, it was nevertheless deemed to be universal, and as such a standard by which the value of works of art could be measured and rules governing the artist deduced. Good taste in art was, naturally enough, reasonable, balanced, measured; and bad or corrupt taste pedantic, emotional, immoderate. These virtues were best embodied by the art of the ancients and the polite literature of the day.

But already by the middle of the century the concept of taste was being challenged. In his *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* (1750), Rousseau

<sup>15</sup> Herder to Johann Georg Hamann, 18 June 1776, *Briefe* 3:193.

<sup>16</sup> Franz Schümmer, “Die Entwicklung des Geschmackbegriffs in der Philosophie des 17/18 Jahrhunderts,” *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 1 (1955): 120–41.

<sup>17</sup> König, *Untersuchung von dem guten Geschmack in der Dicht- und Rede-Kunst. Anhang zu: Des Freyherrn v. Canitz’ Gedichte* (Leipzig, 1727), p. 261.

cast doubt on the moral and political value of the cultivation of taste. Taste was also beginning to be seen as derivative, learned, and inferior compared with the natural gifts of genius; this is evident as early as 1757 in Diderot's article on genius in the *Encyclopédie*. Soon Young would echo these sentiments, followed of course by Herder himself. By the 1770s, as the Sturm und Drang movement gathered pace, these ideas had become widespread. The worship of genius meant also a one-sided celebration of "feeling," and the denigration of taste signaled a rejection of the rational culture (*Verstandeskultur*) of French neoclassicism and the Enlightenment. At the very moment when it was about to be swept away and rendered obsolete by the proto-Romantic trends in European thought, we find Herder unexpectedly fighting a rearguard action and attempting, in one of the last major works devoted to the topic in European letters, to salvage the concept of taste, to reclaim it as a means of safeguarding the equilibrium of human powers.

These developments explain why Herder begins his treatise by discussing the relation of taste to genius, reason, and virtue. The antagonisms that his contemporaries claim to find between these categories, he argues, neither exist nor are the causes of the corruption of taste. Or rather, if such oppositions do obtain, they are pathological developments, which is why Herder suggests that a historical approach to the problem is superior to the "psychological" method preferred by his unnamed opponents. Taste, he claims, is no barrier to genius. It is in fact nothing more than the order and harmonious arrangement of the sensuous powers of genius, a necessary restraint that gives direction to unruly creative impulses. If Herder had insisted before on the sovereignty of the self-legislating artist, now he is just as adamant that the intuitive and untutored expression of genius is insufficient to bring forth works of lasting value. The Egyptians possessed genius but not taste—hence their monstrous and unrefined art; only in Greece was genius first harnessed productively by taste. Even Shakespeare, Herder now concedes, was guided by taste and by rules—even if they were his own, not the inherited and stultifying precepts of another age. Similarly, reason as such is not opposed to taste, which breathes life into the brittle and arid structures of the intellect. Only when genius is exercised in conjunction with what Herder calls true reason does that order of our instinctive powers arise which constitutes taste. Only the misuse of reason, only pedantry and irrationality can ever corrupt taste. Finally, taste and virtue overlap but are not identical: taste is the order of our sensuous nature, but virtue is the equilibrium of *all* the powers of the mind. That means that while those states in which the finest taste flourished are not the most virtuous, where morals are thoroughly depraved so too will taste be. Good taste can become the model of virtue, or at least of decency, but there is no more intimate connection between the two.

In the historical section of the treatise Herder adopts the traditional French scheme according to which there were four ages of good taste: Attic Greece, Augustan Rome, the Renaissance, and the reign of Louis XIV, the latter supposedly the apogee of *bon goût*. But Herder makes significant revisions to this view of European history. For a start, he sees the corruption of taste not as an avoidable aberration but as a natural and necessary process: its causes become clear only when one has identified the historical conditions under which it emerged and prospered. When the unique constellation of physical and cultural factors giving rise to a nation's taste ceases to operate, then taste declines. Herder also reevaluates the conventional estimations of the different ages of good taste. Only in Greece was taste an entirely natural phenomenon, a "flower"; only Greek culture developed a national spirit through the participation of the public or people, and not from the patronage of powerful rulers, whose influence Herder generally views with profound suspicion. With the slide into tyranny under the caesars, those literary genres native to Roman culture, which embodied the democratic virtues of the Republic, namely oratory and history, were uprooted before they could bear fruit. Augustan civilization was an ephemeral hothouse flower, an exotic, foreign species transplanted to Rome for the purposes of political spectacle and legitimacy. The Medici and Louis XIV also presided over learned cultures that sacrificed indigenous and popular expression to the cult of imitation, encouraging works that were accessible only to an educated elite and therefore sprang up with the seeds of their decline within them from the start. Typically and unsurprisingly, Voltaire's *siècle de Louis XIV* is for Herder the most precarious rather than most perfect of all the periods under review. His aim, then, is to show that good taste in Europe has, at least since the Hellenic age, always been a superficial and short-lived phenomenon, choked at each turn by the weeds of despotism and luxury. The Greeks prove that political freedom and the flowering of taste go hand in hand.

