

KRISTIN GJESDAL

## HEGEL AND HERDER ON ART, HISTORY, AND REASON

THE INTRODUCTION OF A historical perspective in aesthetics is usually traced back to Hegel's 1820 lectures on fine art. Given at the University of Berlin, these lectures were amongst Hegel's most successful and best attended.<sup>1</sup> By then a recognized intellectual figure, Hegel sets out to salvage art from its subjectivization in Kantian and romantic aesthetics, but ends up declaring that art, considered in its highest vocation, is a thing of the past. This judgment on art—that its greatness is a thing of the past—follows from Hegel's attempt to combine a notion of art's historicity with a conception of its absolute essence. Hegel, however, was not the first to think systematically about the historicity of art. For this aspect of art—and, indeed, of reason too—was explored philosophically a good sixty years before Hegel's Berlin lectures by a young and aspiring student of Kant's, namely Johann Gottfried Herder. In a series of essays and fragments, Herder develops an advanced and elaborate alternative to Hegel's conception, a fundamentally non-essentialist approach to art, history, and reason.

Over the past twenty years or so, Hegel's attempt to combine an essentialist and an historicist approach to art has been revitalized, with increasing force and sophistication, by Arthur Danto.<sup>2</sup> The attempts to rehabilitate Herder's aesthetics, however, have been few and far between.<sup>3</sup> This is the aim of the present essay, which seeks to contrast the young Herder's non-essentialist understanding of the historicity of art with Hegel's essentialist views on the artwork's historicity, pleading for a rehabilitation of the former.<sup>4</sup> I approach this task from three different directions. First, I offer a brief account of Herder's and Hegel's views on reason, history, and art. Second, I look closer at their conceptions of classical tragedy and sculpture, which, due to Winckelmann's studies,

were perceived at the time as the gateway to a historically sensitive conception of culture as such. Finally, I round off by looking at some of the hermeneutic implications of Herder's non-essentialist standpoint.

## I

According to Hegel, a phenomenologically mature and accountable philosophy is distinguished by its readiness to reflect on its own, historical presuppositions. It must acknowledge the critical commitments of modern thinking, but also take into account how these commitments are the result of spirit's laborious journey through history. Only by combining the perspective of modernity with the resources of tradition may philosophy inhabit a place where systematicity and historicity concur. Reality may now be exhausted in the form of a speculative logic. This, according to Hegel, is the end of history, but as the end of history, it is also the dawn of a new era, that of free and self-determining spirit.

Hegel's notion of the end of history testifies to a formidable optimism about the power of critical thought. In modernity, Hegel claims, art and religion no longer emerge as adequate media of self-reflection. It is philosophy that has taken on this task. Considered from the standpoint of modernity, religion and art are no longer appropriate forms of expression; now only the conceptual optics of philosophy adequately reflects our deepest truths and values.<sup>5</sup>

Artistically speaking, this moment may well emerge as a loss. For even though Hegel never claims that art, as such, will no longer be produced,<sup>6</sup> he reckons it will not be produced in the same spirit as before. No longer expressive of a shared, ethical and political commitment, art is not brought forth by necessity. Intellectually speaking, however, the end of art triggers a different response. Not only does the end of art represent another step towards the conceptual self-determination of spirit. It also follows that only when a phenomenon such as art has finally fulfilled its historical possibilities can it be brought to philosophical clarity about itself. Only after art can we know conceptually what art is. Aesthetics can only begin at the point when art, considered in its highest vocation, no longer holds a historical future.

## II

As a young and romantically minded theology student in Tübingen, Hegel had joined forces with Schelling and Hölderlin in order to revive

the Platonic unity of truth, goodness, and beauty. The highest act of reason, it was claimed, “is an aesthetic act”<sup>7</sup> and philosophy of spirit is “an aesthetic philosophy” (“The Oldest System-Program,” p. 155). Within the context of Hegel’s philosophy, the call for an aestheticized reason did not last for long. Fifteen years later, around the period of writing the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel finds the aestheticization of reason incompatible with the aims of philosophy proper. Nonetheless, the idea of a harmonic unity of the true and the beautiful remains at the heart of his philosophy of art.

