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Reading Shakespeare – Reading Modernity*

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In the history of German idealism, Hegel is often portrayed as the philosopher who, better than anyone else, captures the tensions of modern life, the way in which our search for autonomy and self-determination is linked up with the threat of alienation and homelessness. Herder, by contrast, is hardly known for his views on modernity. Instead, he is frequently portrayed as a thinker who prides himself on avoiding the problem of modernity altogether. 'Community' and 'belonging' are terms often used in discussions of Herder's work; the rhetoric of the fatherland and the mother tongue is never far away. Even the most charitable readers of Herder's work, such as Isaiah Berlin and Charles Taylor, are not usually in the habit of promoting him as a great philosopher of modernity. Herder, one might think, offers intriguing insights about the intertwining of thought and language, about history and the challenge of cultural differences. Yet it is Hegel, not Herder, who presents us with the true dilemmas of modern life.

This picture of Herder, I want to argue, is not entirely just. For although Herder does not engage in any straightforward discussion of modernity, this does not mean that he ignores the issue altogether. In order to see this, however, one cannot simply focus on the later Herder's discussion of cultural identity and belonging. Rather, one ought to consider the early Herder's reflections on art and history, and in particular his work on Shakespeare. Here, Herder focuses on the epistemic conditions of historical research and literary interpreta-

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tion. This area was surely not alien to Hegel either. However, Hegel's major contribution to this field is the idea of an all-comprehensive, continuous *Geist* in light of which past life forms present themselves to the hermeneutic mind as principally intelligible. Herder, by contrast, undermines this hermeneutic holism by emphasizing how past and distant civilizations, in their alterity, beg a conception of history that also takes into account the untranslatablility of the experiences that they convey. It is this aspect of his thinking – the deep-seated hermeneutic pluralism that he defends – that makes Herder a significant philosopher of modernity.

I shall explore these notions of modernity – Hegel's and Herder's – by, first, looking into Hegel's conception of reason in modernity, his discussion of Descartes and the predicament of post-Cartesian philosophy. I then go on to show how, according to Hegel, this predicament gets reflected within the framework of Shakespearean drama and how he claims that the tensions of early modernity are elevated into a higher unity by the coming to the fore of absolute knowledge. At this point Herder's philosophy of art and history offers an important alternative. Stepping back a good sixty years prior to Hegel's lectures on aesthetics, I explore the initial debate about Shakespeare in Germany, as well as the three different versions of Herder's essay "Shakespear". Finally, I conclude by sketching out the basic structure of Herder's hermeneutics and by suggesting how his theory of understanding fundamentally challenges the Hegelian tenors of later hermeneutic philosophers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer.

1.

According to Hegel, no historical period can be understood in isolation. History, he argues, is a totality, an organic totality even. "The True", as he famously puts it, "is the whole"[1]. Any particular culture, any particular period of time, gains significance in terms of the larger, world-historical unity. Ultimately, this unity is conceptualized as the absolute, the unity of spirit, whose phenomenological journey through history culminates in the luminous transparency of speculative logic.

[1] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Engl. transl. by Arnold Vincent Miller, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 11.

Hence, in Hegel's view, the absolute "is essentially a *result*, […] only in the *end* is it what it truly is"[2].

Modernity is also inscribed within this grandiose Hegelian narrative. Like any other stage along spirit's path towards self-knowledge, modernity gains meaning and identity from previous times and periods. Yet in the story Hegel tells, modernity also emerges as something special. "A new epoch has arisen in the world", Hegel declares upon addressing the intellectual framework of his own period[3]. Modernity is our era, the point at which philosophy consciously retrieves the achievements of world-historical spirit. As such, it is the era of a reason that has grown up and matured[4]. Epistemologically speaking, this means that reason not only knows a number of things about the world, but also possesses a second-order knowledge of what knowledge is[5]. In this sense, modernity is the period when spirit has left the ontological level of a *being-in-itself* in favor of a dialectically mediated *being-for-itself* – the period of absolute spirit, the position in light of which previous philosophical conceptions of knowledge, culture, and morality gain their ultimate meaning[6]. In short, on Hegel's understanding, modernity is the period of self-reflection.

Self-reflection amounts to self-determination, Hegel thinks, and self-determination is tantamount to freedom. In post-revolutionary Europe, we encounter, for the first time, the idea of emancipation not just for a privileged minority but for all. Freedom is no longer an ab-

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[2] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 11.

[3] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Engl. transl. by E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1995, 3 vols, vol. III, p. 551.

[4] In light of this maturity, it applies that as far as factual information is concerned, "what used to be the important thing is now but a trace". Thus previous times are likened by Hegel to "exercises, and even games for children", *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 16.

[5] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 17. Or, as Hegel also puts it, its testing of knowledge is now "not only a testing of what we know, but also a testing of the criterion of what knowing is" (p. 55). For a clear account of how this position critically carries on the perspective of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, see Terry Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 191-93.

[6] With regard to the history of philosophy, Hegel concomitantly claims that "[a]ncient philosophy is to be reverenced as necessary, and as a link in this sacred chain [spirit's development], but all the same nothing more than a link". Furthermore, he reasons that "throughout all time there has been only one Philosophy", *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. III, pp. 547, 552.

stract principle. It is embodied, realized, and built into the teleology of our civil institutions. Because Hegel supports freedom, he supports modernity. Modernity is the highest stage of self-realizing spirit, and as such modernity is good.

However, for a dialectical thinker such as Hegel, no truth can be as plain and simple as that. If modernity comes across as a gain, this gain is the result of a painful and laborious *Bildung* in history. Knowledge and freedom are won through hardship and suffering[7]. Furthermore, having reached the level of absolute knowledge, spirit realizes that no progress is made without the tragic parting with times and life-forms past. Gaining something also means leaving something behind. Reflection on the development of spirit includes a dimension of lament and mourning – neither of static melancholy nor of petrifying obsession with the past, but of coming to terms with the ruination that is integral to the idea of the advancement of spirit as an advancement in history. This understanding of the history of spirit is reflected in Hegel's discussion of early modernity, and in particular in his reading of Descartes, the philosopher who came to initiate the paradigm of modern thinking.

