Herder on Shakespeare, Nominalism, and Obsolescence

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ABSTRACT: This article revisits Johann Gottfried Herder's 1773 essay on Shakespeare. What makes Herder's critical essay remarkable, it argues, is not just that it models the nominalist and culturalist outlook that would go on to have far-reaching implications for the history of comparative literature and related disciplines, but also that it recognizes the existential consequences of adopting the thoroughgoing culturalist and historicist self-image that it promotes. Herder's meditation on cultural finitude in *Shakespeare* flows directly from his insistence that human beings are social and historical creatures and carries important lessons for the interpretive humanities today.

In chapter 1 of *Comparing the Literatures*, David Damrosch quotes Johann Gottfried Herder's coda to his 1773 essay on Shakespeare. In it, Herder reflects on the fate of obsolescence that awaits every writer, even Shakespeare:

> Sadder and more important is the thought that even this great creator of history and the world soul grows older every day, that the words and customs and categories of the age wither and fall like autumnal leaves, that we are already so removed from these great ruins of the age of chivalry . . . And soon, perhaps, as everything becomes effaced and tends in different directions, even his drama will become quite incapable of living performance, will become the dilapidated remains of a colossus, of a pyramid, which all gaze upon with wonder and none understand.[1]

These lines are ostensibly about Shakespeare and really about the ephemerality of "the words and customs and categories of the age," or what we today simply call "culture." Their real subject is not so much the vicissitudes of literary reception as it is the anxious recognition that

[1] Johann Gottfried Herder, *Shakespeare*, ed. and trans. Gregory Moore (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 63–64.

sooner or later "everything becomes effaced and tends in different directions." What we see in this passage, as in so many other places in Herder's writing, is an attempt on the part of a pioneering eighteenth-century intellectual to look squarely at what Damrosch calls "the uncertainties of cultural belonging in a radically relativistic world."[2]

But, of course, Herder's cultural environs were not yet relativistic. The intellectual climate in which he came of age was characterized by a robust belief in the authority and universality of reason. His mid-eighteenth-century peers and mentors, writes Frederick Beiser, "were confident that reason could peel away the mystical shell of our moral, religious, and political beliefs . . . and that it could lay bare their truthful core (the universal and necessary principles of human nature and society)."[3] Their main concern was to liberate European civilization from what they regarded as the scourge of religious superstition and its attendant *Schwärmerei* and bring it under the sovereignty of reason, newly conceived as the source of individual freedom, ground of morality, and foundation of community.

In casting doubts on virtually every item of this Enlightenment creed, Herder consciously positioned himself at the antipode of the reigning intellectual consensus of his day and, particularly, of the views espoused by his erstwhile teacher, Kant. Where the *Aufklärer* prized universality, Herder celebrated particularity; where Kant looked to reason as the guide to human affairs, Herder looked to culture and history; and where luminaries such as Hume and Voltaire insisted that "mankind are so much the same in all times and places that history informs us of nothing new or strange,"[4] Herder proceeded on the assumption "that peoples from different historical periods and cultures vary *tremendously* in their concepts, beliefs [and] sensations."[5] His intellectual point of departure, as Michael Forster observes, was the principle of "*radical difference.*"[6]

This outlook was rooted in Herder's culturalist conception of the self. "For Herder," wrote Isaiah Berlin in a classic study, "to be a member of a group is to think and act in a certain way, in the light of particular goals, values, pictures of the world."[7] Human beings, on the view that Herder promoted, are neither incarnate souls nor embodied minds but *cultural creatures*, wholly embedded in, expressive of, and bounded by the diverse sociohistorical habitats in which we find them. True to his developing culturalist and historicist understanding of the human animal, Herder broke away from Kant's critical program and subordinated philosophy to anthropology. Culture, language, shared traditions, acquired customs—these, for Herder, came first; conceptual thought and abstract categories were a distant second. If Kant sought to ground human consciousness and morality in fixed and universal mental faculties, Herder insisted that both were culturally and historically contingent.[8]

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2 David Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 19.