Artistic beauty is for the Hegel of the Berlin lectures “a specific way of expressing and representing the true” (*LFA*, p. 91). Stronger still, art has truth “as its proper subject-matter” (*LFA*, p. 102). Art is an expression of the true in a sensuous form (*LFA*, p. 38). Being both sensuous and truth-oriented, art stands out as “the middle term between pure thought and what is merely external, sensuous, and transient, between nature and finite reality and the infinite freedom of conceptual thinking” (*LFA*, p. 8). As such, there is a relation, Hegel claims, between art and religion. Religion, for Hegel, is not the kind of emotional *salto mortale* that it had been for Jacobi, and Hamann and his followers, but “the place where a people defines for itself what it holds to be true.”<sup>8</sup> Sensuously expressing this process of self-definition, art is related to religion, not just as a matter of historical contingency, but on a much deeper and more fundamental level. This is reflected in Hegel’s turn to the example of classical art.

### III

For Hegel, the classical is an aesthetic paradigm that expresses itself in a particular, historical epoch. In this sense, classical art is contrasted with symbolic (Oriental) and romantic (modern) art. Roughly speaking, classical art is the art of the ancient Greeks. Greek art, Hegel claims, provided society with an ethical, political, and religious standard, and was “the highest form in which the people represented the gods to themselves and gave themselves some awareness of truth” (*LFA*, p. 102). This was not only the case in the weak sense that the artist lent voice to a sentiment that was already there. Rather, according to Hegel, it was the artist who “gave the nation a definite idea of the behaviour, life, and effectiveness of the Divine, or, in other words, the definitive content of religion” (*LFA*, p. 102, emphasis added).

Ancient Greek religion, Hegel argues, was fundamentally different

from Christianity. Christianity, for a start, is predicated on a split between mind and body. The ancient Greeks, by contrast, knew no such division. In their view, spirit could be given an adequate sensuous expression; indeed, the body was spirit, spirit made real and manifest. The Greek gods emerged as embodied, as members of a heavenly assemblage that would, from time to time, descend to earth and take part in matters more or less mundane. However, the divinity of the Greek gods was never in question. Theirs was an individuality of a more perfect, more accomplished order than the individuality of human beings. Freed from the burden of time, the gods presented the most proportionate forms. Here there was no conflict between inner and outer. Spirit and sensuous shine were indistinguishable.

This harmony, so crucial to early Greek religion, begs aesthetic expression—not just contingently, but necessarily, in terms of its essence. But not only does the harmony of inner and outer, spirit and body, demand aesthetic expression. There is also a mutual relationship between the needs of Greek religion and the needs of Greek art. Just as Greek religion needs art, so Greek art needs religion. The balance of form and content, of “free spirituality as determinate individuality,” is the essence of classical art (*LFA*, p. 435).

However, for Hegel, classical art is not an indivisible type or category but consists of different genres and modes of expression, such as architecture, poetry, drama, dance, pantomime, and pottery. Moreover, classical art undergoes significant historical changes. Reflecting on this development, Hegel is keen to uncover its peak. Greek sculpture, he maintains, is the paradigmatic case of classical art. In lending a fully adequate sensuous expression to the absolutes of its culture, classical sculpture displays the speculative essence of Greek art. In classical sculpture, spirit finds itself in perfect unity with its expression. The sculpture *is*, emphatically, its own meaning—it “expresses and means itself alone” (*LFA*, p. 431). At this point, classic art ceases to be a period amongst others and becomes the incarnation of the idea of art as such. Never was art more perfect, nor would it ever be. Greek sculpture is the form through which art realizes its utmost possibilities, exhibiting “what true art is in its essential nature” (*LFA*, p. 427). This line of argument, following from Hegel’s attempt to combine an essentialist notion of art with a focus on its historical being, is exactly the kind of thinking that the young Herder is so keen to avoid.