2.

Traveling through a terrain that is basically unified, Hegel's world-historical spirit presents itself through a number of different characters and in different guises – "a gallery of images", as Hegel puts it towards the closing of the *Phenomenology*[8]. Its *modus* is that of "a self-originating, self-differentiating wealth of shapes"[9]; it is always the same, yet always different. This, however, does not mean that each historical constellation, each historical character, emerges as equally important. Hegel was no democrat in this sense of the term. Some figures, Hegel argues, articulate the intellectual watersheds, the junctions of history, in ways more apt than others. Within Hegel's retrieval of ancient Greek culture,

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7 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Engl. transl. by Thomas Malcolm Knox, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1975, 2 vols, vol. II, p. 1237. See also Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 7.

8 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 492.

9 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 9.

Antigone and Socrates work as such emblematic figures. When Hegel turns to his own field – that of modern philosophy – it is Descartes who stands out as the most significant voice. With Descartes, Hegel argues, reason is brought to consciousness of itself. This is the point at which spirit as we know it reaches familiar coasts[10].

Descartes, Hegel claims, liberated philosophy from theology[11]. In so doing, he did for philosophy what Luther did for religion[12]. Thinking was freed from the stifling grasp of tradition, and, in particular, from the doctrines of medieval scholasticism. One cannot, Hegel remarks, but admire the boldness of this maneuver. For the first time in history, individual thought made good on its own validity, and did so more or less from scratch. The ultimate touchstone is now "my own free thought"[13]. Philosophy emerges as responsible in a deeper sense than before.

Self-grounding is an a priori of modern thinking, an enabling condition, and to the extent that Descartes is the first to articulate this philosophically he is championed by Hegel as a hero of world-historical importance.

But if Descartes is championed as a hero of world history, he is nevertheless a hero of the past. Writing at the beginning of modernity, rather than at its end, Descartes could not possibly have reached the highest point of reflection, the maturity that Hegel found characteristic of his own time. Descartes's notion of self-grounding therefore cannot be ours, even if self-grounding in general is a principle that we adopt. What, then, hampers the Cartesian notion of self-grounding? According to Hegel, it is this: Descartes arrives at his famous cogito argument by hypostatizing the division between the freely determined scope of theoretical subjectivity and the causally determined realm of the material world. Descartes, Hegel finds, does not see that thought and reality are intertwined and thus ends up defending what Hegel takes to be an untenable form of philosophical idealism[14].

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[10] In Hegel's lectures on the history of philosophy, the emergence of Cartesian philosophy is retrieved in the following terms: "Here, we may say, we are at home, and like the mariner after a long voyage in a tempestuous sea, we may now hail the sight of land", *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. III, p. 217.

[11] Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. III, p. 224.

[12] Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. III, p. 217.

[13] Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. III, p. 218.

[14] This is how Hegel defines idealism: as a direction of thought that "proceeds from

Modern philosophy is haunted by this idealism. After Descartes, Hegel argues, philosophy inevitably has something abstract about it[15]. When spirit is seen as completely free and the world is understood in terms of causal laws, then mind is no longer able to recognize itself in its surroundings[16]. Hence the problem of Cartesianism is the problem of alienation. It is the problem of a mind that no longer belongs in the world, the problem of homelessness.

Now, it is one thing to attribute to modern philosophy – *post festum*, so to speak – the problem of homelessness and alienation. It is something quite different, however, to show that the feeling of alienation gets reflected, on a deeper level, within early modern culture itself. If philosophy, as Hegel argues, is but a conceptual articulation of a pre-conceptual, perhaps even pre-reflective, horizon of practice and understanding, then Hegel's case would be considerably stronger were he able to trace this problem back to Descartes's own time. This is the task that Hegel sets himself in his interpretation of Shakespeare.

3.

Hegel did not lecture extensively on art and aesthetic experience until the 1820s. Shakespeare's work, however, had been with him for almost a lifetime[17]. The 1820 lectures, given at the University of Berlin, address both the comedies and the historical dramas: among them *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *As You Like It*, *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, *Richard III*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Tempest*. Yet one cannot help noticing that it is the great tragedies – *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *Hamlet*

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what is inward; according to it everything is in thought, mind itself is all content", *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. III, p. 163.

15 Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. III, p. 166.

16 In fact, since the human being is not just spirit, but body as well, this is a problem of human self-understanding. Hegel asks how we understand the unity of soul and body when "[t]he former belongs to thought, the latter to extension; and thus because both are substance, neither requires the Notion of the other, and hence soul and body are independent of one another and can exercise no direct influence upon one another", *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. III, pp. 250-51.

17 According to Terry Pinkard's biography, Hegel had been given Shakespeare's collected works at the age of eight, and while visiting Paris in 1827 he watched Shakespeare being staged at the English Theatre. See Terry Pinkard, *Hegel: A Biography*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, vol. V, p. 551.

– that draw most of Hegel's attention. It is here, Hegel seems to imply, that the modernity of Shakespearean drama crystallizes in its clearest and most palpable form.

Because he focuses on Shakespeare's modernity, one would perhaps think that Hegel simply brackets the English playwright's indebtedness to the past. This, however, is not the case. Hegel repeatedly emphasizes how Shakespeare borrows his material from "sagas, old ballads, tales, chronicles"[18]. Shakespeare's modernity does not, in other words, rest with the mere content or material of his theatre, but rather with the way in which this content gets shaped. According to Hegel, it is Shakespeare's accomplishment to change the past tragedy of society and trans-individual world-views into a tragedy of subjectivity itself.

