

Építész a kőfejtőben Architect in the Quarry



Tanulmányok
Dávidházi Péter
hatvanadik születésnapjára

Studies Presented to
Péter Dávidházi
On His Sixtieth Birthday

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A borító Adam Friedrich Oeser *Sokrates meißelt die drei Grazien*
(Szókratész kőbe faragja a három gráciát) című metszete alapján készült.
A metszet Johann Joachim Winckelmann *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der
griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* című értekezésének első,
1755-ös kiadásában jelent meg először.

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STEPHEN PRICKETT

Translating Herder

A Protestant Idea of Tradition

Given the relatively tiny number of British who knew German at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, Johann Gottfried Herder's influence on the English-speaking world was surprisingly pervasive. He was, moreover, one of the very few non-Catholic writers in the eighteenth century not merely to defend the value of 'tradition', but to use the word freely and favourably in his writing.

As one might expect, Coleridge had been one of the first to show an interest in Herder. As early as 1799 we find him writing to his brother-in-law, Robert Southey asking for a copy of Herder's *Ideen*,¹ and two years later discussing with him Herder's views on the Resurrection.² Whatever his sources – and he was also attempting to borrow a copy of the *Ideen* from a friend, William Taylor, at more or less the same time – Coleridge's habit of scribbling extensively in all books that he read (including those borrowed from friends) make it unusually easy to trace

¹ September 30, 1799. *Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. R. Griggs, Oxford: Clarendon, 1956. 1:535.

² As expressed in Herder's *Von der Auferstehung, als Glauben, Geschichte und Lehre*, *Ibid.* Vol. II., 861–862.

his reading. The collected *Marginalia* reveals an extensive reading of Herder, especially of his theological works, by the early 1830s.³

Something of Herder's general reputation in the 1820s is revealed by another of the few English-speakers who could read German at this period, Thomas De Quincey, who casually compares Herder and Coleridge in an essay of 1823 – with the obvious implication that his readers are likely to know both, at least by reputation.⁴ Though De Quincey was not above trying to impress readers with his knowledge of the German scene (he also throws out names of many deeply obscure German 'authorities' and at one point he seems to confuse Friedrich Schlegel with his brother, August) the reference to Herder, like his references to the Schlegel brothers, implies at least some expectation that his readers would be reasonably familiar at least with Herder's name.⁵ Similarly we know from notebook entries that Thomas Carlyle was reading Herder in the early 1820s when he was also at work on his massive translation of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*.⁶ Felicia Hemans (1793–1835), one of the most popular poets of the day, was also reading Herder in German at much the same time – referring approvingly to his

³ *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Marginalia*, 5 vols, ed. George Whalley, London: Routledge; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984, 2:1048 – 1088.

⁴ The article was published in January 1823, although it is mysteriously dated December 24, 1824. 'Letters to a Young Man whose Education has been Neglected', *Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. David MASSON, 14 vols, Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1889-90, 10: 12.

⁵ His own knowledge is not above question. At one point he seems to confuse Friedrich Schlegel with his brother, August. (Ibid. p. 41)

⁶ In 1823 he copied into his notebook two passages from Herder – one on sleep and death from *Zerstreute Blätter*, and the other from the fifth book of the *Ideen*. It seems clear that such jottings were only the tip of the iceberg of Carlyle's reading of Herder. See Hill SHINE, 'Carlyle's Early Writings and Herder's *Ideen*: The Concept of History' = *Booker memorial Studies*, ed. Hill SHINE, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1950, 3-33; René WELLEK, 'Carlyle and the Philosophy of History' = *Confrontations: Studies in the intellectual relations between Germany, England, and the United States during the nineteenth century*, Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965, 89; and Chris R. Vanden BOSSCHE, *Carlyle and the Search for Authority*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991.

translations of *El Cid* (*Der Cid, nach Spanischen Romanzen besungen*) in a note to her *Siege of Valencia*, published in 1823,⁷ and *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* again in *The Forest Sanctuary* (1825).⁸

For those outside the relatively elite circle of those who could read German, a whole chapter of Mme. De Staël's best-seller, *On Germany* (which had been published in London in 1813 both French and English), was devoted to an eulogistic introduction to Herder and his ideas. Meanwhile a steady stream of English translations of Herder's work (some of dubious quality) had been appearing from 1790 onwards, so that by the early 1830s there were perhaps a dozen or so available – some complete, some consisting of selections or extracts, sometimes with obscure titles.⁹