## IV

Publishing his first philosophical texts about forty years prior to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the young Herder could not have known the grand Hegelian synthesis of history and reason. Yet Herder repeatedly turns his attention to the relationship between reason and historicity. Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to suggest that this is the focal point of both his early and his later philosophy. Like Hegel, Herder sees reason and history as closely related.<sup>9</sup> But unlike Hegel, Herder does not inscribe this unity into a model whose ultimate justification rests with the idea that truth is in the whole of the historical process. As it is, nothing would strike Herder as a graver and more severe error than the attempt to capture the historicity of reason as a continuous narrative of spirit's way towards infinite self-understanding.

Just as the historicity of reason stands out amongst the young Herder's philosophical concerns, so, too, does the relation between philosophy and art. In Herder's view, art is the activity in which human spirit gains its most adequate articulation, and in which its various aspects merge in a harmonic and well-balanced whole. Furthermore, it is art and culture that, clearer than any other areas, bring to the fore the historicity of human life. However, on Herder's understanding, art and reason do not constitute successive steps of spirit's way towards enlightenment and self-determination. Reason can never adopt the tasks and commitments of art. Nor can art, as the Jena romantics were later to suggest, take over the tasks of reason. Art and philosophy obey different principles of rationality.

In Herder's view, this holds true for our philosophical conception of art as well. Our thinking about art—aesthetics—should not itself be aesthetic. In what is a surprising thought, perhaps, for a thinker who would later be the target of Kant's harsh remarks about the “charlatans” who “speak and decide like a genius even in matters that require the most careful rational investigation,”<sup>10</sup> Herder claims that mixing philosophical aesthetics and aesthetic practice easily ends in “a monstrosity [ein Ungeheuer von Ästhetik].”<sup>11</sup>

Nonetheless, Herder often makes use of literary forms such as the essay and the fragment. In doing so, he does not try to aestheticize philosophical reason, but to sensitize his mode of philosophizing to the subject area he is dealing with. In its most inclusive dispensation, the subject of philosophy is nothing less than the realm of human culture at large. The development of culture, however, cannot be rendered

in a seamless system of subsumptive definitions. It is an area that is irretrievably marked by detours, breaks, and leaps. Within the field of historical research, Herder warns us, “every *general image*, every *general concept*, is only an *abstraction*.”<sup>12</sup> Reflecting the rejection of large-scale generalizations, forms such as the fragment and the essay stand out as particularly suited to accommodate the concerns of philosophy.

In the 1760s and 70s, this was not a fashionable claim. History, as the eighteenth century knew it, was, in Herder’s wording, presented as a system, as “the entire coordination of many events in terms of a plan, with a purpose.”<sup>13</sup> In one form or another, it was conceived as a teleological enterprise. According to Herder, this notion of history falls beneath the relevant academic standards. Teleological narratives, he finds, have more in common with art and artistic production than with science. The teleologically minded historian assumes the role of the painter, of the artistic genius, rather than the scientist.

Offering a grand, unitary system, the teleologically minded historian deduces a whole in terms of which the parts gain meaning. Like the *Bildungs*-novel, so favored in Herder’s time, history is presented with a beginning, a middle, and an end to round it off nicely. No threads or traces are left unaccounted for. On reaching the age of maturity and education, the hero of the *Bildungs*-novel—or history itself—may reflect on the ultimate purpose of his wanderings. Nothing appears to have been contingent; nothing appears to have happened in vain.

In historiography, this is the type of reflection—always after the fact—that Hegel captures with the image of the Owl of Minerva. However, if one follows Herder’s line of reasoning, the Owl of Minerva, lifting its wings at dusk, does not always see things clearly. History provides no overreaching, narrative unity. Unlike a novel, a portrait, or a landscape painting, it cannot be finished, framed, and displayed for public veneration. History is marked by “leaps and gaps and sudden transitions.”<sup>14</sup> The past does not derive its meaning from the present. Nor can historical events and manifestations be understood (primarily) in terms of a continuous tradition retrieved, as it tends to be, from the historian’s own point of view. In Herder’s opinion, history should never be constructed as a teleological narrative that culminates in the epistemic pale of our own time. Historical events must be understood in terms of their own context. The whole is never more real or truer than its individual parts.

