J.G. Herder, the Origin of Language, and the Possibility of Transcultural Narratives

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Herder's ideas on cultural plurality in language offer an explanation for how narrative might bridge cultural boundaries. In his *Essay on the Origin of Language*, Herder focuses on language as the specifically human trait that distinguishes humanity from all other species on the one hand and the creator of human differences and diversity of cultures on the other hand. The crucial issue for Herder's aesthetics of language is the reception process whereby a particular experience acquires linguistic form. This process functions in the origin of language and in the translation from one language to another in a similar way. In both cases, the particular environmental forces that are significant in the mind of the receiver become crucial for the shaping of the final linguistic or narrative construct being received. If this is true, then cases of transcultural narrative are not examples of the creation of a 'common' narrative. Rather, narrative 'proliferates' across cultures by multiplying itself in a process that is determined by a certain confluence of interests in two or more cultures but not a reproduction of identical narrative forms, even in the case of direct translation.

Herders Ideen zur sprachphilosophischen Bedeutung von kultureller Vielfalt zeigen wie kulturelle Grenzen durch Erzähltechniken überwunden werden können. In seiner "Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache" betrachtet Herder die Sprache als die spezifisch menschliche Gabe, die die Menschheit einerseits von allen anderen Tierarten unterscheidet und andererseits die Unterschiede unter den Menschen schafft, die zur Vielfalt menschlicher Kulturen führen. Die Schlüsselfrage für Herders Sprachästhetik ist die Frage nach dem Charakter des Rezeptionsprozesses, wobei eine bestimmte Erfahrung eine sprachliche Form gewinnt. Dieser Prozeß funktioniert im Ursprung der Sprache und in der Übersetzung von einer Sprache in eine andere auf ähnlicher Weise. In beiden Fällen üben die für das Bewußtsein des Empfängers besonders wichtigen aüßeren Kräfte eine formierende Funktion auf den zu empfangenden endgültigen linguistischen oder narrativen Konstrukt aus. Wenn dies der Fall sein sollte, dann sind Beispiele von transkultureller Erzählung keine Beispiele von der Schaffung einer "gemeinsamen" Erzählung. Vielmehr verteilt sich die Erzählung verteilt auf verschiedene Kulturen, indem die Erzählung in einem Prozeß sich vervielfältigt, in dem gemeinsame Interessen der jeweiligen Kulturen den Prozeß bestimmen. Es handelt sich hier nicht um eine Reproduktion identischer narrativer Formen, selbst im Fall einer direkten Übersetzung.

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Having written extensively on issues of language and cultural exchange in the 18th century, Johann Gottfried Herder's work still has much to contribute to current debates concerning multiculturalism and transcultural narrative. He

was one of the founders of modern notions of cultural pluralism and an early champion of the idea that every cultural group possesses its own individual identity. At the same time, his work on language has continued to influence a reemerging debate on the origin of language and its relation to human perception. One of the fathers of modern linguistics and philology, his work, along with that of Condillac (2001) in France, was decisive in linking language to cognition and introducing the idea that language might be an indicator of the character of a particular culture. As Aarsleff (1982) and Mueller-Vollmer (1990) have shown, this achievement in turn allowed the development of historical linguistics and philology as new disciplines in the 19th century. I would like to explore Herder's ideas of cultural plurality in language in order to argue that multiculturalism, rather than being a modern phenomenon, is a fundamental and perennial characteristic of human existence that is based in the human need to adapt culturally to a specific environment. Herder sees this process of adaptation as the essence of human freedom and the core of human reason. As such, however, this human adaptability also suggests that human consciousness can never be considered as an abstract entity but can only exist as formed into a particular culture and language. This insight leads to the conclusion that cases of transcultural communication are not examples of a 'common' narrative. Rather, narrative 'proliferates' across cultures by multiplying itself in a process that is determined by a certain confluence of interests in two or more cultures. In this proliferation process, each individual cultural context retains its hegemonic status in defining the parameters for appropriating the new narrative. Consequently, the reception of a narrative from another culture does not constitute a reproduction of identical narrative forms, even in the case of direct translation. The aesthetic aspect of narrative, grounded in emotional responses, creates the possibility of translation, while the linguistic particularity of narrative makes each translation into a distinct entity with its own fund of meanings.