3 Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 2.

4 Hume quoted in Michael N. Forster, *After Herder: Philosophy of Language in the German Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 17.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder,* 2nd ed., ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 273.

8 For a discussion of the early Kant's influence on Herder's ideas and their eventual parting of ways, see John Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

Herder's views eventually won out over Kant's. Consequently, we today inhabit Damrosch's "radically relativistic world": a world where value pluralism and cultural relativism are broadly assumed, where anthropology matters more than epistemology, and where Kantian appeals to a universal moral law are met with indifference by most people (with the possible exception of a few unreconstructed philosophy professors). By and large, Herder's heterodox ideas have become our orthodoxy.

All this is well known. Herder's signal contribution to the development of the modern culture-concept and its related intellectual formations—from Boasian anthropology to hermeneutics, cultural studies, and new historicism—has long been recognized. Now, thanks to Damrosch's recent book, we also have a fuller understanding of Herder's importance for the emergence of comparative literature, which, like its sister disciplines, flows from the relativist insistence that "each national culture should be assessed on its own terms" rather than pigeonholed into a grand historical narrative or measured against some universal yardstick.[9] In short, Herder's central place in the intellectual history of the last two hundred years is a case that no longer needs to be made.

But the late eighteenth-century emergence of the culturalist sensibility, to which Herder was a prominent contributor,[10] did more than provide us with novel concepts to work with or new disciplines to pursue. It also ushered in new anxieties and vulnerabilities that stemmed from the increasingly more central place that (what we today call) cultural identity assumed in people's self-image. The more accustomed women and men grew to thinking of themselves as products of a particular set of cultural and historical contingencies, the more sensitized they became to the tenuousness and temporality of their identities and of the "world" that sustains them. The late eighteenth-century discovery of history in its fully historicist sense, as described by Georg Lukács; the unraveling, during the same period, of the worldview organized around the metaphor of the Great Chain of Being, as traced by A. O. Lovejoy; and the emergence of imagined national communities, now perceived as "a solid community moving down (or up) history,"[11] familiar from Benedict Anderson's work—all contributed to the pervasive sense of cultural precarity that began to be felt in the late 1700s and would go on to become one of the hallmarks of modernity.

Literary production in the second half of the eighteenth century provides ample evidence for the growing preoccupation with cultural transience. Starting already before the French Revolution but gaining increasing momentum in its wake, we see the emergence of works and eventually entire genres organized around the trope of cultural extinction and its staple "last-of-the-race" figure who survives the death of his culture to live out his days as a forlorn relic.[12] Influential poems, such as Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751) and

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9 Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures,* 20.

10 A comprehensive history of the emergence of the culturalist sensibility in the West would likely begin with Montaigne before proceeding to discuss the contributions of Vico, Montesquieu, Herder, Burke, and Chateaubriand on the one side, and of nineteenth-century French and British novelists who traveled down the path cleared by Maria Edgeworth and Walter Scott on the other. I provide an abridged version of this story in the early chapters of my book, *The Blossom Which We Are: The Novel and the Transience of Cultural Worlds* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2020). But the full history of culturalism as a modern structure of thought and feeling still waits to be written.

11 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 26.

12 For a detailed survey of the vicissitudes of this figure, from Milton to Darwin, see Fiona Stafford, *The Last of the Race: The Growth of a Myth from Milton to Darwin* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

James Macpherson's "translations" of Ossian (1760–65) (greatly admired by Herder), are early expressions of the budding fascination with vanishing forms of life, later followed by the widely circulating works of Maria Edgeworth, Sidney Owenson (Lady Morgan), Charles Maturin and, especially, Walter Scott, who collectively introduced the theme of cultural extinction into the nineteenth-century novel.[13] These developments, together with the growing scientific consensus regarding the reality and prevalence of species extinction and the waning prestige of the biblical model of history, turned the extinction trope into a permanent fixture of the Romantic imagination and subsequently of our own late-modern sensibility. If, as Jonathan Lear observes, "we live at a time of a heightened awareness that civilizations are themselves vulnerable," this has much to do with the ideas that Herder and his followers helped weave into the fabric of modernity.[14]