On the level of parts and details, our understanding of past periods is always subject to revision and improvement. A total overview of history

is beyond the reach of finite reason. New facts may always be unearthed, new interpretations should never be ruled out. In Herder's view, there simply is no such thing as absolute spirit. Historical work is endless; it is the work of an academic Sisyphus figure.

This, and not, as Kant suggests, some more or less contingent aesthetic liking, is the reason why Herder turns to the essay and the fragment. Herder, in other words, retains these non-linear forms of philosophizing in order to distinguish between art and (historical) science. The aesthetization of reason, he suggests, is not something that necessarily follows when we deviate from the predictable rules of deductive logic, but rather when we, spellbound by the beauty of all-encompassing systems, attribute to history a teleological unity that history itself does not possess.

## V

In the 1760s and 70s, Herder is still preoccupied with his philosophy of art, the *Critical Forests*, as he calls it. Anticipating Hegel, Herder at the time holds art to be historical through and through. But unlike Hegel, Herder does not think of art in terms of one universal definition that gets articulated more and more adequately throughout the ages. Artworks can never be exhausted in terms of general definitions. Strictly speaking, they cannot be compared. Every work puts up its own, immanent standard of evaluation. Every work calls out for its own exemplary criticism. And sometimes, as if a matter of luck, the call is heeded. Aristotle's defense of Sophocles is one example that Herder brings up. Another is the way in which Apollo is approached by Winckelmann, or Raphael by Mengs. Milton, Herder suggests, gets his most adequate interpretation in Addison, and the greatness of Shakespearean tragedy is spelled out by Henry Home (*Kritische Wälder*, p. 263). In all these cases, the work is understood in its own right, in accordance with its individuality as well as its genre and medium. (Herder does not distinguish the two but uses the German term *Gattung*.)

This, again, is a position that differs from that of Hegel. In Hegel's aesthetics, each genre or art-form—architecture, sculpture, painting, music, and poetry—is speculatively connected to a given historical period. Herder, by contrast, stresses that the desire to synthesize singular works into a large, teleological narrative can only be redeemed at the cost of suppressing their particularity. "If our systematic philosophers (. . .) are *Linnaeuses* who stubbornly stratify and classify," claims Herder, "then

there should be made to accompany them an unsystematic head who, like *Buffon*, stubbornly disrupts their classes and dissects individuals.”<sup>15</sup> No work should be subsumed to universal categories. Rather, the work of art must be regarded as, potentially, creating its own genre. It is the work itself that erects the adequate measures for its reception.

Yet the fact that we, as historical beings, may not legitimately marshal a final, universal definition of art does not mean that we are completely left in the dark regarding the question as to what art in general is. Nor does it mean that we should renounce the attempt to expound this knowledge philosophically. The idea of a universal definition should not be thrown overboard too hastily, Herder recommends, but be held up as a “regulative ideal,” as that towards which our thinking about art—our historically informed aesthetics—ought to strive. Hegel, we have seen, assumes that the beginning of philosophical aesthetics is made possible by the end of (great) art. Herder, by contrast, would find such a thought the product of a painterly mind, one to which history itself emerges as an artwork. Great art is not something that comes to an end. Or, to put it differently, art, in Herder’s account, never was great in the sense intended by Hegel. It never was part of a progressive, historical process paving the way towards total conceptual clarity. Every work alters our understanding of art. If art dies, then this happens all the time. The death of art is no grand finale, but a perpetual ending, following from its historicity. There is no absolute point of culmination from which the meaning of art—through the reflections of absolute spirit—may, once and for all, be retrieved. Grasping the meaning of art is a task we continuously confront; a task that begs careful, empirical examination of the particular works with which tradition has left us.