By far Herder's most important early translator is a person (presumably, but not necessarily, a man) called T. O. Churchill, whose translation of Herder's *Ideen*, as *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, was published in 1800, and which was popular enough to be followed by a second edition in 1803. Given his importance in disseminating the ideas of a leading continental philosopher, remarkably little is known about Churchill. Biographical notes on him in the *Modern Language Review* of 1947 indicate that he was also the author of a *Life of Nelson* (1808) and an English Grammar (1823), but that apart from that, and a letter to *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1827, nothing else seems to be known about him.¹⁰ It is, of course, possible that 'Churchill' was a pseudonym. He is not listed as the graduate of any university, nor do any contemporaries refer to him, although, since his translations were put out by the radical publisher Joseph Johnson (1738-1809), it is also possible that he was a member of the liberal circle that included Mrs Barbauld, William Blake, Maria Edgeworth, William Godwin, Henry

⁷ "Herder's translation of these romances are remarkable for their spirit and scrupulous fidelity." Felicia HEMANS, *The Siege of Valencia: A Dramatic Poem*, Murray, 1823, 266, n. 5.

⁸ Felicia HEMANS, *The Forest Sanctuary and Other Poems*, Murray, 1825. 106.

⁹ Bayard Quincy MORGAN, *A critical Bibliography of German Literature in Translation 1481-1927*, Second Revised Edition, New York: Scarecrow Press, 1965.

¹⁰ A. GILLES, 'T.O. Churchill, Translator: a Note' = *Modern Language Review* 42 (1947), 491.

Fuseli, Horne Tooke, and Mary Wolstonecraft – possibly the only circle in London at that time where German, and contemporary German ideas, were known and widely discussed, and which was highly receptive to Herder’s thought. But, if so, it is strange that none of them ever mentions someone who had undertaken so major a translation. Whether or not Churchill was also behind an anonymous translation of the first part of Herder’s *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* published in 1801, with the rather strange title of *Oriental Dialogues*,¹¹ or, indeed, a subsequent anonymous translation of the *Treatise on the Origin of Language* (1827) is equally unclear.

The first full English translation of *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* was not published until 1833, fifty years after it had appeared in Germany, and seventy years after the original Latin publication of Lowth’s *Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (1753). The translator was James Marsh (1794–1842), a New England Congregationalist minister, who had been first Professor of Philosophy and then President of the University of Vermont (1826–1833). An Emersonian Transcendentalist, Marsh was a key figure in the introduction of Coleridge’s philosophy to American readers, producing editions of *Aids to Reflection*, *The Friend*, and *The Statesman’s Manual*.¹²

From the first Marsh read Herder through Coleridgean spectacles, and consequently through Lowthian ones as well. The tone of the translation is immediately set in Marsh’s Preface, where he not merely compares Herder to Lowth, suggesting, somewhat surprisingly to modern readers, that Herder is too much influenced by the German Higher Criticism, but then proceeds to summarize Herder’s arguments in words taken almost verbatim from Lowth. To understand Hebrew poetry, Marsh explains, the reader

...must not only be acquainted with the facts of their history [the Hebrews or any foreign people], the modes of life, and the circumstances of every kind, by which their habits of thought and feeling were moulded,

¹¹ *Oriental Dialogues: containing the conversations of Eugenius and Alciphron on the spirit and beauties of the sacred poetry of the Hebrews*, London: printed by A. Strachan for T. Cadell jun. and W. Davies, 1801.

¹² See Anthony J. HARDING, ‘James Marsh as Editor of Coleridge.’ = *Reading Coleridge: Approaches and Applications*, ed. Walter B. Crawford, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1979.

as a mass of antiquarian lore, but must learn to place himself entirely in their *point of view*, and see all these particulars in the relation to each other, and to the observer, which they would then assume. When he has done this, he will be prepared to understand why they thought, and felt, and wrote as they did; and if he have the feeling and inspiration of the poet, he will sympathize with their emotions, and the living spirit of their poetry will be kindled up in his own imagination.¹³

Comparison with the original passage of Lowth reveals almost no changes of substance,¹⁴ but what amounts to a significant shift in viewpoint – perhaps befitting a professor of philosophy struggling to assimilate the eighteenth-century German critical historical revolution, while specifically keeping at bay more disturbing elements of the German Higher Criticism. Thus thinking and feeling as an ancient Hebrew now involves also assimilating ‘a mass of antiquarian lore’ – the addition of such distancing phrases suggesting that the mental effort to bridge the gap to modernity had increased appreciably over the previous seventy years.