In his *Essay on the Origin of Language* (1772), Herder focuses on language as the specifically human trait that distinguishes humanity from all other species on the one hand and the creator of human differences and diversity of cultures on the other hand. As opposed to all other species of the earth that are biologically adapted to a specific environment, humans can adapt themselves to many different environments by altering their culture. In an argument later developed by Gehlen (1993: 52–53), Herder points out that this ability to adapt to different environments can only be developed once humans are free of instinctual reactions to objects in the world. Rather than reacting by instinct, humans must be able to develop on their own modes of existence that are adequate to the particular environment in which they find themselves. In order to do this they must be able to decide for themselves which perceptions and objects are important and which are not. While animal perceptions are already instinctually programmed to respond to particular objects and ignore others, the human mind must actively develop such a template for perceptions and then be able to adjust this template as the circumstances demand. Herder designates this activity of the mind with the word reflection and emphasises that the act of reflection is only possible

> when the force of his [man's] soul acts in such freedom that, in the vast ocean of sensations which permeates it through all the channels of the senses, it can, if I may say so, single out one wave, arrest it, concentrate its attention on it, and be conscious of being attentive. (Herder, 1966: 115)

In order to make such a decision about which objects to focus on and which to ignore, humans need to be able to attach a distinguishing mark to a particular object, which then structures the human relationship to the object. The set of distinguishing marks is then used as a template with which humans experience the world. In a famous passage, Herder describes the precise mechanism whereby a distinguishing mark is attached to an object. Rather than having an automatic relationship to an object, for example the wolf's reaction to a sheep, humans must be able to adjust this relationship depending on the particular situation. Thus when the human encounters the sheep, the human must make a determination about how to relate to the sheep and summarise this relationship as a distinguishing mark. In Herder's sheep example, the human hears the bleating and uses this sound as the distinguishing mark with which to label the sheep and establish its place within the hierarchy of human perceptions.

> As soon as he feels the need to come to know the sheep, no instinct gets in his way; no one sense of his pulls him too close to it or too far away from it. It stands there, entirely as it manifests itself in his senses. White, soft, woolly – his soul in reflective exercise seeks a distinguishing mark – the sheep bleats! His soul has found the distinguishing mark. The inner sense is at work. This bleating, which makes upon man's soul the strongest impression, which broke away from all the other qualities of vision and of touch, which sprang out and penetrated most deeply, the soul retains it. (Herder, 1966: 116–117)

This example is key to Herder's argument in that it illustrates the identity of language ability with the basic mechanism of human perception based on reflection. The distinguishing marks that the human mind needs in order to 'channel the senses' and experience the world humanly already have the sign structure of a language. In fact Herder makes clear that reason and language ability cannot be separated from each other but are simply the interior and exterior manifestations of a single essential human characteristic, 'that language, from without, is the true differential character of our species as reason is from within' (Herder, 1966: 127). At the same time, this account suggests that differing languages will result in different forms of reasoning.

One important but underappreciated aspect of Herder's account is that the creation of a distinguishing mark depends upon the repetition of an experience. Discussions of the sheep episode such as Mueller-Vollmer's (1990: 13–14) have tended to focus on the fact of the distinguishing mark without remarking the element of repetition and memory involved. Trabant (1990: 360–363), while considering the issue of repetition in his discussion of hearing as the crucial moment of the sheep example, only mentions hearing in its opposition to speaking, leaving aside any reference to recognition and memory in the hearing experience. Likewise, Kittler's (1990: 39–40) reference

to the repetition in Herder's description of the sheep experience focuses on the repetition as a displacement rather than as the basis for recognition. But as Gaier (1988: 110–111) has pointed out, repetition and the resulting structure of recognition are nevertheless an essential part of Herder's account. The first time that the human encounters the sheep, the distinguishing mark is perceived but not brought to consciousness. 'The soul retains it.' But this retention functions only as an unconscious part of a fund of memories to which it can return later. This return only happens when the soul experiences the sheep a second time.