## VI

Herder’s emphasis on the particularity of the work, his call for an aesthetics that starts “not at the top, but from below,”<sup>16</sup> has repercussions for his concrete dealing with particular works and periods. This is particularly clear if one compares Herder’s and Hegel’s understanding of classical sculpture and tragedy. For Hegel, as we have seen, the speculative essence of art is read off from Greek sculpture. This is where art is most fully itself. Nonetheless, it is well established that tragedy, and above all the work of Sophocles, is more in tune with Hegel’s philosophical and aesthetic sensibilities than sculpture is. In the *Phenomenology*, for example, *Antigone* figures as the heroine of the Greek ethos of family and care,

and in the *Aesthetics* Hegel famously declares *Antigone* to be the most magnificent work of art ever to have been produced (*LFA*, p. 1218). Sophocles, in Hegel's view, represents the epitome of Greek tragedy. In his work, the tragic protagonists identify themselves completely with a higher, ethical-political vocation. This identification is so strong that his characters transcend the theatrical. They have, in Hegel's words, "risen to become, as it were, works of sculpture" (*LFA*, p. 1195). And if sculpture, for Hegel (but not for Herder), displays the essence of art as art, then the Sophoclean heroes, as a result of their statuesque appearance, may at least borrow some from this grandeur.

Hegel defines tragedy as the objectification of action. The tragic outlook is generated by the conflict between the different principles by which the action is justified. As the devoted niece, Antigone is obliged to show loyalty to her uncle (and the laws of the polis) as well as her brother. The same is true of Creon. Had he been like most other uncles, Creon would have cared for Antigone's concerns whilst still respecting the legal imperatives of the state. Yet the tragic moment cannot be traced back to the conflicting obligations of the devoted niece and the loving uncle. It is a struggle between the different substantial principles that the characters embody, and with which they identify. The justification of the individual actions lies, as Hegel puts it, "*in them* [the characters] *essentially*" (*LFA*, p. 1212, emphasis added). Antigone would not have been a tragic heroine had she not identified with the particular, with the love relations of the beautiful *Sittlichkeit* as opposed to the decreed commands of the city.

The struggle between the different orientations represents a breaking up of the harmonious unity of the city-state. According to Hegel, it is this struggle that eventually makes Greek spirit take refuge in the realm of subjectivity. In its latest period, ancient Greek spirit turns towards itself, thus anticipating the onset of modernity and the rise of romantic art. Reflecting this predicament, tragedy, in both its Sophoclean and Euripidean form, is at the same time the most mature and reflective expression of Greek culture, *and* the art-form that marks the point at which this culture comes to an end.

To the extent that this argument structures Hegel's understanding of ancient Greek art, tragedy becomes a "symptom." It is an art-form that has lost the sovereign features of Greek sculpture, but not yet gained its adequate articulation in the romantic art of interiority and inwardness. Its relevance for us moderns consists in the fact that this is the point at which the deeper, cultural conflicts of our era are brought to an early,

almost premature articulation, having not yet received the form that expresses these experiences in a genuinely modern manner. Tragedy is less perfect than Greek sculpture, yet a form that somehow comes to mean more to us moderns, living, as we do, in a period in which art is about to lose (or has already lost) its status as the most adequate way in which the common spirit of our society gets mediated and brought to reflective consciousness.

Herder shares Hegel's enthusiasm for Greek tragedy. Sophocles, he writes, was one of the playwrights who "created the beauty of expression for a language that did not yet possess developed prose."<sup>17</sup> His work, he continues, is "a masterpiece of the human spirit, the summit of [the] poetry which Aristotle honours so highly . . . and [which] we cannot admire deeply enough."<sup>18</sup> Herder also has a high opinion of Greek sculpture. He does not, however, hypostatize it as the ideal of Greek art as such. Sculpture and tragedy are different modes of expression, and neither one is more valuable or relevant than the other.<sup>19</sup>

This position saves Herder from the potential conflict that Hegel finds himself thrown into by defining sculpture as the embodiment of art as such while simultaneously favoring *Antigone* as the most accomplished artwork. The difference between Herder and Hegel is, in other words, not only that Herder does not turn Greek art into the ideal of art as such, but also that he takes no art-form to be the privileged or paradigmatic expression within the boundaries of Greek culture. There are no normative hierarchies among the periods, nor among the aesthetic forms of expression within a given, historical paradigm. No type of art manifests the essence of art as such, and to perceive tragedy as less perfect an art-form than sculpture (yet as more attuned to modern spirit) would simply not be an option for Herder. The truth of historical processes does not, as Hegel would have it, reside in the totality of historical unfolding, but in the particular work, as experienced within its local context.