In Hegel's aesthetics, pre-Shakespearean drama is identified predominantly with Greek tragedy, and no Greek tragedy has been subject to closer philosophical examination than Sophocles' *Antigone*. *Antigone*, Hegel claims, presents us with the artistic core of tragedy. Here we face two different views of the world – each one of them perfectly coherent, each one of them perfectly justifiable in its own terms – in unrelenting conflict. Mediation is not an option here; nor is passive co-existence. As represented by Creon, the abstract justice of the gods crudely opposes the ethical message of family, kinship, and care that Antigone brings forth. This is not contingently so. It is a matter of strict necessity. In Hegel's interpretation, the characters of Greek drama personalize an ethical paradigm that is larger than themselves and through which their lives gain meaning and direction. Greek drama is populated by characters who, speculatively speaking, *are* their own absolutes.

This is not so, however, with Shakespeare's characters. Take, for example, the figure of Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark. As opposed to Antigone and Creon, Hamlet incarnates no higher principles. Nor do the other characters in the play. Neither does Claudius, the brains behind the murder of the king and the target of Hamlet's fury, emerge as a person of principles. Draped in his new-won regality, Claudius does not, unlike Creon, deserve respect or obedience[19]. In fact, he is not even deserving of a gruesome and well-plotted death, as in the old revenge dramas such as Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* or the epic of *Amleth*. The new

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[18] Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. I, p. 288. See also p. 190.

[19] Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. II, p. 1225.

king, whose presence, *via negativa*, determined the older Amleth's actions, is in Shakespeare's play a creature inviting unanimous contempt. In Shakespeare's version, the drama is not really between Hamlet and the new king. It is between Hamlet and Hamlet. This, Hegel argues, is something entirely new.

What kind of explanation does Hegel offer here? How does he account for this turn of Shakespearean drama? Hamlet, Hegel explains, is "full of disgust with the world and life"[20]. Nothing in this world, not even the presence of fair Ophelia, may temper his disgust or subject it to dramatic reparation. Denmark is rotten to the very core. Deprived no less of someone to love than of someone to hate, Hamlet has only himself to lean on. This, one may note, is a condition he shares with the Cartesian philosopher, as Hegel portrays him. Hamlet, however, has no share in the Cartesian confidence. The solid ground of clay and stone that Descartes, turning towards the thinking cogito, claims to have uncovered, is for Hamlet beyond reach. No remedy is powerful enough to put an end to his torturing doubts. Even a message as stark as the one brought forth by his father's ghost appears in a dubious light, and, as if that were not enough, Hamlet is not even convinced that the ghost was really present in the first place[21].

On Hegel's reading, a life of such uncertainties is not a life worth living. Yet it is also a life in which death is deprived of meaning. Antigone could punish Creon by taking her own life. Hamlet is left no such alternative. When death comes to Hamlet, it is stripped of pathos-filled splendor. Death arrives as an accident, a simple, almost trivial mistake (the swapping of swords). This is not the death of a man of honor. It is the death of a man of doubt, a death that provides no consolation, neither to Hamlet nor to us, the spectators and readers of Shakespeare's drama. Hamlet's death solves no problems and promises no future redemption. To a life absorbed in self-ransacking and uncompromising questioning, death comes as the ultimate confirmation of the meaninglessness of it all. But precisely for all his anti-heroic qualities, his despair and exasperation, does Hamlet appear to Hegel as a hero of modern life.

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[20] Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. II, p. 1226.

[21] The complexity of the ghost scene is elaborated in Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001, especially chapters 4 and 5.

4.

Two very different personalities – Descartes and Hamlet – mark the beginning of Hegel's reconstruction of spirit's travel through modernity. By the looks of it, these personalities could hardly be more different. On the one hand, Descartes, who, although adopting the idea of a methodological doubt, believes that thought's reflective turn towards itself leads to a certainty so solid as to withstand the pressure of any skeptical objections. On the other, Hamlet, who could not possibly have dug himself deeper into doubt, self-hatred, and merciless agonizing. If Descartes embodies the philosophical nerve and cultural optimism of modernity, Hamlet emerges as the incarnation of dark melancholy and existential gloom.

How, then, can these two images of modernity be brought together? Can they be joined in any way? Or must we speak of two incompatible aspects of the same intellectual era? At least in Hegel's mind, this is not the situation. Rather, he suggests that the character of Hamlet exhibits the existential flipside of the modern (Cartesian) search for freedom and self-determination through a turn towards subjectivity. In modernity, self-determination is not a matter of opinion. It is a condition into which we are born. Even to eschew the path of self-determination is a self-determined choice. In such a predicament, individuals appear almost like "free artists of their own selves"[22]. The modern self does not, like previous Creons and Antigones, possess a set of ethical principles with which it may identify wholeheartedly[23], but appears, rather, as a creation – a work of art, as Hegel puts it[24].

However, in order to be fully self-responsible, spontaneous self-creation is not enough. The individual must also objectify herself, perceive herself from the outside. This generates a split mind, one of the judge and the judged, the reflecting and the reflected. Shakespeare, Hegel claims, presents us with an image of this predicament. He gives us a set of characters who, like Hamlet, are "inwardly divided against themselves"[25]. There are no absolutes in Shakespeare's

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[22] Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. II, p. 1228.

[23] Pinkard clarifies this point by contrasting the groundedness of the Greek form of life with the groundlessness of the early modern world, *Hegel's Phenomenology*, p. 188.

[24] Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. II, p. 1228.