Moreover, the places where Herder differs significantly from Lowth in understanding such ‘antiquarian lore’ are likely to be a cause of censure, rather than praise.

That he [Herder] has always apprehended in their true sense the early conceptions of the Hebrews is not to be supposed, nor would any one probably undertake to defend all his views, even of important matters, connected with the early **traditions** of the race. The biblical representations of Paradise, of the garden of Eden, of the temptation and fall of

¹³ Johann Gottfried von Herder, *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, 2 vols. Trans. James Marsh, Burlington: Edward Smith, 1833. Facsim, ed. Naperville, IL: Aleph, 1971, 1: 5.

¹⁴ “He who would perceive the peculiar and interior elegancies of the Hebrew poetry, must imagine himself exactly situated as the persons for whom it was written, or even as the writers themselves; he is to feel them as a Hebrew [...] nor is it enough to be acquainted with the language of this people, their manners, discipline, rites and ceremonies; we must even investigate their inmost sentiments, the manner and connexion of their thoughts; in one word, we must see all things with their eyes, estimate all things by their opinion: we must endeavour as much as possible to read Hebrew as the Hebrews would have read it.” Robert LOWTH, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, trs. G. Gregory, 1787, vol. 1, 113; 114. See above.

Adam, of the Cherubim, of the deluge, and of what Herder denominates mythological representations generally, have ever furnished an ample field of speculation, in which every critic feels at liberty to form his own opinions, and for the most part to interpret by his own rules.¹⁵

Modern readers of Herder are often puzzled by his attitude to what are here called 'mythological representations', in that he often seems curiously literalist in his approach to Old Testament material – particularly from Genesis – that the higher critics such as Eichhorn, Lessing or Reimarus, had already dismissed as myth, fantasy, or even priest-craft. What is interesting here is that Marsh skilfully evades direct confrontation with the Higher Criticism by suggesting that the interpretation of such passages has always been a matter of personal taste. This is, to say the least, disingenuous: the fact that critics from Catholics like Geddes to extreme deists like Tom Paine had questioned or ridiculed such passages did not mean that they were open territory for every personal speculation.¹⁶

What is even more interesting is the role played by that innocent-seeming word 'traditions' in this evasion. At first sight it appears no different from Coleridge's or any common eighteenth-century English usage. It stands for oral, and therefore probably unreliably transmitted sources. But closer examination raises some curious problems. Hasn't Marsh's whole purpose in this delicately phrased editorial been to damp down speculation over stories concerning the Garden of Eden, the Fall, or the Deluge, not to suggest their inherent unreliability?

Later uses of the word may clarify Marsh's dilemma, if not his intentions. Here is his translation of Herder's own 'Author's Preface' to *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*:

With these, it [Herder's work] must contain also, especially, the **traditions** of the patriarchs, which, as among all nations, so peculiarly among this people, were the source from which were derived all the peculiarities of their modes of thinking, consequently also the genius of their poetry. To set forth these, and unfold them correctly, was here so much the more

¹⁵ Op. Cit. P. 7.

¹⁶ Alexander GEDDES, *The Holy Bible faithfully translated from corrected Texts of the Originals, with various Readings, explanatory Notes and critical Remarks*, Vol. I, 1792; Vol. II, 1797.

necessary, since most **traditions** of this kind have themselves more or less of poetical colouring, and what is worse, are often misapprehended.¹⁷

Here Marsh as a faithful translator is being true to his text. The word 'tradition' follows its Latin root, and means essentially the same in both German and English. Herder, however, while not denying the oral and folk origins of tradition, spells out his national and linguistic ideas by inverting the common associations of the word. Rather than being essentially unreliable, they are, instead, the source of the poetic genius of the race. It is unintelligent literalists who have 'misapprehended' the nature of poetry, and of its traditional roots in the folk culture, and therefore totally failed to understand the language of mythology. So far from being a source of unreliable fact, mythology is the source of ineffable sublimity.

Thus, for Herder, the essential continuity of the Old and New Testaments is not merely (to a Christian) theological, it is also 'enlightening' in a Coleridgean sense, and above all, poetic – and failure to understand this is a not merely a failure of faith but of scholarly scriptural interpretation:

In the Old Testament we find as an aid to this, a rich interchange of history, of figurative representations, of characters, and of scenery, and we see in it the many coloured dawn, the beautiful going forth of the sun in his milder radiance. In the New Testament it stands in the highest heavens, and in meridian splendour, and every one knows which period of the day to the natural eye of sense imparts most life and strength.¹⁸

Seen in this way modern questions of biblical historicity were beside the point. By looking for what is not there, critics were failing to see the glories that *were* there under their noses.