In the following, I will offer a brief reading of Herder's *Shakespeare* with an eye to its pronounced nominalism and culturalism. What makes Herder's text so remarkable, I will argue, is not just that it models the relativist outlook that would go on to have such far-reaching implications for the history of comparative literature and other disciplines, but also that it recognizes what might be called (for lack of a better term) the existential consequences of adopting the thoroughgoing culturalist and historicist self-image that was only just beginning to coalesce when it was published. Herder's meditation on transience, with which he closes his essay, I will try to show, flows directly from his insistence that human beings are thoroughly the creatures of their time and culture.

Herder's *Shakespeare* is a wonderful mess. An enraptured rhapsody on the bard's genius, a historical survey of Greek and European drama, an exploration of the role of setting in literature, a spirited bashing of French art and culture—these are only some of the articles on Herder's agenda. The most significant item, for our purposes, is the essay's culturalist nominalism.

Herder's first order of business is to disabuse his readers of the assumption that—just because we commonly use a single word, "drama," to describe both European and Greek theatrical art—the two should be viewed as instantiations of some great Platonic original. "Sophocles's drama and Shakespeare's drama," he underscores, "are two things that in a certain respect have scarcely their name in common."[15] What Herder means by this is that each of these two bodies of work is a historical phenomenon that emerged in a specific context and in response to particular pressures and needs. Therefore, to try to force Sophocles's and Shakespeare's oeuvres into the Procrustean bed of our contemporary aesthetic categories is to uproot them from their natural habitat and thus distort them. Abstract theoretical schemes, Herder urges, produce caricatures of the phenomena they are meant to clarify. To truly understand Sophocles and Shakespeare requires seeing them in the terms of their native cultural and historical worlds.

This kind of culturalism and nominalism closes the door on grand theoretical syntheses of the kind we associate with figures like Northrop Frye or Claude Lévi Strauss as well as on positivist approaches, both old and new, from Russian Formalism to today's cognitive literary studies. For, when taken to its logical conclusion, Herder's view leaves no metaphysical room for

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13 Katie Trumpener's *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997) remains the most comprehensive study of these literary developments in Britain's Celtic periphery around the turn of the nineteenth century.

14 Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 7.

15 Herder, *Shakespeare*, 5–6.

abstractions such as history, or form, or mind on which these approaches rely. In fact, Herder's view leaves no room for theory at all, insofar as by theory we mean a conceptual apparatus that spits out true knowledge regardless of what we feed into it. If, as Herder writes, "French drama is … not the same thing as Greek drama [because] nothing in their inner essence is the same," then there is no hook for theory in the strong sense to latch unto.[16] Which is why Herder argues that Aristotle's *Poetics,* while eminently useful for understanding Sophocles, is irrelevant if we want to make sense of Shakespeare. In his view, theory is just as contingent, just as cultural and historical, as the objects it purports to explain. Contingency is the only universal. It extends not only to the object of inquiry but also to the inquirer herself, to her conceptual tools and normative assumptions. All these, from Herder's anti-Kantian perspective, are products of history and culture.

This call to abandon the comforts of theory and embrace one's situatedness lies at the heart of Herder's pioneering anthropological and comparatist approach to human products and affairs. For Herder, as Kristin Gjesdal remarks, "our interpretative efforts are rooted in our status as historical and cultural beings and so our scholarly pursuits must be situated within, yet point beyond, the actual historical and cultural frameworks from which we talk and write."[17] In other words, the scholar's recognition of her own contingency need not discourage her from engaging with texts that hail from culturally or historically distant locales. It does recommend, however, that she cultivate a hermeneutic awareness of the perspectival nature of interpretation. As interpreters, we are always-already approaching the text from a definite somewhere, even while we try to divine how it fit into its original context.