> The sheep comes again. White soft, woolly – the soul sees, touches, remembers, seeks a distinguishing mark – the sheep bleats, and the soul recognizes it. And it feels inside, 'Yes, you are that which bleats.' It has recognized it humanly when it recognized and named it clearly, that is, with a distinguishing mark. (Herder, 1966: 117)

Herder does not emphasise the fact of the repetition, but because he describes the formation of a distinguishing mark as a recognition, he is forced to create the repetition in explaining his example. Recognition can only occur with repetition, and the creation of distinguishing marks is a process that does not simply attach a mark to a thing but which links a present experience to a memory. The role of the distinguishing mark is not just to be an arbitrary sign for the referent but to act as a definer of the relationship between the current experience and the memory. In Herder's example, the bleating becomes the key element linking the current experience of the sheep to a previous memory of bleating. Using a notion of the sign that prefigures Peirce's (1991: 27–30) idea of a 'mediating representation' or 'interpretant', Herder emphasises this linking of experience to memory through the sign by noting that

> the difference between one and another can never be recognized through anything but a third. Precisely this third, this characteristic mark, becomes thus an inner characteristic word: so that language follows quite naturally from the initial act of reason. (Herder, 1966: 120)

The moment of memory is crucial because it is the point at which the current experience links to a prior affective context. Commentators (Helfer, 1990: 369–371; Mueller-Vollmer, 1990: 12–13; Trabant, 1990: 362; Trabant, 1992: 17–19) have consistently downplayed the importance of affect for Herder's discussion by citing his focus on the idea of reflection (Besonnenheit) and the polemic against Condillac and Rousseau. Though Herder (1966: 99–102) seems to reject arguments by Condillac and Rousseau according to which language originates in the passions, the falling away of instinct as a motivating factor for action requires its replacement, not simply with reflection, but with an alternative mechanism for gauging the relative values of different objects in the environment. His polemic against Condillac indeed differentiates human language from animal 'outcries of the emotions', but does not do so primarily to affirm a disinterested reason against a passionate emotion, but rather between animal instinct and human intention:

> For I cannot conceal my amazement that philosophers – people, that is, who look for clear concepts – ever conceived of the idea that the origin of human language might be explained from these outcries of the emotions: for is not this obviously something quite different? All animals, down to the mute fish, sound their sensations. But this does not change the fact that no animal, not even the most perfect, has so much as the faintest beginning of a truly human language. Mold and refine and organize those outcries as much as you wish; if no reason is added, permitting the purposeful use of that tone, I do not see how after the foregoing law of nature there can ever be human language – a language of volitional speech. (Herder, 1966: 99)

Herder treats reason and reflection as central, but only insofar as they permit the 'purposeful use' of language, this element of volition (as opposed to instinctual compulsion) being the key differentiator of human language.

Yet, the originating impulse for language is not an instrumental rationality, but an aesthetic experience. Gaier (1988: 123–125) emphasises that the role of reflection in Herder's account is to serve as a 'means of humanizing sensuality', and this transformation of sensuality in the human consists in a move from instinct to aesthetics as the mechanism for managing the affective relationship to the outside world. Herder indicates how human sensuality is constituted by language when he delves into the reasons why the bleating of the sheep should cause the building of a sign: 'The sheep bleats! Now one distinguishing mark separates by itself from the canvas of the colors wherein so little was to be distinguished. One distinguishing mark has penetrated deeply and clearly into the soul' (Herder, 1966: 129). The distinguishing mark is not merely picked out by the human within a process of cool reflection, but penetrates into the soul in a process that must be termed aesthetic in character. The motivating factor that impresses the distinguishing mark into the soul is a certain need that is not instinctual but yet not without an affective element that Herder explains in a later passage:

> Every family of words is a tangled underbrush around a sensuous central idea, around a sacred oak, still bearing traces of the impression received by the inventor from this dryad. Feelings are interwoven in it: What moves is alive; what sounds speaks; and since it sounds for or against you, it is friend or foe: god or goddess, acting from passion as are you!. (Herder, 1966: 134)

While language develops as a construction of distinguishing marks for perception, this construction is neither arbitrary nor purely instrumental. Rather, for Herder the development of words is shaped by feelings and passions, and the origin of language is an aesthetic process that replaces the animal's instinctual process of relating to the world.