[25] Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. II, p. 1229.

universe, no transcendent God or principles that may, once and for all, put an end to this alienation. Self-determination, he shows us, means a condition in which no peace is on offer, one in which the modern individual is left to "endure the fate of finitude"[26]. This, in turn, means to endure the fact that our death, no less than Hamlet's, will have no greater meaning; it means to endure a condition in which we can find no consolation in the world, yet are deprived of the hope of a world beyond this one. Subjectivity has taken on too many God-like powers, as it were. Hence it must bear responsibilities of God-like proportions: the responsibility of healing alienation and division, the responsibility of finding meaning in life. In this sense, Hamlet's tragedy is the tragedy of a life that is led in the spirit of Cartesian philosophy – a spirit which Hegel, to be sure, felt like celebrating, but which he could still not see as an achievement worth celebrating on its own merits.

5.

However compelling and influential, Hegel's analysis of nihilism and alienation does not conclude his narrative about spirit's passage through modernity. The Cartesian spirit initiates modernity, but does not make up the final chapter of Hegel's retrieval of modern life. Through the movements of progressive history, spirit moves beyond the drama of early modernity. Division and alienation are overcome. Having taken subjectivism to a point at which it has exhausted its uttermost possibilities – where it embodies in its shape "as much of its entire content as that shape was capable of holding"[27] – modern subjectivity no longer has to negotiate the dilemma of values and normativity being *either* bestowed from a trans-subjective beyond *or* being an outcome of its own creation. Intersubjectivity has taken over the perspective of subjective idealism, and the 'I' recognizes itself as situated within a dialectics of mutual recognition. The field of intersubjectivity is the realm of a higher autonomy: through the civic institutions of family, law, and government, the modern self takes on a shared responsibility for its own condition. In ethics, art, and epistemology, the transition from

[26] Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. II, p. 1231.

[27] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 17.

subjective idealism to that of intersubjectivity announces the beginning of absolute knowing, the epistemic point of view that, ultimately, constitutes the condition of possibility for Hegel's phenomenological retrieval of the history of spirit.

Absolute knowing, however, demands not only a responsible and secularized conception of who we, as members of a given society, are and want to be, but also a notion of how we have become the ones we are – i.e., a reconstruction of spirit's way through history. In Hegel's opinion, this reconstruction, dialectically teasing out the various conjugations of spirit's development, is, as I have mentioned, a task of unification. The agony, doubt, and existential bewilderment that had been haunting Hamlet (as an emblem of early modern culture) is replaced by the tranquility of a fully perspicuous philosophical overview. Previous suffering – the intrinsic brutality of history – gets justified in light of a larger teleological meaning: the self-identity of absolute spirit.

It is at this point that the young Herder's studies of art and history offer an alternative to the Hegelian narrative, a conception that, many years prior to Hegel's *Phenomenology* and his *Lectures on Fine Art*, questions the idea of an overreaching, continuous reason in history. In Herder's work, the self-responsibility of reason is connected with the challenge of philological rigor and respect for the alterity of cultures that are historically or geographically distant from ours. This becomes particularly clear on comparing Hegel's reading of *Hamlet* with Herder's discussion of Shakespeare's work and literary style – or rather, his defense of the idea that Shakespeare had a literary style worth mentioning in the first place.

6.

In the 1820s, when Hegel first drafted his Berlin lectures, Shakespeare's reputation in Germany had reached almost stellar levels. Shakespeare was seen as the Bard of the North, and since every culture needs a Bard, a life without Shakespeare was, in Goethe's phrasing, barely a life at all[28]. Hegel, in other words, could well afford expounding on

[28] Goethe quoted in Wolfgang Stellmacher, *Herders Shakespeare-Bild. Shakespeare-Rezeption im Sturm und Drang: dynamisches Weltbild und bürgerliches Nationaldrama*, Berlin, Rütten & Loening, 1978, p. 110.

Shakespeare's philosophical insights, rich and compelling as they were. Herder, addressing Shakespeare's work about sixty years earlier, knew no such luxury. For in order to arrive at a point where such a contemplation was possible, an intellectual atmosphere would have to be created in which Shakespeare's drama could be appreciated as art. That turned out to be easier said than done.

When Herder published his most famous piece on Shakespeare in 1773, the essay had been rewritten twice. The first version of the essay was finished in 1771, the second a year later. These two drafts provide a glimpse into the development of Herder's understanding of Shakespeare – how his perspective changes and how he, year by year, obtains a firmer grasp of the real philosophical problems behind the Shakespeare debate in Germany.

Within the context of German aesthetics, this debate stretched back to 1740, when *Julius Caesar* was made available in C. W. von Borcke's translation. Having spent three years as an ambassador in London, von Borcke thought it was high time the German audience got acquainted with the English poet. Presenting Shakespeare in a free, Shakespearean prose, however, would be going a step too far. Alexandrines it had to be, or nothing at all. In this sense, von Borcke, although appreciative of Shakespearean drama, was still under the sway of classicist aesthetics – which now appears as something of a paradox, considering how the debate that was to follow his translation was driven extensively by classicist worries.

Critical voices emerged as soon as von Borcke's translation was published. Among the most powerful of these was that of Christian Gottsched. Gottsched immediately sensed the threat of Shakespearean drama. This was a kind of drama, he feared, that would bring about a questioning of the ideals that he, as a poet as well as a theoretician, had vindicated with all his strength and energy. Thus he braced himself for a fight. Two arguments fueled Gottsched's crusade against Shakespeare, and one cannot help noticing the obvious tension between the two.

First, Gottsched found it necessary to remind the critical audience that Shakespeare was not German[29]. That, he thought, was a point to

[29] Johann Christoph Gottsched, *Beiträge zur critischen Historie der Deutschen Sprache* (1741), in Roy Pascal, *Shakespeare in Germany, 1740-1815*, New York, Octagon, 1971, pp. 38-39.

be used against him. Shakespeare's tradition was different from their own; his way of thinking was not natural to the Germans. This was a playwright who brought the lowly classes to the scene. The characters spoke with unsuitable accents. Princes socialized with peasants and gravediggers. As if that was not enough, Shakespearean tragedy inclined towards the supernatural. Ghosts and witches were not alien to this playwright, nor were fairies, spirits, and sinister elves. This was not the world as Gottsched knew it. And it was not a world that had anything in common with art as he knew it, either.