Among the Hebrews, history itself is properly poetry, that is the transmission of narratives, which are related in the present tense, and here too we may discover an advantage derived from the indefiniteness or fluctuation, of the tenses, especially in producing conviction, and rendering what is described, related or announced, more clearly and vividly present to the senses. Is not this in a high degree poetical?¹⁹

¹⁷ Op. Cit. 17.

¹⁸ Ibid. 22.

¹⁹ Ibid. 37.

Marsh's dilemma was as obvious as it was intractable. If tradition could be dismissed as the kind of territory where 'every critick feels at liberty to form his own opinions' [p. 7] then it is difficult *also* to argue that it is nothing less than the source of the poetic genius of the race. Nor does Marsh's final disclaimer clarify the position beyond passing the buck:

... after making due allowances... it will still be felt that the work contains some things irreconcilable with just views, nor would I be understood as subscribing to all the sentiments, which I am herewith exhibiting to the publick.

If it be asked, why do I then exhibit opinions, which I deem erroneous, I can only say, that others, as well as myself, and those in whose judgement I place the highest confidence, have thought it extremely desirable, all things considered, that the work be given to the publick, and my views of duty to my author, as a faithful translator, did not permit me to misrepresent his opinions in any thing of importance.²⁰

The endless commas and sub-clauses of that tortuous sentence give the same message in starker terms: in other words, 'don't blame me'. Yet one doubts if one reader in a thousand (assuming the volume to have so many readers) would have seen that what distinguished Herder, indeed, what makes this volume unique in the English-speaking world of the 1830s, is not what Marsh calls 'the free spirit of Biblical criticism, as exhibited... by Eichhorn and other contemporary German writers', but what amounts to a new and revolutionary use of the idea of tradition itself.

This is a point that needs to be made with some care. At first sight there seems little in Herder's use of the word to distinguish it from other eighteenth-century writers like Lowth or Coleridge, Schleiermacher or Novalis, and much that would seem to set it in opposition to the discreetly demonised Eichhorn. Herder's argument is presented in part 1 by means of a Socratic dialogue between the sceptic Alciphron and his friend the more aesthetically-inclined Euthyphron. In Dialogue 6, for instance, which is clearly the one that gave Marsh so much unease in the passage quoted earlier, Alciphron, while accepting the idea of the Fall as a theological or poetic myth, questions the reality of any such historical event.

²⁰ Ibid. 8.

Had Paradise ever a real existence, or is the whole a poetical **tradition**? Moses clearly represents it as a wide extended and to him unknown fairy land. He places it, too, precisely in those remote regions, where fable has placed everything marvellous, including in its wide compass Colchis and Cashmire with their golden streams, the Phasis and the Oxus, as well as the regions of the Indus and the Euphrates. In this broad land, to which he gives the name of Eden, or the land of delight, he represents God as planting a garden. Where, then, in a country so extensive was the garden situated? Where are the marvellous trees, which grew in it – the tree of life and the tree of knowledge? Have these ever come to maturity? Where are they now, and where stood the Cherubim? All this, I confess, has to me, the appearance of a fable.

To which Euthyphron, Herder's mouthpiece, replies

So it should have; and the purpose, which we are now seeking to accomplish, is to distinguish between fable and truth, that is, between historical fact and the dress in which its is clothed. You have remarked correctly, that Moses, or the **tradition** copied by him, gives the situation of Paradise only within very wide and vague limits, and that the region in which it is placed, is just that fable-land, in which the nations of antiquity placed their finest pictures of all that is visionary and enchanted – the golden fleece, the golden apples, the plant of immortality, &c... But do not all these later marvels show, that there must have been some more simple **tradition**, and some real fact in primeval history, in which they had their origin? There must have been some cause for the singular fact, that the **traditions** of the whole world chance to point towards one and the same region. The human race, which, so far as history and the progress if cultivation enables us to judge, has been gradually spread over the earth, must some where have had a beginning; and where more probably – whether we look at history, or the formation of the earth's surface – than in those very regions, to which these **traditions** direct us? ... Moreover the very indefiniteness, which you speak of in Moses' account of the situation of Paradise, is an evidence of its truth. He would give no more than **tradition** had furnished.²¹

One can see why the faithful translator might have wished to distance himself from this dialogue. Here the apparent defender of biblical truth has seemingly sold the pass to his debating opponent at the outset.