## VII

Honoring Greek art and culture, both Herder and Hegel were heavily influenced by Winckelmann, whose talents as a historian were commonly acknowledged by the critical audience at the time. Towards the end of the 18th century, Winckelmann was seen as *the* art-historical authority, one of the few scholars who, in Goethe's words, had the strength "to reject or oppose or scorn with impunity the great philo-

sophical movement initiated by Kant.”<sup>20</sup> This rejection was based on Winckelmann’s new approach to art. Like classicists such as Christian Gottsched, Winckelmann would be prepared to go to virtually any length in order to defend the normative authority of Greek aesthetics. Yet his arguments were not merely abstract. Unlike many other classicists at the time, Winckelmann supported his claims by meticulous, empirical examination of the relevant works. Furthermore, Winckelmann was not, as Vasari had been, interested in the lives of the great artists, but in their works. It is in this sense that he emerges as the first genuinely modern historian of art.

Hegel’s admiration of Winckelmann is palpable. Although he would never promote a simple imitation of the Greeks, he adopts more from Winckelmann than the latter’s descriptive account of a given body of works. More or less uncritically, Hegel makes use of Winckelmann’s idea that modern agents, reflecting on the nature of art, have some kind of privileged access, philosophically and aesthetically, to this period. Not only does Greek art appear comprehensible to us, but it is only now, in Hegel’s (and Winckelmann’s) own time, that Greek art gains its full philosophical significance as presenting us with the speculative essence of art as such.

Herder shows at least as much respect for Winckelmann as Hegel does. Winckelmann, he claims, is simply the “best historian of the art of antiquity.”<sup>21</sup> Yet Herder is worried by Winckelmann’s notion of history as a doctrinal structure (*Lehrgebäude*),<sup>22</sup> a notion that he traces back to the ancient Greeks. Confronting this understanding of history, Herder raises two questions. First, he asks whether history can at all be thought of in systematic terms, and second, whether this notion has anything at all to do with the work of the ancient historians. It is no surprise that the answers he offers are both negative.

History, Herder explains, is the “narration of complicated occurrences [*Begebenheiten*] or of simple productions, whether of data or of facts” (“Older Critical Forestlet,” p. 257). No such narration may give rise to a doctrinal whole.<sup>23</sup> As the Greek historians realized, this is neither possible, nor desirable. Look for instance at Herodotus, Herder proposes. Herodotus’ history-writing provides no systematic whole, but is full of “episodes and transitions” (“Older Critical Forestlet,” p. 261). This does not mean that it lacks unity. Rather, it is held together by a rhapsodic unity, a unity that permits gaps and fragmentation. There is—and yet another time Herder points to the art of painting—no final frame or paragon here (“Older Critical Forestlet,” p. 262). Instead we encounter

an open-ended historical mentality, one that, always informed by empirical studies, remains susceptible to changes and revision.

Tracing the legacy of a non-doctrinal science of history back to the ancient Greeks, Herder offers an indirect, yet efficient critique of Winckelmann. Precisely because he is blinded by the “painterly” and wants to erect a grand theoretical structure, does Winckelmann miss out on the strength of the ancient Greek historians. In order to reap the full benefits of Winckelmann’s procedure, we ought, therefore, to be more thorough than Winckelmann himself: stricter in our approach to the empirical material, more sensitive to the uniqueness of the material with which we deal.

Like all history the history of classical art must be empirically and not speculatively based. This implies awareness of the distance between modern society and that of the ancient Greeks. Greek art, Herder claims, is not something that can be directly grasped and expounded—doctrinally or speculatively—by a modern mind. Our culture is simply too different from that of the Greeks. Modern society with its “history, traditions, customs, religion, the spirit of the time, of the nation, of emotion, of language—[is] so far from Greece!”<sup>24</sup> Hence Greek sculpture and drama cannot be understood in terms of our point of view. As far as possible, Greek art should be understood in terms of itself. According to Herder, “Anyone who reads [Sophocles] with clear eyes and from the point of view of Sophocles’ own time will . . . realize that everything he says was virtually the opposite of what modern times have been pleased to make of it” (“Shakespeare,” p. 164). To understand Greek culture as Greek, as distinctly different from our own time, is a task we should never renounce.