Art, as Gottsched knew it, was built on the ideals of a past long gone, the golden age of the Greek tragedies, whose aesthetic premises were laid out in Aristotle's *Poetics* and brought to life again in the work of Corneille, Racine, or, in a German context, his own dramatic writings. This gave rise to a second line of criticism. Despite the blatant nationalism that seems to drive his first objection, Gottsched now claimed that Shakespeare had missed out on the rules provided by the French. By these rules, he thought, German art ought to be guided. They were not expressive of a certain view of art, but of art as such. Order was required. There had to be a clear and well-organized plot. A firm and stable unity of time and place was a condition beyond questioning.

Neither of these requirements was heeded by Shakespeare[30]. Worse still, if Shakespeare broke the rules of French classicism, he did not care to do this with the rigor and consistency that ought to characterize the introduction of a new aesthetic regime. Shakespeare went against the rules of French classicism without even trying to offer another, alternative set of guidelines, or at least not anything Gottsched was able to recognize as a normative foundation for the new dramatic arts. Shakespeare was somewhat of an aesthetic anarchist, and from Gottsched's perspective that was an offense beyond redemption.

The second objection carries the burden of Gottsched's attack. For, as it is, Gottsched's nationalism did not go very deep. Neither did he reject the force of French drama, nor was he, generally speaking, opposed to the influence of English culture. He quoted Shaftesbury and Addison and is, indeed, known to have imitated the latter's polemical prose[31]. It is the question of breaking the rules of the classicist dogma

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[30] Gottsched, p. 39.

[31] See Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, Engl. transl. by Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1979, p. 334.

in modern theater that emerges as the burning issue for Gottsched, and hence also for the writers rushing to defend Shakespearean drama against his virulent criticism.

Gottsched's writing proves a foil for Herder's essays. But so, one must add, do the texts that came to Shakespeare's aid. Important here is Johann Elias Schlegel's comparison between Shakespeare and Andreas Gryph (1742), but also, later on, essays by Lessing and Mendelssohn. More than anything else, however, it was Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenberg's *Briefe über Merkwürdigkeiten in der Litteratur* (1766) that would trigger Herder's curiosity and provoke his critical reaction.

Occasioned by Christoph Martin Wieland's Shakespeare translation – by which von Gerstenberg was not visibly impressed[32] – von Gerstenberg's essay voices the growing will to defend Shakespearean drama, although he is by no means ready to go all the way with the English playwright. Shakespeare, von Gerstenberg claims, had so far been judged by the wrong criteria. By and large, he had been judged by the standards of French tragedy. Yet French drama does not exhaust the resources of Greek poetics. Greek art is not just about rule-following and formal constraints, at least not if we follow Aristotle and his emphasis on passion and empathy[33].

If Shakespeare does not follow Aristotle in a way that can be recognized through the optics of a Francophile taste, this does not mean that he does not relate to Aristotle altogether. As opposed to previous drama, Shakespeare creates a new historical plot, von Gerstenberg claims, referring to the Scottish philosopher Henry Home. This turn towards history allows for a certain dramatic beauty, which very well complies with Aristotelian poetics[34]. Keen to defend the originality of Shakespearean drama, ultimately von Gerstenberg sympathizes with the well-known paradigm of the ancient Greeks. This is precisely what worries Herder, and what reading Shakespeare turns out to be his major concern in the first draft of the "Shakespear" essay.

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[32] Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenberg, *Briefe über Merkwürdigkeiten der Litteratur* (1766), in Pascal, pp. 55-56. Rehearsing the German adoption of Shakespeare, Friedrich Gundolf offers a more positive evaluation of Wieland's translation, Friedrich Gundolf, *Shakespeare und der deutsche Geist*, Berlin, Georg Bondi, 1914, p. 161.

[33] Gerstenberg, p. 56.

[34] Gerstenberg, pp. 65-67.

7.

Herder's first draft is composed as a letter to von Gerstenberg. Starting out in highly appreciative wording, the tone soon takes a more acrimonious twist. Von Gerstenberg, Herder acknowledges, defends Shakespeare by (indirect) reference to Aristotle. Yet the Aristotle to whom von Gerstenberg refers is a philosopher dressed up beyond Herder's recognition[35]. It is an Aristotle who has little in common with the teacher of Alexander the Great, i.e., the Greek philosopher as most of us would know him. Thus, in Herder's view, von Gerstenberg's mistake is twofold. First, von Gerstenberg thinks that Shakespearean drama is defensible only to the extent that it complies with the normative grid of Aristotle's poetics. Second, he stretches the scope of Aristotelian poetics so as to accommodate a drama whose complexity would be way beyond the reach of the ancient Greek imagination.

Shakespeare's theater, Herder argues, could hardly diverge more drastically from the drama that Aristotle had in mind. Take the issue of character. The famous Aristotelian hero was as grand as he was decisive. His fatal flaw – the flaw that would eventually bring him down – was one of which he was unaware and which therefore had the power to determine his actions. Shakespeare generates no heroes of this kind. Drowning in doubt and existential insecurity, Hamlet, for instance, is no man of action. In fact, according to Herder, Hamlet's pensive character makes one ask whether the plot would develop at all without the aid of the king, the queen, Polonius, Laertes, and Ophelia[36]. If Hamlet is the main character of Shakespeare's drama, he is, at the same time, a deeply impoverished main character: not a hero who carries the dramatic development on his shoulders, but one who sinks into a potentially un-dramatic agonizing.