²¹ Ibid. 124–125.

Though this may read like Chateaubriand's defence of the Bible twenty years later, in fact it is much more radical. Eden, the serpent, and the Cherubim may indeed be just the poetical fictions that Eichhorn had surmised, and traditions may similarly be the leaky and imprecise vessels of knowledge that the Enlightenment critics had always supposed them to be, but they are nonetheless unrivalled sources of truth and poetic wisdom.

What Herder has done, in effect, is to re-introduce a very old, and, by this stage, very familiar quality of the tradition debate into his argument. He is not describing tradition as it would have been understood by Bossuet or any other Roman Catholic expositor of the period. It does not consist of the accretion of commentary and extra-canonical assumptions central to the imperial claims of the Vatican. Nor is it the essentially unreliable process of oral transmission treated with such contempt by most contemporary eighteenth-century writers. Neither Burke nor Paine would have recognised it. The claim is that traditions (at least of the Bible) provide a guide both to lost truths – now almost certainly inaccessible to other kinds of investigation – *and*, even more significantly, to the unique sublimity of the poetic traditions of the Hebrews is a reading-back of Herder's own aesthetics into the ancient world. Faced with a contemporary epistemological crisis in Alastair MacIntyre's sense he has, like Cassiodorus before him, sought to re-create from the strands of the past a rope that will lead him both towards a greater understanding of history, and provide a guide for perceiving the present.

There is, of course, a chicken-and-egg quality central to this whole argument. We only come to understand who the ancient Hebrews were by understanding the language and the poetry which formed them, but, naturally, the language and poetry of the Hebrews was in no small measure the result of their unique experiences. Not surprisingly from these premises, the idea of 'history' itself feels the gravitational pull of this idea of tradition. Anticipating – as the German Romantics so often did – arguments that were to be re-presented as original in the twentieth century,²² he sees history as not so much a record of past events as an

²² See Andrew BOWIE, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory: the Philosophy of German Literary Theory*, London: Routledge, 1997.

interpretative narrative of those events, written (like all interpretative narratives) from a particular perspective or viewpoint. There is no such thing as disembodied perception. Just as the French would interpret the wars of the eighteenth century in a different way from the Austrians, the English, or the Prussians, it is natural and entirely proper that the same set of events will be viewed by the Hebrews in one way and, for instance, by the ancient Egyptians in quite another.

In claiming this, Herder, of course, had his own political axe to grind. His concept of 'cultures' (in the plural) was in deliberate opposition to the French, and, to a lesser extent at this stage, the English,²³ who felt that 'civilization' was one and indivisible (and probably best represented by themselves). 'Civilization', as the word came to be used in France from the 1750s stood for an ideal order of human society, involving the arts, learning, and manners. In this sense it was used strictly in the singular; only with vanished societies of the past could one speak of 'civilizations'. The connotations, justifying both colonial expansion and European linguistic hegemony, were of the evident superiority of *la civilisation française*. French was the lingua franca throughout Europe: it was the language of diplomacy, of aristocrats and of the royal courts of many states in Germany and even Tsarist Russia. The new meaning of the word, though naturally not with its innate French bias, was then taken up in England.²⁴

²³ The first example of this use of the word in the OED is Boswell's record of Johnson, in 1772, *refusing* to incorporate it in the Fourth Edition of his Dictionary.

²⁴ Almost a century later, Dean Church, in his 1868 lectures on 'The Gifts of Civilization', insists that the word has an essentially moral as well as technical connotation, covering 'all that man does, all that he discovers, all that he becomes, to fit himself most suitably for the life in which he finds himself here.' While the gifts and benefits of Christian civilization, manifestly outweigh those of pagan Rome, the same word nevertheless applies equally to both. By Church's time it had acquired much of its impetus from the way it could be used to differentiate the superior state of the colonizing power from the inferior state of the colonized. For him, India was still in 'a low state of civilization' while Egypt, China, and Japan, though 'singularly ingenious' and 'industrious' have not yet reached a 'high' stage. *Gifts of Civilization*, Macmillan, (New Edn.) 1880, 152.