The centrality of an aesthetic reception in Herder's account of human language thus maintains a connection to Rousseau's derivation of language, in which he affirms that 'the passions stimulated the first words' (Herder, 1966: 11). Though Rousseau does not explain the link between reason and language that Herder develops, the concentration on passions allows him to

gain insight into the figurative aspect of the distinguishing marks that Herder understands as the signs with which humans engage with the environment. Rousseau begins with the counterintuitive assertion that metaphors precede literal meanings in the origin of language. 'As man's first motives for speaking were of the passions, his first expressions were tropes. Figurative language was the first to be born. Proper meaning was discovered last' (Rousseau, 1966: 12). In one sense this primacy of the figurative is consistent with Herder's account in which the use of the bleating in order to designate the sheep is also a metonymic figure of speech. In fact, it becomes clear in Herder's account that a literal meaning is impossible. Language can only consist of figures of speech in which a distinguishing mark is used in order to refer to a thing figuratively. This creation of tropes is then the real work of language in which the creation of distinguishing marks is at the same time a creation of a particular relationship to the thing being designated. This figurative function of language is foregrounded in Rousseau's example of the first human words:

> Upon meeting others, a savage man will initially be frightened. Because of his fear he sees the others as bigger and stronger than himself. He calls them *giants*. After many experiences, he recognized that these so-called giants are neither bigger nor stronger than he. Their stature does not approach the idea he had initially attached to the word giant. So he invents another name common to them and to him, such as the name *man*, for example, and leaves *giant* to the fictitious object that had impressed him during his illusion. That is how the figurative word is born before the literal word, when our gaze is held in passionate fascination; and how it is that the first idea it conveys to us is not that of the truth. (Rousseau, 1966: 13)

In this example, the word *giant* does not so much designate a particular thing as it defines a relationship of fear between the speaking subject and the object to which it is referring. The move to the word *man* is not so much a move closer to truth, as Rousseau claims, but a reflection of the redefinition of the relationship between the speaking subject and the object.

This insight into the way a distinguishing mark defines a relationship provides an additional explanation for Herder's remark that 'the difference between one and another can never be recognized through anything but a third' (Herder, 1966: 120). When he states this, Herder is affirming the necessity of distinguishing marks for human perception. Without distinguishing marks human reflection would not be able to function to differentiate one object from another. But this distinguishing ability does not function as a disinterested cognitive activity but rather in conjunction with human feelings and goals. The distinction between the bleating of the sheep and the roar of a lion does not come about simply on the basis of a detached freedom from the environment but rather an interested relationship to this environment in which one sound is related to fear and the other to hunger. Herder is at pains to downplay this interested relationship to objects in order to distinguish the human's reflective from the animal's instinctual relationship to the world. But in fact both humans and animals relate to the world in terms of their interests. The difference between a freedom from these interests and a subjugation to

them lies in the way in which these interests are managed. For once the roar or the bleating are transformed from sounds eliciting responses into distinguishing marks for reflection, affective relationships begin to function within a symbolic economy rather than an instinctual one, and the human relation to the world becomes one of aesthetic interaction rather than behavioural response. But in carrying out this role, the distinguishing marks become more than just arbitrary signs, and the role of the third that distinguishes one from another is not that of an arbitrary sign. Instead, distinguishing marks form a symbolic field that constructs objects in terms of human interests through the mediation of an affective memory context.