## VIII

Hegel emphasizes how our self-understanding always involves an understanding of the historical life-form in which we are situated. This also applies the other way around. By definition, our understanding of history, of other periods, involves an element of self-understanding. Herder’s critique of “painterly” historiology might at first seem to fail with regard to this hermeneutic structure of historical work. This, however, is not the case. It is precisely because Herder sees our understanding of other cultures as intrinsically connected to our understanding of ourselves that he promotes a “rhapsodic” rather than a “painterly” notion of history.

For Herder, however, this problem is addressed in terms of an outspokenly political approach. No attitude is more ridiculed in the work of the young Herder than the tendency to think of one's own culture as the center of the world, the apex of truth and normativity. People who are ignorant of history and know only their own age, Herder writes, "are similar to the Chinese who, because they knew no one but themselves, considered their country to be the rectangle of the earth and painted gargoyles and monsters in the corners of this rectangle—a space which was supposed to give portraits of us poor inhabitants of the rest of the world" ("On the Change of Taste," p. 255). Herder criticized every form of cultural *Besserwisserei*, an attitude that goes hand in hand with the idea that a given group of people may harbor that "their times are the best because they live in them and other ages lack the honor of their acquaintance" ("On the Change of Taste," p. 255). Such a view—which is, potentially, the view of the painterly historian—offers no genuine self-understanding, no questioning of the prejudices by which our horizon is shaped and defined. In order to arrive at such a questioning, we ought to see the world from different points of view, allowing the encounter with other ways of thinking to challenge our own horizon.

To be able to see the world from different angles is therefore not a means to the retrieval of a higher—doctrinal or philosophical—synthesis. It is an aim in itself. This is how historical reason expands and improves in the first place; it is the only way in which historical reason can exercise a self-critical, and thus enlightened, attitude: not by focusing on speculative essences, but by tirelessly reminding itself that *this* particular perspective, say that of post-revolutionary Europe, is not the only one.

Yet the gravest error committed by the painterly historian is not to be prejudiced. The real error, which the historian should shy away from at any cost, is to believe that he is unbiased by history, that he has reached a point of perfect perspicuity from which the truth of other cultures may be extracted once and for all. This is the point at which one stops reflecting on one's own prejudices. The philosophical desire for a final truth must therefore never dispense with the openness that characterizes the fine historical mind. The historical mind must be liberal and inclusive. Indeed, to the extent that such a mind can at all be found, it is one that will enrich our work as philosophers.<sup>25</sup>

Cultural tolerance, Herder insists, is not something we may take for granted. It is not something we have, but something we strive for—a task rather than a possession. We cannot but perceive history from our own

horizon or point of view. For this reason, it is necessary, indeed entirely crucial, to try to imagine what other cultures were like, and also what our own culture might look like from their perspective. To conceive of history in terms of a teleological progress is a natural inclination. As such, it is a temptation that Herder is also sure to have felt. How, then, does one overcome such an attitude? If one is a historian, one does so, Herder suggests, by striving to approach foreign cultures not in terms of that which is one's own, but in terms of what is different and often hard, if not impossible, to make sense of. Or if one, like Herder, happens to be a philosopher, one adds to this a reflection on the principles of historical reason and research. This is one of the things that the young Herder aspires to in his early writing on art.

Because this is the place where all aspects of culture merge and fruitfully strengthen one another, the study of art is crucial to our study of reason, Herder claims. This and not his later and, regrettably, more well-known attempt at rehabilitating the idea of a "Volkskunst" is Herder's most significant contribution to aesthetics: a notion of art that allows us to maintain its historicity without thereby embracing the idea that art may be inscribed into a teleological narrative in which it is, finally, surpassed by conceptual reason; a notion of art that emphasizes the hermeneutic importance of relating to that which does not immediately comply with our own, pre-established patterns of understanding. It is at this point, in its non-teleological and non-essentialist approach that Herder's aesthetics makes up a genuine challenge to the Hegelian notion of the end of art, and it is due to this challenge that Herder deserves a renaissance within the theory of art and aesthetics.