In contrast, 'culture' (*Kultur*) as used by Herder and his fellow Romantics in defiance of the generalised and global pretensions of the Anglo-French idea of 'civilization' was specific, local, and plural, describing not an ideal order of human society in general, but the distinctive modes of existence of different societies. Defending a national *Kultur* both against the rationalism of the *philosophes* and a Francophile Prussian court, Herder urged that different ways of life were valuable in themselves, and not to be seen as stages of development towards a common goal. Unlike 'civilization', which could be transferred between more advanced and less advanced peoples – preferably by a beneficent imperialism – culture was what truly identified and differentiated a people. Culture came in kinds, not in degrees; in the plural, not the singular. Nor could there be any uncultured peoples, as there were uncivilized ones. 'Only a real misanthrope', Herder once ironically remarked, 'could regard European culture as the universal condition of our species.' Each people had its own appropriate kind of happiness based on the cultural legacy of their ancestral tradition, transmitted in the distinctive concepts of their language, and adapted to their specific life conditions. It is through this tradition, endowed also with the morality of the community and the emotions of the family, that experience is organized, since people do not simply discover the world, they are taught it. Moreover, they experience their world not merely in terms of ideas but values. We cannot speak of reasoning correctly on objective properties known through unmediated sensory perceptions. Seeing is also a function of hearing, a judgement, and in the economy of thought – what Herder once spoke of as 'the family or kinship mode of thought' – reason is invested with feeling and bound to imagination.

One can see both why Marsh finds Herder so important, and also why he is careful to distance himself from some of the implications of his ideas. What is being suggested in the *Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* is nothing less than a new way of reading the past – and any new way of imagining the past will naturally affect the way in which a society thinks about its own time, and how it has reached the present moment. Tradition has, for Herder, become an act of historical imagination. But there is nothing oral or 'primitive' about the imagined past offered by biblical tradition. If it is certainly not the extension of dogma still insisted upon by Rome, neither is it the conventional Protestant source of antiquated

and unreliable fictions. It is, on the contrary, a sophisticated literary and aesthetic form. If God had formed the ancient Hebrews into a literary people, it is because that is how tradition speaks to the modern world.

Two things follow from this – and both were reflected in other new ideas that were making headway across Europe at the turn of the century. The first is the new idea of the 'aesthetic'. First recorded by in English in 1798, with the meaning 'received by the senses', the O.E.D. comments acerbically that the word was 'misapplied in German by Baumgarten, and so used in England since 1830'. In fact, of course, the revolutionary use of the word to mean 'pertaining to the beautiful' by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten is itself far too narrow to catch the way in which by the end of the century it had come to stand for something much closer to 'pertaining to the theory – or theories – of art'.²⁵ In his Third Critique, the *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Kant had attempted to bridge the gap between his two earlier Critiques, of what called 'pure' and 'practical Reason', by means of reflective or aesthetic judgement – the power by which (for instance) we distinguish between the sublime and the beautiful.²⁶ For Kant, these qualities were reflected alike in nature and art, but subsequent philosophers, following Schiller, in *The Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794), tended to see art rather than nature as central to the construction of the human world. For Hegel the Kantian priorities were explicitly reversed: beauty in art actually has higher status than natural beauty.²⁷

Where Kant's influence remained undiminished, however, was in the belief that poetry was somehow the most representative form of this new and very powerful idea of the aesthetic.

Of all the arts poetry (which owes its origins almost entirely to genius and will least be guided by precept or example) maintains the first rank. It expands the mind by setting the imagination at liberty and by offering, within the limits of a given concept, amid the unbounded variety of possible forms accordant therewith, that which unites the presentment

²⁵ See Andrew BOWIE, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: from Kant to Nietzsche*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990.

²⁶ See, for instance, Hazard ADAMS, *Philosophy of the Literary Symbolic*, Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1983, Ch. 2: 'The Kantian Symbolic'.

²⁷ BOWIE 1990, 133.

of this concept with a wealth of thought to which no verbal expression is completely adequate, and so rising aesthetically to ideas.²⁸

For Friedrich Schlegel there was a further attribute of the aesthetic that was of prime importance: it was essentially *mythological*.

...we hear so often that the masses should have a sensuous religion. Not only the masses but also the philosopher needs monotheism of reason of the heart, polytheism of imagination and of art... we must have a new mythology, but this mythology must be in the service of the Ideas, it must become a mythology of *reason*.