Likewise with the question of dramatic genre. With Shakespeare, this problem emerges as much more pressing than in the case of the Sophoclean drama to which Aristotle refers. Drama, Aristotle claimed, is either tragedy or comedy. Yet Shakespearean drama is often difficult to classify. Shakespeare, in fact, makes this an explicit point in *Hamlet*.

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[35] Johann Gottfried Herder, "Shakespear (Erster Entwurf)", in *Schriften zur Ästhetik und Literatur 1767-1781, Johann Gottfried Herder Werke*, eds Ulrich Gaier *et al.*, Frankfurt, Deutscher Klassiker, 1985, 10 vols., vol. II, p. 523.

[36] Herder, "Shakespear (Erster Entwurf)", p. 523.

When Hamlet, in Act II, stages the play within the play, we immediately encounter, along with tragedy, comedy, history, and pastoral, the register of the pastoral-comical, the historical-pastoral, the tragic-historical, and the tragic-comical-historical- pastoral. Ultimately, Herder notes, it does not really make sense to speak of genre in a context like Shakespeare's. Every play will have to give itself its own genre, a name of its own[37], and in giving itself its own name it also gives itself its own standard of dramatic imperatives and prohibitions.

To his points about character and genre, Herder now adds a third, namely the idea that Shakespearean drama is not really drama but, as he puts it, *Geschichte* (history)[38]. As we have seen, this point, first developed by Home, had already been explored by von Gerstenberg. According to Herder, however, it was not given the appropriate weight. In Shakespearean drama, Herder claims, the theatrical simply vanishes and so do scenery, imitation, and declamation. Shakespeare does not present us with theatre in the old-fashioned meaning of the term. He presents us with the world, people, passions, and truth[39].

Herder, in this context, mentions no names, but the argument draws not only on Home but also on the British poet Edward Young, whose *Conjectures on Original Composition* was translated into German in 1760, just a year after its first appearance in English. Shakespeare, Herder claims – reciting Young's argument (and completely neglecting the influence of Shakespeare's contemporaries) – is original. He gives voice to a natural drive, and does not imitate at all. The French classicists, by contrast, did precisely that. They looked at previous literature, i.e., Greek drama, and held it forth as an aesthetic ideal directly applicable to their own time. Hence they forgot about the relationship between art and world. Ultimately, Herder argues, the fact that Shakespeare, in his originality, produces *Geschichte* rather than drama means that he needs to be freed from the normative yolk of previous literature and poetics. Against von Gerstenberg's attempts at defending Shakespeare with reference to Aristotle, Herder finds Shakespearean drama too different to benefit from such a comparison.

With this argumentative gesture, the critical gist of the German Shakespeare debate is elevated to a new, philosophical level. It shifts

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37 Herder, "Shakespear (Erster Entwurf)", p. 524.

38 Herder, "Shakespear (Erster Entwurf)", p. 525.

39 Herder, "Shakespear (Erster Entwurf)", p. 526.

from the simple options of pros and cons to a discussion of the validity of ahistorical aesthetic norms in a historically developing art world.

8.

Herder's second draft, written about a year later, carries this train of thought a good step further, but also adds to it in terms of argumentative richness and sophistication. Whereas in the first draft Herder is happy merely to point out the originality of Shakespeare's plays, he now faces the deeper, philosophical conclusions to be drawn from this originality.

If every Shakespeare play is original and unique, Herder argues, then this must be reflected in our conception of art. The uniqueness of a play cannot be justified with reference to universal definitions or criteria. This, in turn, means that in the case of a drama like Shakespeare's, the *work* itself is forced to carry the responsibility of justifying its own existence[40].Without the aid of aesthetic imperatives, every work is required to answer the question as to why it is a work of art – and to do so in an original and non-imitative way. For us, having been through the aesthetic paradigms of romanticism and the avant-gardes of the twentieth century, the idea might be familiar. To Herder's audience, however, it was not.

Eager to explore the implications of Shakespeare's modernity, Herder raises a question that had so far been left out of the debate: could Greek poetics be at all normatively binding for Shakespeare? And, furthermore, can it be at all binding for us?[41] Herder, once more, emphasizes the co-belonging of work and world. History develops continuously. Because history is always underway, so also is art. What Sophocles could take for granted, Shakespeare could not. Sophocles, Herder thought, could write tragedies that were predicated upon an overreaching social unity. His was a relatively homogeneous world[42].

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40 Herder, "Shakespear (Erster Entwurf)", pp. 533, 535.

41 Herder, "Shakespear (Erster Entwurf)", p. 545.

42 This view of Greek society and Greek tragedy, later echoed in Schiller's contrast between naive and sentimental poetry, now seems far too simplistic. For a more nuanced account of Greek tragedy and life, see Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne*, Paris, François Maspero, 1972, and *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne deux*, Paris, Editions la Découverte, 1986.

Elizabethan England, by contrast, knew no such homogeneity. Hence, Shakespeare would be unfaithful to his world were he to present it as homogeneous and unified. He simply could not place before us an action that was self-contained in the sense of providing a classic, dramatic unity: one time, one place, and one tragic hero. Instead, he must reflect the world as fragmented and divided. Whereas Sophocles, in making his characters stick unwaveringly to one, and only one, belief-system, writes tragedies that resemble "a beautiful painting", Shakespearean drama is like an entire magic lantern[43]. But precisely in presenting us with the images of a magic lantern, jittery and ephemeral as they are, he also presents us with the unavoidable conditions of our art, of what we, with Hegel, may address as the art of modernity.

In other words, the form of Greek drama was not available to Shakespeare. Nor is it available to us. Modern drama cannot be measured by Aristotelian standards. Shakespeare, to stay with Herder's example, does not need Aristotle. Or rather, as Herder now suggests, if he needs an Aristotle it must be his *own* Aristotle[44]. But this Shakespearean Aristotle must be one who is not geared towards the production of universal aesthetic norms. He must be one who aspires to a skillful reading of the particular works and passages, thus indirectly reminding us that within the area of art and aesthetic expression there is no such thing as a finite set of general rules or criteria.