TEMPLE UNIVERSITY

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1. Terry Pinkard, *Hegel: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 593.
2. Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art, Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 30f.
3. Two important exceptions would be Robert E. Norton, *Herder's Aesthetics and the European Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) and John Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

4. This, however, does not mean that I am going to deny the obvious parallels between the two philosophers. These parallels have been convincingly pointed out by Taylor. (See Charles Taylor, *Hegel* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975], pp. 13–27.) Nor am I going to claim that Herder was the *only* or even the *first* to address the historicity of art throughout the 1760s and 70s. The aim, rather, is to try to show how Herder in this period articulates, and hence opens up, an argumentative space in which art is understood primarily (but not exclusively) in terms of its historicity. Whether or not Herder was the first to do so, I find less important than the question as to the extent to which his conception may provide us with a systematic alternative to the Hegelian conception of the relation between art, history, and reason.
5. G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, 2 vols., trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 11. Further references to this work will be abbreviated *LFA*.
6. On the contrary, Hegel claims that “we may well hope that art will always rise higher and come to perfection, but the form of art has ceased to be the supreme need of the spirit” (*LFA*, p. 103).
7. “The Oldest System-Program of German Idealism,” in Friedrich Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, trans. and ed. Thomas Pfau (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 155.
8. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 50. For Hegel’s criticism of Hamann, see Otto Pöggeler, *Hegels Kritik der Romantik* (dissertation) (Bonn: Friedrich Wilhelms-Universität, 1965), p. 35.
9. In Herder’s words: “When philosophy is led by history and history is enlivened by philosophy, then it becomes doubly entertaining and useful.” “On the Change of Taste,” Herder, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 255.
10. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), §47, p. 310.
11. J. G. Herder, *Kritische Wälder. Oder Betrachtungen, die Wissenschaft und Kunst des Schönen, Werke in zehn Bänden*, Bd. 2, ed. Gunter E. Grimm (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985), p. 268 (Viertes Wäldchen).
12. “This Too a Philosophy,” *Philosophical Writings*, p. 293.
13. Herder, “Early Leaves of *Critical Groves*,” *On World History*, ed. Hans Adler and Ernest A. Menze, trans. Ernest A. Menze with Michael Palma (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1997), p. 26.
14. “Ossian and the Songs of Ancient Peoples,” in H. B. Nisbet (ed.), *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Winckelmann, Lessing, Hamann, Herder, Schiller, Goethe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 160.
15. “On Thomas Abbt’s Writings,” *Philosophical Writings*, p. 168.
16. “Fragments of a Treatise on the Ode,” *Selected Early Works*, ed. Ernest A. Menze and Karl Menges, trans. Ernest A. Menze with Michael Palma (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), p. 50.

17. "First Collection of Fragments," *Selected Early Works*, p. 122.
18. "Shakespeare," *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism*, p. 162.
19. The recognition of the differences of artistic forms of expression was brought forth as part of Herder's discussion of Lessing's *Laocoon*, in the fourth *Critical Forest*.
20. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, "Winckelmann and his Age," *Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. John Gearey, trans. Ellen and Ernst H. von Nardroff (New York: Suhrkamp, 1986), p. 115.
21. "This Too a Philosophy," *Philosophical Writings*, p. 283.
22. "Older Critical Forestlet," *Philosophical Writings*, p. 257.
23. "Just as it is impossible for a whole body to be perceived, represented on a surface, as it is without projection from a viewpoint, it is equally impossible for the annalist and the writer of memoirs to make a historical doctrinal structure out of a subject, even if it were the most important of subjects, and even if his account of the detail were nothing less than rambling excess." "Older Critical Forestlet," pp. 258f.
24. "Shakespeare," *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism*, p. 167.
25. In Herder's words: "If . . . our philosophers do not yet so frequently attempt this cognition of individual minds [*Geister*], another person has more opportunity and duty for this: the *historian*." "On Thomas Abbt's Writings," p. 168.