Before we make the Ideas aesthetic i.e. mythological, they are of no interest to the people and on the other hand before mythology is reasonable the philosopher must be ashamed of it. Thus enlightened and unenlightened must finally shake hands, mythology must become philosophical and the people reasonable, and philosophy must become mythological in order to make the philosophers sensuous. Then eternal unity will reign among us. Never the despairing gaze, never the blind trembling of the people before its wise men and priests. Only then can we expect the *same* development of all powers, of the individual as well as all individuals. No power will then be suppressed any more, then general freedom and equality of spirits will reign! – A higher spirit sent from heaven must found this new religion among us, it will be the last, greatest work of mankind.²⁹

How much of this huge (and in some ways overbearing) superstructure of ideas was implicit in Herder's *Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* must remain a matter of debate. What is very clear is that his concept of the tradition of Hebrew poetry had opened the way to some of the central tenets of Romanticism, and, crucially, helped to create a 'user-friendly' and receptive climate for the later applications of it by Kant, Hegel, the Schlegels, etc. It was to change radically the whole subsequent theory of literature and the arts. Hegel's assertion that 'in our time' the theory of art is much more important than any actual examples of its practice' was only a reiteration of one of the fundamental tenets of the Jena group.³⁰ Two twentieth-century French historical critics, Philippe

²⁸ KANT, *Critique of Judgement*, trs. J.H. Bernard, N.Y.: Hafner, 1951, 170–171.

²⁹ As quoted and translated in BOWIE 1990, 265–266.

³⁰ *Ästhetik*, ed. Bassenge, Berlin, Weimar 1965. Vol. I, 20. Cited by BOWIE, 135.

Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, in their book, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, attribute to Herder, Kant, Hegel and their successors the whole modern idea of 'literature' as writing charged with an aesthetic value over and above its ostensible subject.³¹

Because it establishes a period in literature and in art, before it comes to represent a sensibility or style (whose 'return' is regularly announced), romanticism is first of all a *theory*. And the *invention* of literature. More precisely, it constitutes the inaugural moment of literature as *production of its own theory* – and of theory that thinks itself as literature. With this gesture, it opens the critical age to which we still belong.³²

Indeed, one of the features that rapidly became common to Romanticism right across Europe at this period is this new concept of 'Literature'. The OED lists this value-added variant as the third, and most modern, meaning of the word, ('of very recent emergence in both France and England'), defining it as 'writing which has a claim to consideration on the ground of beauty of form or emotional effect'. Certainly the idea of what constituted 'literature' was fiercely debated. De Quincey, ever the *enfant terrible*, dismisses the conventional Johnsonian idea of poetry giving knowledge through pleasure as nonsense. Citing Wordsworth, he insists that 'The true antithesis to knowledge, in this case, is not *pleasure*, but *power*. All that is literature seeks to communicate power; all that is not literature, to communicate knowledge.'³³

In Germany the idea of literature was to take on an even higher status than in Britain and France since it could be seen as in some sense *the* mediator of reality. Indeed, it was possible for extreme Kantians to hold that poetic or literary descriptions, as aesthetic constructs, were actually *more* real than direct sense-data, which, in the last resort, have no access at all to things-in-themselves. The distinctive addition made

³¹ Philippe LACOU-LABARTHE and Jean-Luc NANCY, *The Literary Absolute: the Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trs. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester, Albany: State University of N.Y. Press, 1988. xiv.

³² LACOU-LABARTHE – NANCY 1988, xxi-xxii.

³³ Thomas De QUINCEY, 'Letters to a Young Man whose Education has been Neglected' = *Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. David MASSON, A & C Black, 1897, Vol. X.

by the Schlegels and their circle, however, is that it was, or should be, impossible to distinguish between such a theory of literature and its actual practice. This produces in much of the romantic writing of the period a kind of theoretical synaesthesia which links poetry, the novel, philosophy and frequently theology as well. Friedrich Schlegel, in *Athenaeum* Fragment 304, for example, writes:

Philosophy... is the result of two conflicting forces – of poetry and practice. Where these interpenetrate completely and fuse into one, there philosophy comes into being; and when philosophy disintegrates, it becomes mythology or else returns to life. The most sublime philosophy, some few surmise, may once again turn to poetry...

According to this view, it is art, rather than our perceptions of the world around us, that gives access to a reality that is in part our own creation.

