

HERDER'S HERMENEUTICS

Through a detailed study of Johann Gottfried Herder's enlightenment thought, especially his philosophy of literature, Kristin Gjesdal offers a new and provocative reading of the historical origins and contemporary challenges of modern hermeneutics. She shows that hermeneutic philosophy grew out of a historical, anthropological, and poetic discourse in the mid-eighteenth century and argues that, as such, it represents a rich, stimulating, and relevant engagement with the potentials and limits of human meaning and understanding. Gjesdal's study broadens our conception of hermeneutic philosophy – the issues it raises and the answers it offers – and underlines the importance of Herder's contribution to the development of this discipline. Her book will be highly valuable for students and scholars working in the fields of hermeneutics, aesthetics, and European philosophy.

KRISTIN GJESDAL is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Temple University. She is author of *Gadamer and the Legacy of German Idealism* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), editor of *Debates in Nineteenth Century Philosophy* (2016), and coeditor of *The Oxford Handbook of German Philosophy in the Nineteenth-Century* (2015) and *The Cambridge Companion to Hermeneutics* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

HERDER'S HERMENEUTICS

History, Poetry, Enlightenment

KRISTIN GJESDAL

Temple University, Philadelphia



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-11286-5 — Herder's Hermeneutics
Kristin Gjesdal
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
4843/24, 2nd Floor, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, Delhi – 110002, India
79 Anson Road, #06-04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.
It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of
education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107112865
DOI: 10.1017/9781316285770

© Kristin Gjesdal 2017

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without the written
permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2017

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-107-11286-5 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of
URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication
and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain,
accurate or appropriate.

What is more worthy and important for human beings than to investigate productions of human forces, the history of human efforts, and the births of our understanding?

Fragments on Recent German Literature (PW 58; W I 608)

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	page ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xiii
Introduction	I
1 The Future of Philosophy	19
I Academic Preliminaries	22
II Philosophical Critique	28
III Independent Thought	32
IV An Anthropological Turn	40
2 Poetry, History, Aesthetics	43
I Historicizing Art	46
II The Historicity of Language	55
III Epistemological Concerns	59
IV The Future of Poetry	65
V The Discourse of Modernity	70
3 Aesthetic Value and Historical Understanding	73
I Taste and Culture	76
II Transitory Beauty	80
III Historical Ignorance	84
IV Aesthetic Education	92
V Independent Thought	100
4 Human Nature and Human Science	102
I Language, Nature, History	104
II Methodological Considerations	110
III Interpretation and Sympathy	113
IV Sympathy and Critique	118
V <i>Bildung</i> to Humanity	124

viii	<i>Contents</i>	
5	Prejudice and Interpretation The Case of Shakespeare	129
	I Art and Individuality	130
	II The Historicity of Art	138
	III Prejudice, Critique, Emancipation	143
	IV Enlightened Hermeneutics	149
6	Critique and <i>Bildung</i>	151
	I Appreciating Ancient Egypt	154
	II Classical Culture Revisited	158
	III Reassessing the Middle Ages	163
	IV Prejudice and Politics	166
	V Enlightening Enlightenment	169
	VI Propaedeutic to History	176
7	Self and Other The Case of Ancient Hebrew Poetry	179
	I Poetry, Culture, Language	181
	II Learning to Read	185
	III Hermeneutic Methodology	191
	IV Poetry and Prejudice	197
	V Hermeneutic Continuations	202
	Conclusion	208
	<i>Bibliography</i>	214
	<i>Index</i>	228

Preface

Over the past few decades, scholars of the eighteenth century have explored the diversity of enlightenment movements. Examinations of the hermeneutic legacy of the enlightenment period, however, are few and far between.¹ The present study represents a step toward filling this gap, though it engages both the Enlightenment (with a capital E) as a distinct, historical period and enlightenment (with a lower-case e) as a philosophical ideal that is significantly broader than the standard, periodic use of the term. In focusing on the early work of Johann Gottfried Herder – a philosopher who contributes to the Enlightenment (as an epoch) as well as to the shaping of enlightenment as a philosophical ideal – I argue that eighteenth-century discussions of poetry, anthropology, history, and the relationship between them give rise to a hermeneutic point of view whose force and relevance should not be overlooked.