This final point about the symbolic and aesthetic quality of the relation to the world is crucial in order to understand the possibility of transcultural narratives. Herder's linking of reason to language provides a convincing argument for a fundamental multiculturality. Because human perception is not constant and universal for all humans but arises out of the linking of environmental forces with memory traces that creates language, every individual human does not exist as an example of the human species as a whole but only as an individual within a particular cultural sphere. The proliferation of human cultures according to environment and memory belongs to the basic definition of the human that differentiates humanity from all other species that are confined to one particular environment and are unable to adapt to new environments without genetic mutation. But Herder's explanation of the origin of language as simultaneously the origin of human perception and reflection leads to the thesis that language might pose an insuperable barrier to cross-cultural understanding. If the sign system is constitutive for the structure of perception, then an alternative sign system would lead to an alternative perception of the world, and transcultural narratives would be impossible.

But if the key to perception is not distinguishing marks as arbitrary signs but as aesthetic mechanisms, then transcultural narratives might be possible as the ability of one narrative to create an emotional response in more than one culture, even if the character of this response will vary from culture to culture. In this case transcultural narrative understood as a narrative that is common to two cultures is still indeed an impossibility, but the ability of a single narrative to be translated and proliferate across cultures with differing functions would be possible. In this account human perception develops out of an affective interaction between environment and memory rather than an animal's instinctual relationship between stimulus and response, and aesthetic experience as an organisation of human feelings into communal sensual structures becomes crucial for the process of human perception. The origin of language out of the relationship between impulse from the environment and prior memory is just a specific case of a broader set of aesthetic relationships to the world that have the same structure. Leaving aside here other examples such as visual experience or music, I would just like to point out how this structure works in narrative in order to better understand just what a transcultural narrative might mean.

If we extend the structure given to us by Herder for the origin of language into an understanding of narrative, then it becomes clear, first, that any new

narratives will only be integrated into consciousness if there is an affective impulse for doing so and, second, that this integration will always occur through the creation of a relationship between the new narrative and the existing fund of narratives, this fund, typically organised in a textual tradition, functioning as a set of prior tropes that define affective relationships to the world. Clearly, the new narrative will necessarily function differently when inserted into one cultural tradition than when it is inserted into a second, distinct cultural tradition. In fact, to be precise, every narrative functions uniquely in every individual consciousness. But because specific individuals within a particular culture will tend to have a similar fund of memories, the individuals within that culture can be expected to have comparable reactions to the same narrative. When they do not, this is an indication of a variance in tradition or in environment that is creating the differential reaction and could be the point at which one cultural tradition splits into two or several.

The crucial issue for an aesthetics of language is the reception process whereby, in one and the same process, a particular experience acquires linguistic form and human consciousness as a whole is defined. This simultaneous forming of consciousness and the object is dictated by two forces, environmental forces that dictate the constraints on human existence in a particular time and place and a cultural tradition that provides the context for the new experience. The environmental forces provide the limiting parameters for human existence and are the source of the violence against which culture constructs itself. The cultural tradition provides the fund of narrative templates for dealing with environmental forces. This object- and consciousness-producing process functions in the origin of language and in the translation of a narrative from one language to another in a similar way. In both cases, the interaction of the particular environmental forces that are significant in the mind of the receiver with the existing fund of individual memories, understood culturally as a tradition, become crucial for the shaping of the final linguistic or narrative form being received. This does not mean that narratives can only be understood within the culture in which they are originally produced. Rather, the movement of narrative across cultural boundaries occurs as a proliferation. With regard to direct translations, for instance, Arens (2000: 100) points out: 'Each use of language thus conveys and rests on a certain historical experience and a certain habit of expressiveness; it identifies a group as a nation. As Herder describes it, translating thus actually means rewriting, never a replication of the original.'