This post-Kantian orthodoxy was expanded by Julius Hare, as avowed an admirer of Coleridge and Schleiermacher as Marsh himself, to include the way in which poetry (or poesis in its broader archaic English sense) affects our construction of nature:

The commentator guides and lights us to the altar erected by the author, although it is at the flame upon that altar that he must have kindled his torch. And what are Art and Science, if not a running commentary on Nature? what are poets and philosophers but torch-bearers leading us toward the innermost chambers of God's holy temples, the sensuous and the spiritual world? Books, as Dryden has aptly termed them, are spectacles to read nature. Homer and Aristotle, Shakespeare and Bacon, are the priests who preach and expound the mysteries of the universe: they teach us to decypher and syllable the characters wherewith it is inscribed. Do you not, since you have read Wordsworth, feel a fresh and more thoughtful delight whenever you hear a cuckoo, whenever you see a daisy, whenever you play with a child? Have not Thucydides and Dante assisted you in discovering the tides of feeling and the currents of passion by which events are borne along in the ocean of Time? Can you not discern something more in man, now that you look on him with eyes purged and unsealed by gazing upon Shakespeare and Goethe? From these terrestrial and celestial globes we learn the configuration of the earth and the heavens.³⁴

³⁴ *Guesses at Truth*, 1st. edn. 1827, 80.

The second word to have entered the European lexicon at roughly the same period was 'hermeneutics' – defined by the O.E.D. 'as the art or science of interpretation, especially of scripture.' Though commonly associated in its modern form with Schleiermacher, the word itself goes back (once again, like 'aesthetics') to Baumgarten in the mid-eighteenth century.³⁵ Schleiermacher's hermeneutics stressed both the interpretative gulf between early texts and the modern reader (especially in the case of biblical writings) as well as the subjectivity and open-ended quality of such interpretations.

Between the time of Herder's original publication in 1782–1783 and Marsh's translation in the 1830s much of this philosophic and hermeneutic background was common not merely to the English Romanticism of Coleridge and Hare, but to the New England Transcendentalists, including, of course, Marsh himself, who was steeped in both the German and English sources of these ideas. The implications for any reading of Herder were significant – and, in retrospect, perhaps a little surprising.

It is, for instance, hard to believe that Marsh was not being more than a little disingenuous when he suggests that what he calls Herder's 'mythological representations' are, as it were, an optional extra, for which he, the translator, cannot be held responsible, and which may safely be ignored by readers who wish to do so. As we have seen, Marsh had every reason for knowing perfectly well that Herder's aesthetics were very much of a piece. The stories of the Garden of Eden cannot be read as literal truth, and can only be understood as part of a wider mythological pattern of the Hebrew historical imagination. They are works of art – in much the same way as the mediaeval poem, *The Pearl*, Dante's *Divine Comedy* or Milton's *Paradise Lost* must be read as works of art. Such literalist phrases as Eichhorn's 'pious fictions' do not begin to describe what is going on.³⁶ But by translating Herder,

³⁵ For an extensive account of the evolution of modern hermeneutics see Kurt MUELLER-VOLLMER (ed) *The Hermeneutics Reader*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986.

³⁶ Much more sympathetic is Daniel Wiedner's reading of Herder: 'The 'poetic' is not a given, imposed upon the Bible from the outside; it is constituted in the course of reading... it goes beyond the horizon of his contemporaries: unlike even historical criticism, he does not try to prove that the text is historically accurate. He cares about the force, the performative moment of the text.'

while playing down and distancing himself from the hermeneutical implications of some of Herder's arguments, Marsh was able to keep his fellow Transcendentalists up to date on German theology and aesthetics, while at the same time also keeping on board many New England readers for whom biblical literalism was not so much a conscious article of belief, as an unquestioned basis of their faith.

In so doing, however, Marsh had also brought back the idea of tradition into mainstream Protestant thought in the English-speaking world. Moreover, the intervening fifty years between Herder's original German publication and Marsh's translation had clarified and developed many of the ideas that were only embryonic in the 1780s, illustrating with peculiar clarity the basic hermeneutic principle that any writing can only be understood within the social and historical matrix from which it came. In the interval the Higher Criticism had developed enormously. The French Revolution had polarized European thinking. Kant and Hegel, Schleiermacher and the Schlegels, Volney and Chateaubriand, Coleridge and Hare, had all contributed to the revolution in European ideas. No longer either the handmaid of Rome, or an obsolete and unreliable historical source, for those at least who understood something of Romantic philosophy, the idea of tradition could now be seen as central to biblical hermeneutics and aesthetics alike – and indeed was so seen by an increasing number of theologians, writers, and artists.

'Secularization, Scripture, and the Theory of Reading: J.G. Herder and the Old Testament.' *New German Critique: An Interdisciplinary Journal of German Studies*, No. 94, Winter 2005, 185.