As part of the eighteenth century and its scientific, anthropological, poetic, and historical debates, the young Herder develops a philosophy of understanding that avoids the pitfalls of objectivism (in his work, the past is not objectivized, but drawn into the self-understanding of the interpreter), yet remains committed to a critical standard of interpretation and the ideal of understanding a text or symbolic expression within its own historical and cultural context. Further, Herder emphasizes that the field of hermeneutics transcends the interpreter's own tradition and encompasses

¹ Some discussion can be found in Peter Szondi, *Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics*, trans. Martha Woodmansee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); *Einführung in die literarische Hermeneutik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1975); Werner Alexander, *Hermeneutica Generalis. Zur Konzeption und Entwicklung der allgemeinen Verstehenslehre im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: M & P Verlag, 1993); *Unzeitgemäße Hermeneutik. Verstehen und Interpretation im Denken der Aufklärung*, ed. Axel Bühler (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1994); Robert S. Leventhal, *The Disciplines of Interpretation: Lessing, Herder, Schlegel and Hermeneutics in Germany 1750–1800* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994); Thomas Seebohm, *Hermeneutics: Method and Methodology* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2004); Michael N. Forster, *After Herder: Philosophy of Language in the German Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

texts and expressions that emerge from within a wider spectrum of cultures and historical periods. In both cases – when encountering cultural and historical others – the interpreter faces the pull of prejudices and dogmatically held beliefs. Hermeneutics seeks to illuminate and overcome such impediments to understanding. It is in the spirit of hermeneutics that the young Herder launches his program of enlightenment and independent thought. And it is in the spirit of hermeneutics that he raises his emphasis on independent thought to the level of political and ethical discourse, critiquing not only what he sees as the barren formalism of modern philosophy, but also its Eurocentric premises. As it is given shape by Herder, hermeneutics is the operational modus of human understanding within the domain of historically mediated culture; it is critical in its attitude, ethical-political in its aim, and proceeds by way of an unrelenting commitment to humanity. This is a hermeneutic position that emphasizes the need for textual and philological work, yet recognizes a dimension of feeling and sympathy in understanding. And it is a position that, in so doing, reflects on the interaction between Europe and other parts of the world, and the need for intercultural exchange. For Herder, the problem of understanding texts and symbolic expressions (including non-linguistic expressions such as painting and sculpture) is but a special case of the broader challenge of understanding cultural and historical others. Further, Herder views the process of understanding as an opportunity for growth and education – *Bildung* in and through the historical-cultural world.

For Herder, the centrality of hermeneutics, as a practical as well as a theoretical discipline, emerges with particular force and urgency in the modern period. At this point, readers and historians turn to the tradition and realize that past texts, documents, practices, and works of art are no longer expressive of an immediately accessible worldview, that understanding requires interpretation, and that interpretation, in turn, benefits from methodological standards and critical ideals – it requires, in short, reflection on what it is for a culturally and historically situated being to understand its own culture and history as well as to engage expressions from culturally or temporally distant contexts. In this way, hermeneutics is conceived as a crucial dimension of modern philosophy. As it develops in his encounter with poetry, anthropology, and history, Herder's hermeneutics is still ours, and in reflecting on the stakes and challenges of philosophical hermeneutics, we do well in considering the resources and arguments it offers.