But Herder does not dismiss outright the mannered and uncouth chapters in the history of taste. The obscure and fustian style of a Persius or Tacitus; the degeneracy of Latin occasioned by the spread of Christianity and the barbarian invasions; the forced imitation of the ancients during the Italian Renaissance—these lapses in and errors of taste may show how far we have traveled from the harmony enjoyed by the ancients, but they are merely staging posts in the historical evolution of humanity. The natural forces that brought forth genius in one land will do so again in another, and once there is genius, taste is sure to follow; Herder holds out the prospect that beneath the rubble of modern ideas, Germany is working toward "an age of exalted philosophical taste." But if an enduring age of taste is ever to come about, we as human beings must act as midwives to Nature's geniuses; we must create the conditions under which taste can

thrive. And that is possible only through education. Taste shall be cultivated not only by studying the ancients and the liberal arts but by freeing it from fashion and the dictates of the court. Thus liberated, taste shall help to usher in an age of *Humanität*.

## Aesthetic Education

Herder's ideas on the moral and pedagogical dimensions of the experience of beauty can be found scattered throughout his writings in one form or another, and they are developed further in another prizewinning essay, *On the Influence of the Belles Lettres on the Higher Sciences*, which might be seen as a kind of companion piece to the essay on taste. But his conviction that art has a role to play in education should not be interpreted as advocating narrow didacticism. Just as he rejected the "top-down" approach in aesthetics practiced by lazy thinkers such as Riedel, preferring to start from the evidence of the senses rather than nominal definitions and unquestioned general concepts, so he thought that the cultivation of young minds should not be entrusted to grammarians who suffocate their charges with high-flown theories and arid speculation. Instead, Herder demanded that education have as its goal the production of a balanced human being whose sensuous and intellectual powers interoperate in perfect harmony.

In some ways, Herder's ideal here is reminiscent of Baumgarten's *felix aestheticus*, a figure who successfully combines a love of the sensory world with rational cognition. Yet even Baumgarten himself, Herder points out in his early essay on that philosopher, fell short of his own ideal: of the two souls dwelling in Baumgarten's breast, the poet and the Wolffian logician, it was the latter who ultimately triumphed. In his *Journal* of 1769, Herder sketches out some of his thoughts concerning what Schiller would soon call an aesthetic education. Overtaxing the youthful mind with abstractions learned secondhand from dusty schoolbooks and depriving it of a rich variety of sensations induces a state of intellectual torpor and prematurely ages the child. Wherever possible, whether the subject be philosophy, ethics, or theology, concrete concepts should be introduced to the young via their senses, so that children learn to think for themselves and make these ideas their own. Furthermore, *all* of the senses should be put to use; returning to the conclusions he had recently drawn in the *Fourth Grove*, Herder demanded not only that touch be included as a vital aid to learning, but that the body as a whole must not be neglected in education, for without its proper exercise, without the free play of the senses, the soul is left paralyzed and confined. Hence if young minds are to arrive at concepts of truth, they must be exposed to the full gamut of sensory experi-

ence: “Many, powerful, vivid, true, individual sensations . . . are the basis of a host of many, powerful, vivid, true, individual ideas, and that is original genius.”<sup>18</sup>