Herder demonstrates this proliferative quality of narrative in his essay on Shakespeare. His main concern in this essay is to defend Shakespeare against a prevailing opinion that his drama is inferior because it does not adhere to the rules laid down by Aristotle concerning the unity of time and place. In this defence of Shakespeare, Herder makes two cross-cultural moves. First, he seeks to claim Shakespeare for German culture: 'to explain and to feel how he is, to use and – when possible! – to construct him for us Germans' (Herder, 1993: 499–500). He bases the possibility of this cultural borrowing by emphasising that both Germans and English share a certain Nordic environment (p. 509) and knightly cultural traditions (p. 521) that make Shakespeare's narrative understandable for a German audience. In order to emphasise this

cultural similarity, Herder's second cross-cultural move is to distinguish this shared Nordic culture from the culture of the Greeks: 'for I am closer to Shakespeare than to the Greeks. [. . .] And if [the Greek] imagines and teaches and touches und cultivates the *Greeks*, then Shakespeare teaches, touches, and cultivates Nordic *people*!' (p. 509). The unity of time and place was a natural characteristic of Greek tragedy because of its cultural origins, but Shakespeare's drama and a proper drama for German culture arise out of a different set of environmental circumstances and consequently have a different form.

Herder's approach demonstrates a clear consciousness of the way in which a narrative will function differently according to the context in which it is placed. Greek tragedy in ancient Greece has a different meaning and import than the same work performed in 18th century Germany, and this difference leads to a basic untranslatability of the Greek tragedy from its original context. Moreover, this same limitation of cultural context also ensures that Shakespeare will eventually become incomprehensible to German culture as it progresses away from Shakespeare's historical moment. Doomed to pass into an undecipherable past that is separated from the present by the cultural particularities of its origins, Shakespeare's work will eventually be regarded with the same awed incomprehensibility as the pyramids in Egypt (Herder, 1993: 520).

Yet, in spite of this sense that narrative is culturally bound to its time and place, Herder's essay is also motivated by an opposite sense for the ability of narrative to travel. For he affirms that the inability of the Greek tragedy to exist and function exactly as it did in its original culture does not lead to a total inability for Germans to respond to Greek tragedy. Herder affirms the power of Greek tragedy to create its intended effect on a German audience, but he emphasises that this effect is an emotional one: 'a *certain* quaking of the heart, the *excitement* of the soul in a *certain measure* and in *certain aspects*' (Herder, 1993: 505). The aesthetic effect that is based on the ability of an object to arouse emotional responses is indeed translatable and can be conveyed across cultures, even if the meaning of such an effect will necessarily vary from context to context. This possible affinity of aesthetic responses across cultures is not limited to the relationship between German and classical Greek culture. As Eisleben (2003: 227) has pointed out, Herder also refers to such affinity in order to argue for the reception of a new translation into German of a Hindi text, Kalidasa's *Sakuntala*. By contrast, those aspects of a drama that do not depend on this emotional effect for its functioning will not be able to travel very readily to a new context, and Herder describes contemporary French drama as something very different from Greek tragedy precisely because it does not create the same 'quaking of the heart and excitement of the soul'. Though it should arguably be closer to German culture based on its proximity in time and place, for Herder French drama is incomparably inferior to Greek tragedy in terms of emotional effects and is further from German sensibilities than either Greek tragedy or Shakespeare's drama (Herder, 1993: 505). So there is a sense in Herder's essay of a culture-crossing capability in the emotional effects of drama that does not follow a strict logic of geography, time period or even cultural tradition. Rather there seems to be an independent aesthetic logic

at work that creates an affinity of one culture for another and allows for the aesthetic appreciation of narratives from a different culture. This aesthetic affinity is grounded in emotional response rather than cognitive insights or stylistic sophistication.

To conclude, I would like to sum up the possibilities that Herder's perspective opens up both in terms of multicultural subjects and in terms of transcultural narratives. Herder begins with the fact of variety in human culture and interprets this variety as a result of a fundamentally human mode of relating to the world that consists in a constant creation and proliferation of narrative and an accompanying proliferation of unique cultures. Within this context, a single narrative will always be monocultural at any one moment. That is, it will always function in terms of a single cultural context within which it gains meaning, making a transcultural narrative impossible. However, this monocultural narrative can indeed become multicultural to the extent that it can travel, moving to another context, thereby becoming a new narrative that functions in a different way. Instead of a transcultural narrative that bridges between multiple cultures, we would do better to speak of multicultural narratives that speak to many contexts.

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