But what in Herder's proto-hermeneutic approach invites the melancholy conclusion of his essay? Why does an insistence on the irreducible situatedness of text and reader make the idea of impermanence—an ancient trope if ever there was one—suddenly seem to him more proximate, intimate, foreboding? To answer these questions, we must first factor in the role that theory—at least the kind of theory that Herder seeks to undermine—has traditionally played in staving off the specter of finitude.

The consolatory aspect of theory is not self-evident and still goes largely unremarked. In the history of philosophy, it was Nietzsche who first argued that the turn to theory is at bottom an expression of the wish to escape from the world of history and chance. As Richard Rorty puts this point: "The Western philosophical tradition thinks of a human life as a triumph just insofar as it breaks out of the world of time, appearance, and idiosyncratic opinion into another world—into the world of enduring truth."[18] The promise implicit in the Platonist view of philosophy that Nietzsche and Rorty are criticizing is that by getting in touch with "enduring truth" the philosopher effectively transcends her animal frailty and mortality. Further, a society that succeeds in organizing itself around such discoverable, timeless truths—be they religious, philosophical, or scientific—would consider itself immune to the fate of extinction. Its members would live in the comforting belief that even if their particular community should meet with disaster, the human race will eventually "recapture the virtues and the insights and the achievements which were the glory of that community."[19] For those virtues and insights would not be regarded as the idiosyn-

16 Ibid., 18.

17 Kristin Gjesdal, "Shakespeare's Hermeneutic Legacy: Herder on Modern Drama and the Challenge of Cultural Prejudice," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 69.

18 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 35.

19 Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 31.

cratic achievements of one human tribe among many actual and possible ones; they would be viewed as humanity's own and thus ineradicable so long as the species survives.

This view of theory as a bid for eternity helps explain why the methodical nominalism and culturalism that Herder applies in his essay concludes with the somber meditation on transience which I quoted at the beginning of mine. As Herder intuits, those who would view Shakespeare's drama and Sophocles's drama as instantiations of a single abstract, culture-independent entity—capital-D Drama—are not only trying to pigeonhole and thus assume a kind of power over these phenomena; they are also, as Nietzsche would argue a century later, "[*affirming*] *another world* than the world of life, nature and history."[20] For wherever it is that abstractions like capital-D Drama are presumed to reside, this realm is by definition absolved from the vagaries of time and chance. The theoretical stance, thus described, involves a denial of the determining power of the parochial and historical. For the kind of theorist that Herder, Nietzsche, and Rorty are trying to retire, meaning and value can only ever be the property of immutable things. Contingent circumstances, being merely local and ephemeral, don't matter.

Herder's exploration of literary history in *Shakespeare* sets out from the conviction that contingent circumstances *do* matter; indeed, when it comes to making sense of the present and the past, they are the *only* things that matter. He recognizes that "everything in the world changes," but rather than attempting to transcend this condition, he acknowledges and incorporates mutability into his view. Sophocles, he claims, is of his singular and transient cultural moment, just as Shakespeare is of his. And so it is with everything and everyone else. Human beings, as Herder understands them, are cultural and historical through and through, fully suspended in the webs of meaning and value that they have collectively spun about themselves. The attempt to theorize one's way out of this situatedness, like the tendency to "worship . . . reason as an infallible oracle, self-established, eternal, and independent of everything," is, in his view, both vain and potentially harmful.[21]

In breaking out of Plato's and Kant's orbits, Herder exposes his thought to the lurking menace of transience, which the religious and philosophical outlooks in which he was reared strove to keep at bay. As he comes to see the matter, it is not just our own individual lives that are finite; our cultural habitats—what he calls "the words and customs and categories of the age"—are mortal as well. And so, when he writes that a day may come when Shakespeare's drama "will become quite incapable of living performance . . . [like] a pyramid, which all gaze upon with wonder and none understand," Herder is not only making a point about Shakespeare but also about himself and his contemporaries, alerting them that their cherished values, celebrated institutions, and unshakable moral convictions may be incomprehensible, ludicrous, or reprehensible to their descendants.[22] Such is the price of adopting the thoroughgoing culturalist and historicist position that Herder helped chisel into the intellectual landscape of his era and ours.