Similar ideas are expressed much later in the essay *On the Influence of the Belles Lettres on the Higher Sciences*, the basic argument of which is very simple. Just as images precede concepts and clear cognition precedes distinct cognition, so the higher sciences must be based on the belles lettres, because otherwise they lack a stable, firm foundation. By “belles lettres” Herder did not mean a study of the fashionable literature of the age, which is undemanding and frivolous and produces only aesthetes and dandies who are incapable of any practical activity and wreak havoc in the four traditional faculties of learning. Rather, the belles lettres are a school of the senses, of the imagination, of the passions and inclinations. They serve to cultivate the lower faculties of the soul, bring order to our emotions and fancies, and thereby lay the foundations for independent, abstract thinking in the higher realms of knowledge. A thorough grounding in classical literature and languages is particularly suited to this end. But we should not understand the concept of the belles lettres too narrowly here: geography and natural history are among them, and the canonical authors whom Herder recommends are not only poets. But what they all have in common is that they help to avoid premature and narrow specialization and to place academic disciplines in a meaningful relationship to life. They are *humaniora*: they inspire and nurture in us the feeling of humanity by which we realize ourselves and develop our potential to its fullest extent.

## The Fable

In the eighteenth century the fable enjoyed an unprecedented popularity and prestige as a literary genre. In France and then later in Germany (especially during the period 1740–70), the works of serious fabulists such as La Fontaine were not only widely read but were also discussed by some of the foremost critics of the age. What explains the popularity of the fable in the eighteenth century? Part of the reason is certainly the widespread belief that moral instruction was the paramount pedagogical obligation and literature a necessary means of discharging it. So if a firm underlying moral was required of all literary works, then the fable, didactic by nature, fulfilled this requirement more neatly and naturally than any other genre. Those parents unable to afford the private tutors recommended by educational reformers such as Locke and Rousseau, and who took upon

<sup>18</sup> SWS 4:454.

themselves the burden of teaching their offspring, were assisted by the many collections of fables aimed specifically at the layman seeking to educate his children. Locke himself, in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), declared Aesop's *Fables* to be the best means of stimulating a child's interest in reading and learning, and his ideas, enthusiastically received in France and Germany, were later echoed by Fénelon and Wolff, who also approved the fable as a supremely effective method of inculcating moral truths.<sup>19</sup>

That Herder should be interested in the fable is unsurprising given his profession as cleric and educator, and his conviction that literature ought to be uplifting and edifying was very much of his time. For this reason, though he had moved to Weimar in 1776, Herder could only deplore the nascent ideology of Weimar Classicism and the insistence of Karl Philipp Moritz, Goethe, and others on the autonomy and purposelessness of the artwork. For Herder, the belief that the realm of the aesthetic was hermetically sealed from the concerns of quotidian life signaled a retreat into misguided escapism and empty formalism. Art and literature had urgent moral obligations; as a powerful tool of social and political change they must seek always to communicate with the public. Like many of his contemporaries, Herder regarded the fable as the sine qua non of didactic literature. But his essay *Image, Poetry, and Fable*, first published in the third collection of his *Scattered Leaves* in 1787, is not only an intervention in a live contemporary debate about the nature, meaning, and function of the fable but also one of his most important contributions to a general poetics.

The term *fable* embraces a number of different meanings in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poetics. It might denote the Aesopian fable proper, or apologue; be used in the Aristotelian sense of the narrative or plot of a dramatic or epic work; or, finally, refer to a myth or legend. This multivalence comes out particularly clearly in the work of one of the most influential theorists of the fable, René Le Bossu. In his 1675 work *Traité de poeme épique*, Le Bossu defined the fable as any “discourse invented in order to form morals by means of instructions disguised under the allegories of an action,” a formula that would echo throughout subsequent treatments of the theme by La Motte, Richer, and others. Le Bossu intended *fable* to refer to plot or narrative in the first instance, a two-part framework consisting of both truth (the moral) and fiction (the illustration of that truth through an invented action or story) within which the poetic work is given expression. The difference between the epic and the Aesopian fable proper lies simply in the kind of characters the respective

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Noel, *Theories of the Fable in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975).

genre employs to perform the underlying action: whether mythical figures such as gods or men (the epic) or animals with certain human attributes (the Aesopian fable). So for Le Bossu and his successors, the fable—if we ignore the less substantial issues that preoccupied their attention, such as reflections on the length of the fable or the precise function of animal characters—consisted in a mixture of both invention and truth, poetry and morality; its fictionality, its allegorical structure, and its ability to convey a general meaning that served to differentiate it from the specificity of history.

