

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803)

Johann Gottfried Herder. Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) was an influential German philosopher, memoirist, social critic, and early stage cultural anthropologist, who contributed deeply to the German Enlightenment, to the movement of *Sturm und Drang* (*Storm and Stress*; the pre-Romantic move toward a freeing of emotions on the stage and in writing: 1760's-1780's), and to Weimar Classicism, which became the prevailing literary development of the German late eighteenth century, centered around Goethe, and was already merging into Romanticism.

Herder's Life. Herder was born in Mohrungen, Prussia, and was brought up in an impoverished household, his father a preacher. Extremely studious, as well as hard worked, Herder learned and earned his way to the not distant University of Koenigsberg, hoping to study medicine. As it turned out he came under powerful influences: the lectures of Immanuel Kant, who was drafting the early stages of his culture shaking 'idealism,' and Johann Georg Hamann, a friend and adviser, who led Herder to read and admire Shakespeare. Already from these influences traces of the Herderian world view become visible. From Shakespeare Herder would go on to discover the powerful nation-uniting force of a great poet, who above all formed and formulated the language of his culture, while from Kant, we sense, Herder deepened his instinctual sense that sense life—the daily empirical life of 'ordinary men and women'—is closely allied to their conceptual ideologies and spiritual achievements.

Herder's career develops. In 1764 Herder became a pastor and teacher in Riga, from which, after five years of work, he retired to take a sea voyage to Nantes, in France, and on to Paris. (The account of this trip, *Journal of my Journey in the Year 1769*, is one of his typically brilliant accounts of life as he experienced it—a blend of comparative literature and linguistics, anthropology, and folk nationalism.) By 1770 Herder moved on to Strassbourg, where by great luck he met the young Goethe, with whom he exchanged heady innovative ideas that would lead both men into the *Sturm und Drang* movement. By the mid 1770's Herder would join Goethe, who had helped Herder find a job in Weimar, and with others they worked into writings that constitute the Weimar classicism which was not much later to slip over into the Romanticism of the early 19th century.

Herder and German Folk Culture. While Herder was extremely sensitive to the spirit of his time, certain ideas pervade his thinking from beginning to end, and work their way into his numerous writings, of which we might say, today, that they do not peak in any masterwork but contribute consistently, for more than thirty years, to building a national culture for Germany. His early *Fragments on Recent German Literature*, 1766-67, is a creative diatribe against what Herder considers the coldness of French neoclassicism, with its Latinate base; and a plea for a German literature based on German folk and literary traditions. His *On German Ways and Art* (1773) is a eulogy of Shakespeare, who caught the spirit of his own age, and in whose example Germans can read the potential they have in their own cultural traditions for the making of the greatest literature. *Volklieder, Folksongs* (1778-79) is a collection of 182 folksongs from many different cultures, much of the work translated by Herder, and evidence of the creative power residing with the Volk. Herder's *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1784-1791) concentrate his many notions of the evolution of mankind toward Humanity, a gradual process through which all nations and peoples, in their different ways, contribute to the making of a worthy human race.

Reading

Primary Source Reading

Herder: Selected Writings on Aesthetics, ed. G. Moore, 2006.

Secondary Source Reading.

Herder: *Philosophical Writings*, ed. M.N. Forster, 2002.

Further Reading

J.G. Herder on Social and Political Culture ed. F. M. Barnard, first pub. 1969, reprinted 2010.

Original language reading

Kiesel, Helmut; Muench, Paul, *Gesellschaft und literatur im 18. Jahrhundert: Voraussetzungen und Entstehung des literarischen Markts in Deutschland*, 1977.

Suggested paper topics

What seems to you to be the driving center of the many areas of thought in which Herder was prominent? Is he a philosopher, in your opinion, or a nationalist, or a linguist, or an early sociologist? Or is he a thinker who is constantly reforming a new center for himself as he goes along?

Shakespeare plays an important role in Herder's thought. What is that role? Do you see, in Shakespeare's writing, the massive power that Herder is drawn to? Can you see that power in Hamlet, which was the first play of Shakespeare Herder read in English—in his schooldays, under the tutelage of his friend, Hamann. Can you see why Herder preferred Shakespeare to French neoclassicism, and referred to the great alexandrine works of 17th century France as 'sewage from the Seine'?

Excerpt http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Johann_Gottfried_Herder

With the greatest possible solicitude avoid authorship. Too early or immoderately employed, it makes the head waste and the heart empty; even were there no other worse consequences. A person, who reads only to print, to all probability reads amiss; and he, who sends away through the pen and the press every thought, the moment it occurs to him, will in a short time have sent all away, and will become a mere journeyman of the printing-office, a compositor.

Calmly take what ill betideth;
Patience wins the crown at length:
Rich repayment him abideth
Who endures in quiet strength.
Brave the tamer of the lion;
Brave whom conquered kingdoms praise;
Bravest he who rules his passions,
Who his own impatience sways.

Every one loves his country, his manners, his language, his wife, his children; not because they are the best in the World, but because they are absolutely his own, and he loves himself and his own labours in them.

I am no longer misled, therefore, by the mechanism of revolutions: it is as necessary to our species, as the waves to the stream, that it becomes not a stagnant pool. The genius of humanity blooms in continually renovated youth.

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Air, fire, water and the earth evolve out of the spiritual and material staminibus in periodic cycles of time. Diverse connections of water, air, and light precede the emergence of the seed of the simplest plant, for instance moss. Many plants had to come into being, then die away before an animal emerged.

Questions:

What is Herder's view of language, and in what sense does he see language as the center of the human personality?

Herder is forever exhorting nations and people to realize their natural energies and geniuses, and not to rely on the dull structures of the past. Does he seem to be exhorting himself at the same time? What kind of self-image does Herder carry with him?

Does Herder evaluate himself, as he vents his ideas? He thinks of the Germans as dull and complacent--so will Nietzsche think, ahead--and of the French as light headed and shallow, but what does he think of himself?