9.

Transcending the framework of the previous Shakespeare debate – the option of either scorning Shakespeare because he fails to comply with Aristotle, or stretching the boundaries of Aristotle's poetics so as to include Shakespearean drama – Herder, in the second draft, keeps open the possibility that an Aristotle of our time does in fact exist. Not surprisingly, the critic he is thinking of is, again, Home. According to Herder, Home had presented himself as an advocate of cultural diversity and the relativity of taste[45]. Influenced by G. L. L. Buffon's notion

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43 Herder, "Shakespear (Zweiter Entwurf)", p. 545.

44 Herder, "Shakespear (Zweiter Entwurf)", p. 548.

45 See Johann Gottfried Herder, *Kritischen Wälder zur Ästhetik*, especially "Viertes Wäldchen" (1769), in *Schriften zur Ästhetik und Literatur 1767-1781*.

of a natural history (and his understanding of the meaning of species as logical rather than real), he had attempted to ground a science of man in the historical description of various cultures and life-forms[46]. Rather than proposing a set of new normative guidelines in aesthetics, he questioned the relevance of trans-cultural, trans-historical guidelines for our understanding of art and culture.

The third and final version of the Shakespeare essay no longer appears to contain any notion of a Shakespearean Aristotle. It seems that Herder has changed his opinions about the normativity of the Greeks. What he now senses is that as soon as one leaves behind the mindset of French classicism, there is no real contradiction between Aristotle, on the one hand, and the call for a new poetics, on the other. Aristotle, he now finds, does not really speak out against the plea for a pluralistic aesthetics and art criticism. On the contrary, Aristotle's point of view may turn out to support such a position. The argument, one quickly realizes, is a version of that first developed by von Gerstenberg, although in Herder's essay it is given a philosophical emphasis and direction that could not have been envisaged by von Gerstenberg.

Needless to say, the strategy could hardly be slyer. Joining forces with Aristotle, Herder deprives his opponents of their chief witness in the case against Shakespeare and the new, non-classicist art. It is no surprise, then, that the third and final version of the essay sports a tone of triumph and victory.

In the first two drafts, Herder had sought to undermine the case of Shakespeare's critics as well as those who uncritically celebrated his work. Now his confidence has grown and he decides to address an even more comprehensive problem. Although it is not explicitly brought to the fore, the third version of the essay raises a question of the most universal nature: not just what makes Shakespeare's art modern, but what makes art art. What conception of art can we entertain if both Sophocles and Shakespeare lay equally justifiable claims to the terms 'art' and 'literature'?

The classicist paradigm maintained that the qualities of Sophoclean drama may be expressed in the form of aesthetic rules and guidelines, but Herder is not convinced. Is the greatness of Sophocles really to be found in his "rules"? No, he claims, it is not. Modern society with its

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[46] See John H. Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002, pp. 234-37.

"[h]istory, traditions, customs, religion, the spirit of the time, of the nation, of emotion, of language – [is] so far from Greece!"[47] 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"[48]. Sophocles lends voice to his world – the joys of his fellow citizens and the worries that plague them. Hence his genius does not consist in presenting a set of eternal aesthetic norms. Rather, his drama expresses the wider horizon of his culture, the ethical and political parameters of the society to which he belongs.

World and work are related – this, Herder now claims, is the lesson to be learned from the ancient Greeks. Grasping the close-knit relationship between work and world not only changes our approach to Greek tragedy but also our conception of Shakespeare. If Shakespeare is to match the genius of the Greek playwright, he cannot simply imitate the way Sophocles lent voice to his world but must lend voice to his own world, that of Elizabethan England. Only thus may he 'imitate' the spirit which made Sophocles' tragedies the great works they were; only by being distinctly unlike Sophocles may he be his equal. By adopting Sophocles' "rules", Shakespeare would simply miss out on the genius of the ancient tragedian. What we perceive as Sophocles' "rules" were not rules to him, and this applies to the other tragedians as well. "The artificiality of their rules", Herder claims, "was – not artifice at all! It was Nature"[49]. Only to us may these dramas appear as rule-bound, as artifice properly speaking; to the Greeks these "rules" were non-formalized, tacit aspects of tragedy-production and culture at large. In order to do what Aeschylus, Sophocles, or Euripides did, Shakespeare would have to let himself be guided by equally tacit and non-formalized sensibilities. This is the point promoted by the third and argumentatively most mature version of Herder's essay on Shake-

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47 Johann Gottfried Herder, "Shakespeare", in *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Winckelmann, Lessing, Hamann, Herder, Schiller, Goethe*, ed. Hugh B. Nisbet, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 167.

48 Herder, "Shakespeare", p. 164.

49 Herder, "Shakespeare", p. 162.

speare: that Shakespeare, as Herder puts it with a phrase he borrows from Young, "is Sophocles' brother, precisely where he seems to be so dissimilar, and inwardly he is wholly like him"[50].

10.

On the very face of it, Herder's idea of Shakespeare being Sophocles' brother despite the obvious differences between the two – or, stronger still, precisely because of the differences between the two, differences which, in turn, point to deeper similarities, namely the capacity to express the spirit of their age – seems like an early version of the idea, later to be associated with Kant and the romantics, that the work of art is by definition the work of genius; that there is, within the realm of art, no room for imitation and that genius speaks with the free and unhampered voice of nature. One can never learn how to be a genius, the romantics had claimed. Genius is a gift, the gift to produce works whose originality is recognized by the community of qualified judges of taste[51].