The major break with this tradition was effected by Lessing in his (1759) collection *Fables*, which included five theoretical essays setting out his novel standpoint. Lessing argued that the claim that the fable was allegorical in nature applied only to what he called the complex fable. His preference, however, was for the simple fable, which unfolds only on a single level of meaning, which represents a realistic case history rather than an imaginary or hypothetical situation (and this, he thought, was the truly Aesopian variety). The fable's purpose is to activate the intuitive cognition of a general moral principle. Accordingly, the fable ought to be stripped of all unnecessary poetical effects and attributes, all extraneous ornamentation, and returned to the pristine state that it supposedly enjoyed among the ancients. Ultimately, Lessing viewed the fable as a philosophical instrument, not as a poetic genre; it existed only on the margins of literature, "on the shared border of poetry and morality." The baroque flourishes and discursiveness favored by La Fontaine and his imitators only obscured the moral force of the fable; instead Lessing pleaded for concision and directness (his own fables are rarely longer than a brief paragraph); the fable should be designed to instruct, not to entertain, and hence prose is the appropriate medium for the genre.

Lessing's attempt to reform the fable was controversial; while many of his contemporaries praised the critical perceptions in his essays and applauded his attempts to purify the fable, they were also dismayed by the reactionary tendency of his ideas. The fable, it was felt, had assumed a permanent position among the poetic genres. Most vocal and vigorous in their response to Lessing's puritanical crusade were the Swiss critics Bodmer and Breitinger, whose *Lessing's Unaesopian Fables* (1760) was a mixture of parody and polemic, accusing Lessing of having surrendered any commitment to virtue, religion, and nature.

It is against this general background that we should view Herder's own intervention in the debate about the fable. His definitive treatment of the topic in *Image, Poetry, and Fable* is a belated refutation of Lessing's famous theory. In the preface to his essay, he notes that much of the material dates from his early sketch "Aesop and Lessing," which he had originally intended to appear in the second collection of *Fragments* some

twenty years earlier. The theory of the fable, he complains, has not been advanced since Lessing's contribution; subsequent critics had either imitated Lessing or failed to produce an original or coherent theory. Though there are substantial differences between his early and later treatments of the theme, Herder's main criticism of Lessing is the same in both: he takes issue with Lessing's rejection of the allegorical and the poetical essence of the fable. For Herder, the fable does indeed belong on the border between poetry and morality, but if forced to place it in one realm or the other, he would choose poetry: "Its essence is invention; its life, plot; its aim, sensuous understanding. . . . I regard the fable as a source, a miniature, of the great poetic genres, where most of the poetic rules are found in their original simplicity and, to a certain extent, in their original form."<sup>20</sup>

Herder takes up this idea in the later essay, seeking to demonstrate the fable's essentially poetic nature and clarifying its relation to morality and truth. But this time, he prefixes his poetological discussion of the generic characteristics of the fable with wide-ranging psychological and anthropological reflections on the origins of poetry as such in the operations of the mind. He begins by insisting on the inherent creativity involved in cognitive processes: an "image"—the basic stuff of human thought—is the name he gives to any representation of external objects brought to consciousness in the soul; this is achieved by the "inner sense" that imposes order on the chaos of sensations flooding the mind, separating one object from another, by giving each outline and form, by creating unity in diversity. We do not passively perceive images but rather create them; the process of translation by which an object is transformed into an image, and an image into a thought, is inherently allegorical, and allegory is the essence of poetry. Thus, both thought and language, even ordinary discourse, are constructed on a poetical foundation and are subject to the same rules of veracity, vividness, and clarity that govern poetry. But whereas Nietzsche, arguing along similar lines, would later conclude that the inevitable metaphoricity underpinning our perceptual and linguistic habits points to the impossibility of objective truth, Herder is adamant that although we create the images by which we apprehend the world, in doing so we are merely tracing the outlines that God has drawn for us; the truth is still out there.

In the second section, Herder explains how poetry as such arises from the image through the same process of allegorical transference. Just as with a single external object, we do not perceive the object itself but project an image created by our soul, so when we cognize a whole series of objects—in other words, the world as a whole—we project our feelings and values; human knowledge is inescapably anthropomorphic and hence

<sup>20</sup> SWS 2:197–98.