Comparative literature is many things, but it is nothing without Herder's deep pluralism and cross-cultural curiosity. His angry rebuke to his contemporaries, "the culture of *man* is not the

20 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 201.

21 The passage is from Herder's "Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele," quoted in Sonia Sikka, "Herder's Critique of Pure Reason," *Review of Metaphysics* 61, no. 1 (September 2007): 34.

22 Herder, *Shakespeare*, 64.

culture of the *European* [but] manifests itself according to place and time in *every* people," is the discipline's cornerstone.[23] However, given the current backlash against the historicist and culturalist paradigm that has regulated humanist scholarship and teaching in literary studies roughly since the 1980s, we comparatists would do well to reassert another aspect of Herder's legacy: his emphasis on the local and timebound nature of theory and knowledge.

As Peter Boxall observes, the last two decades have been marked by "a creeping nostalgia for the old spectres of cultural value," as a myriad of resurgent or refurbished approaches—cognitive poetics, Darwinian literary studies, neo-formalism, new ethics, to name the most salient—once again seek to ground critical practice in universal and ahistorical foundations.[24] This broad and uncoordinated disciplinary backsliding toward foundationalism is motivated in part by a desire for theoretical novelty. On a deeper level, however, it reflects an anxious need to legitimize literary scholarship at a moment when its immediate future seems bleaker than ever. If we could but place our disciplines on the secure path of a science, as some seem to believe, we might be able to justify the work we do to a society that seems increasingly indifferent to humanist work and disinclined to fund it. Seen in this light, the creeping nostalgia, of which the aforementioned disciplinary formations are symptomatic, is a roundabout attempt to recover literary studies' longed-for role as arbiters and preservers of enduring values and universal truths.

Alas, that ship has sailed. The current foundationalist revival will run its course, as have earlier attempts to scientize or divinize humanist scholarship, leaving us with a few more conceptual tools, but without inspiring a mass conversion. The desire for foundations is real enough, but the intellectual soil required for such a prelapsarian agenda to take root and flourish has long since been eroded. Moreover, contrary to a prevailing and mildly narcissistic misperception common among us, the current crisis of the humanities has very little to do with how we ground our knowledge claims. Legislators, administrators, and the general public are oblivious to our in-house disputes and neither know nor care whether we are on the side of the Kantian angels or the Herderian apes.

What role, then, might we comparatists, the heirs of Herder, play in the current state of affairs? Franco Moretti, one of the main promulgators of the bad idea that comparative literature should strive for the sanitized objectivity of a science, gets it right when he writes that our job is to be a "thorn in the side" of literary studies, a permanent reminder that there is another way of doing critical work.[25] Insofar as the will to theory—in the sense of an attempt to circumvent our cultural embeddedness and ascend to a standpoint from which trans-local and atemporal entities can come into view—is once again on the rise, our job is to remind our peers that theory is just one more cultural expression among others. It is neither a metalanguage nor an escape hatch from temporality. Theories are just as much objects of cultural-historical comparison as the works they are used to analyze.

Ultimately, comparative literature is an institutionalized form of curiosity about how other cultures and languages imaginatively take up their worlds. We place the stories and concepts that different cultures have woven about themselves side by side—not in order to subsume them in a theoretical scheme that allegedly undergirds them, but in order to reveal unsuspected

23 Quoted in F. M. Barnard, *Herder on Nationality, Humanity, and History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 135.

24 Peter Boxall, *The Value of the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 2.

25 Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review,* no. 1 (January–February 2000): 68.

convergences and divergences, trace lines of influence and dialogue, or show how tropes and ideas travel down the centuries and are put to different uses in different places and times. We present the works we study not as "instantiations" or "manifestations" of some general law—be it aesthetic or moral—but as transient testimonies to the inexhaustible range and plasticity of human expression. The irreducibility of our subject matter is the point. Just look at this kaleidoscope, we say with Herder, isn't it incredible! A