Acknowledgments

I owe thanks to a number of individuals and institutions. Michael Forster initially pointed me in the direction of Herder's work and has, since then, been a much-appreciated interlocutor. In Philadelphia, Paul Guyer has been a generous partner in conversations on German eighteenth-century aesthetics. A long-standing aesthetics reading group, with Noel Carroll, Susan Feagin, Richard Eldridge, John Caravallo, Mary Wiseman, and others, has provided a nice point of connection to contemporary debates in philosophy of art and literature. My stay as a Humboldt Fellow in the Department of Philosophy at the Humboldt-Universität, Berlin, was kindly hosted by Rolf-Peter Horstmann. I would like to thank Bjørn Ramberg for his ongoing support and friendship, Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Helge Jordheim for the opportunity to co-organize a series of Herder workshops at the University of Oslo, and Owen Ware, Benjamin Crowe, and Dalia Nassar for good conversations and constructive comments on an earlier version of this manuscript. Yitzhak Melamed offered valuable input on Chapter Seven and Joshua Billing provided helpful feedback as the manuscript approached its final stage. As ever, my love and gratitude go to my husband Espen Hammer, and to our children, Mathias and Stella – I could not have wished for more! I thank the Humboldt Foundation for its generous support, the Department of Philosophy at Temple for providing a supportive work environment, and the University of Oslo for a Professorial Fellowship and an institutional anchoring point in Norway. Two anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press offered perceptive and conscientious feedback on an earlier version of the manuscript. Finally, I wish to thank Hilary Gaskin and Sophie Taylor for working with me on this and other projects.

Over the past years, I have benefited from – and very much enjoyed – invitations to discuss my work in hermeneutics with colleagues and students at the University of Pennsylvania, Universität Bonn, Ludwig Maximilian-Universität, München, Freie-Universität, Berlin, Boston University,

Accademia di studi italo-tedeschi di Merano, the University of Sydney, the National University, Hanoi, the University of Chicago, the American Shakespeare Association, the University of Bergen, the University of Oslo, the University of Aarhus, the New School, the North American Society for Philosophical Hermeneutics, the Graduate Center at the City University of New York, the London Aesthetics Forum, and the State University of New York, Buffalo.

I thank editors and presses for permission to include material from the following articles: “A Not Yet Invented Logic: Herder on *Bildung*, Anthropology, and the Future of Philosophy,” in Klaus Vieweg and Michael Forster (eds.), *Bildung der Moderne* (Tübingen: Francke-Verlag, 2013), 53–69; “Shakespeare’s Hermeneutic Legacy: Herder on Modern Drama and the Challenge of Cultural Prejudice,” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 64, no. 1-2013, 60–71; “Taste, Value, and Historical Understanding: Some Thoughts on Herder’s Philosophy of History,” in Fred Rush (ed.), *Yearbook for German Idealism 2014* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2014), 80–101; “Human Nature and Human Science,” in Anik Waldow and Nigel DeSouza (eds.), *Herder: Philosophy and Anthropology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). In each case, the present chapter represents a heavily reworked and expanded version of my argument.

Abbreviations

Works by Johann Gottfried Herder:

- S *Shakespeare*. Edited and translated by Gregory Moore. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.
- SWA *Selected Writings on Aesthetics*. Edited and translated by Gregory Moore. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- APH *Another Philosophy of History and Selected Political Writings*. Edited and translated by Ioannis D. Evrigenis and Daniel Pellerin. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004.
- PW *Philosophical Writings*. Edited and translated by Michael N. Forster. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- W *Werke in zehn Bänden*. Edited by Martin Bollacher et al. Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985–1998.
- SEW *Selected Early Works, 1764–1767*. Edited by Ernest A. Menze and Karl Menges. Translated by Ernest A. Menze with Michael Palma. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992.
- SPC *J. G. Herder on Social and Political Culture*. Edited and translated by F. M. Barnard. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969.
- SW *Herders sämtliche Werke*. Edited by Bernhard Ludwig Suphan et al. Berlin: Weidmannsche Verlag, 1877.
- SHP *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*. 2 vols. Translated by James Marsh. Burlington: Edward Smith, 1833.
- PHM *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*. Translated by T. Churchill. New York: Bergman Publishers, 1800. This text will be referred to as *Ideas for the Philosophy of History of Humankind*.

Works by others:

- AK Immanuel Kant, *Kants gesammelte Schriften*. Edited by The Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences. Berlin: Georg Reimer [Walter de Gruyter], 1900.
- GS Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*. 26 vols. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1914–2005.
- HW Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Werke in 20 Bänden*. Edited by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970.
- KGA Friedrich Ernest Daniel Schleiermacher, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Edited by Günter Meckenstock et al. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1983.
- KSA Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe*. 15 vols. Edited by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999.
- OC Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*. Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1898.