“poetic” in the older sense of that word; that is, fictitious or invented. Because we are ignorant or incapable of understanding the true causes of natural phenomena, we personify and ascribe agency to them. Drawing on the pioneering work of his friend the Göttingen scholar Christian Gottlob Heyne, Herder argues that the earliest form of poetry, as an attempt to come to terms with objective reality, is mythology and religion. But where Heyne assumes that the mythical or poetic form of consciousness, even if it served as the basis of all later knowledge, belongs to the prehistory of human thought, Herder sees myth or poetry not as constitutive of an irrevocably past epoch but as the enduring procedure of the human mind, for the analogical transference of our cognitive and affective structures onto objects is the only way in which human beings perceive the world. Thus even modern physics is an interpretation, a kind of poetics for our senses. That is not to deny that there is a great deal of difference between modern science and primitive religion; the content of human knowledge changes, but the earliest form remains the same. In the same way, the outer trappings of poetry have changed, though the poetic impulse is constant; there is development in poetry, too, from the oral sagas rooted in mythology (*Dichtung*) to the more refined written art of poetry (*Dichtkunst*), which is made possible by the evolution of a greater symbolic language and by borrowing features from other arts, such as meter from the rhythms of dance.

The Aesopian fable is an inevitable and early product of this anthropomorphic mode of thinking. Like all poetry, the fable derives from the natural human urge to form images as a means of creating order out of the chaos of nature. What makes it distinctive, however, is the moral lesson that the poet consciously incorporates in those images which he creates. The fable is, then, according to Herder’s definition, “moralized poetry.”

The remainder of the essay is devoted to solving some of the traditional problems addressed by theorists of the fable, for example why the fable often employs animals as actors. Herder’s answer to this question and others follows directly from the poetological theory he has elaborated in the two preceding sections: for “sensuous man,” all aspects of Nature are potential actors, but he feels an especially close bond to the animal world and those species most resembling him and comprehensible to him. Bestial characters are not employed by the fabulist to instill a sense of wonder (as Breitingen argued) or because of their universally recognizable characteristics (as Lessing supposed); instead, the animal fable (as its traditional introductory phrase “once upon a time” implies) expresses a lingering nostalgia for a lost age of unity when human beings felt themselves firmly ensconced in the bosom of Nature. Animals are simply animals, not bloodless abstractions: the fable’s effectiveness always rests on concrete

analogy or allegory. The fable must be living; it must be relevant and recognizable; it must avoid convoluted and abstruse comparisons. As such, it does not matter who or what the characters are; all that matters is that the result fulfills the general requirements of truth, vividness, and clarity and that the invented narrative enables intuitive cognition of a moral lesson.

In the same way, the lesson that the fable imparts is not a universal moral principle but rather a practical rule of thumb, for a fable always contains more than an abstract injunction whose utility is uncertain; it also includes the concrete situation to which it applies in everyday life. Therefore Lessing's distinction between the simple and complex fable is invalid: all true fables are complex; all fables, as species of poetry, are inescapably based on allegory. Devoid of any connection to the problems we encounter in real life, a fable will be vague, monotonous, and ultimately ineffectual. So while Herder approves of Lessing's suggestion that fables be used in the classroom to develop original thinking, he rejects his restriction of the exercise to abstract thought. Herder demands the cultivation of practical knowledge and thinking, particularly the training of students to transpose and apply the lesson learned from one situation to a parallel one.

For Herder, the fable's poetic nature and its moral content explain its peculiar convincingness; other forms of poetry or rhetoric—such as the comparison and example—may possess a didactic element, but only the fable has an insistent quality that brooks no refusal. This irresistibility stems from its connection with nature, in regard to both means and ends. The fable animates the creatures of nature to serve as actors; it demonstrates to us the “moral laws of Creation itself in their inner necessity.” But animated nature speaking to us also gives us a lesson in fundamental unity, which uncivilized humanity felt so strongly that it guided every aspect of life but which modern, alienated man only dimly senses. The fable's ultimate end is not only to communicate a rule of thumb; both the lesson of the fable and the fable itself body forth the moral order of the world in sublime proportions, bringing to intuitive clarity the universal laws of nature and the immutable union of all beings in the realm of Creation. A fable that fails to achieve this sublimity is not a fable at all but a comparison, an example, or simply an amusing story. In Herder's hands, then, the fable is no longer a simple didactic tale, or even the more sophisticated moral poetry of *La Fontaine*. It is transformed into something approaching divine revelation set in a formula that reflects the mythological golden age of cosmic unity.

This ambitious and widely ranging treatment of a single poetic genre, moving easily from the human to the divine, from the social to the psychological, is typical of Herder's writings on aesthetics as a whole. Few

thinkers have reflected so sensitively and productively on the cultural, historical, anthropological, ethical, and theological dimensions of art and the creative process. The importance of aesthetics to the evolution and texture of his own thought, as well as his profound contribution to that discipline, deserves wider recognition.