Such a conception, one may easily object, has little to say about premodern works, which were often produced with reference to traditional knowledge and craftsmanship. However, Herder is not claiming that every work of art is individual in this radical, romantic sense. In his view, such a model would not even provide us with an adequate description of modern art. Modern art is not brought forth in a creative vacuum. It is not the work of an isolated, individual genius. Rather, every work of art lends voice to the pre-reflective horizon that prevails in the community in which it was created. The work may well

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[50] Herder, "Shakespeare", p. 172.

[51] Interestingly, Kant's discussion of the misunderstanding of creative genius – as it is represented by the "charlatans" who "speak and decide like a genius even in matters that require most careful rational investigation" – entails a criticism of Herder. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment,* Engl. transl. by Werner S. Pluhar, London, Hackett, 1978, sect. 47, p. 310; and also John H. Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant's* Critique of Judgment, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 34. Kant's remarks seem unjustified, however, in particular when taking into account how Herder claims that mixing thinking and aesthetic practice, even within the realm of aesthetics, easily ends in "a monstrosity" in aesthetics ("ein Ungeheuer von Ästhetik"), Herder, *Kritischen Wälder zur Ästhetik*, "Viertes Wäldchen", p. 182. See also Robert E. Norton, *Herder's Aesthetics and the European Enlightenment*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1991, p. 182.

transcend the aesthetic resources available to this community, but it is not independent of them. An artwork is neither a purely individual expression nor an expression that may be adequately accounted for in terms of the already prevalent symbolic language of a given community. It is between these two extremes – that of individuality and that of shared symbolic resources – that a work of art, like all communication, is positioned. An ancient work may inhabit this field in a way that differs from a modern work. It cannot, however, transcend this area altogether. Nor is this an option open to the modern artistic mind[52]. However, if every work is unique in this way, understanding becomes a problem. This, one would assume, is even more so when relating to works that are historically or culturally distant.

The problems of historiography and understanding constitute a field in which Herder, in the early 1770s, had already been working for some time. In an early version of the *Critical Forests*, the *Older Critical Forestlet* (1767-68), written just three years before his first Shakespeare essay, Herder had been discussing a number of different historical models, but in particular the idea of a continuous, historical narrative or doctrinal structure (*Lehrgebäude*). Johann Joachim Winckelmann – the "best historian of the art of antiquity"[53], as Herder was later to put it in *This Too a Philosophy of History* – had been defending such a model. However, in Herder's opinion, a full teleology or system of history would require the recounting of every stage in history to be "*whole*, exhaust the subject, show it to us from all sides"[54]. If such an account existed, Herder says, he would praise its author as "the first, the greatest"[55]. Yet such an account remains utopian, beyond the reach for "us one-sidedly seeing human beings"[56]. Hence, realizing that the turn towards a systematic account of history is the point where "historical seeing stops and prophecy begins"[57], Herder remarks laconically that

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[52] According to John H. Zammito, it applies that "[f]or Herder, the uniqueness of an author was always a function of his historical situatedness", *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology*, p. 340.

[53] Johann Gottfried Herder, "This Too a Philosophy of History", in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. and Engl. transl. by Michael N. Forster, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 283.

[54] Johann Gottfried Herder, "Older Critical Forestlet", in *Philosophical Writings*, p. 258.

[55] Herder, "Older Critical Forestlet", p. 258.

[56] Herder, "Older Critical Forestlet", p. 259.

[57] Herder, "Older Critical Forestlet", p. 259.

he would "prefer to think"[58], i.e., to turn hermeneutics and the epistemological problems of history into a subject of philosophical scrutiny and discussion.

As expounded in the Shakespeare essay – both in Herder's hands-on engagement with Shakespeare's work and in his theoretical reflections on interpretation – the capacity to overcome historical (or cultural) distance is not something that we can take for granted. Rather, it poses a problem for the interpreter. A work of art cannot be understood merely in terms of its effective history, the way in which its meaning gets elaborated through the gradually richer fabric of spirit's self-interpretation. This does not mean that we have no access to historical texts at all, i.e., that they are bound to remain alien. What it means is that the finely tuned historical mind must be suspicious of over-generalized models, and turn, rather, towards philological work. This is an idea which gradually matures and gets clearer throughout the three editions of Herder's essay on Shakespeare, as it moves from a defense of Shakespeare against those who, with reference to Aristotle, either reject or excuse his work, to a full-fledged discussion of the prejudices with which we perceive Aristotle as well as Shakespeare.

11.

Why, then, does this imply a call for a genuinely modern hermeneutics? In order to see why this is so, it might, again, be useful to turn to Hegel and the way in which his understanding of tradition and history has influenced the direction of later hermeneutics. In this context, one cannot miss noting how Hegel has been particularly important for Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, the work which more or less coined the current use of the term hermeneutics. Hegel, Gadamer claims, came to determine the direction of his attempt to liberate himself from what he, rightly or not, takes to be the subjectivist legacy of Friedrich Schleiermacher's and Wilhelm Dilthey's notions of a critical method in understanding. By emphasizing how the past presents itself to us against a background of continuous historical mediation, Hegel paves the way for his own conception of the

[58] Herder, "Older Critical Forestlet", p. 258.

productivity of tradition[59]. Gadamer, however, does not go all the way with Hegel. In particular, he is worried that Hegel's notion of absolute spirit testifies to a problematic idealism. As far as Gadamer is concerned, there is no end to philosophy, no point at which phenomenology may culminate in the lucidity of a grand logical system[60].

Hegel's idea of reason being able fully to account for its own historical development is, as we have seen, part of his attempt critically to carry on the legacy of early modern philosophy: the turn towards the self-grounding of thought and, furthermore, the connection between the autonomy of reason and its capacity for self-reflection. This is another point at which Gadamer hesitates. In his view, reason is not autonomous in the way the idealist tradition took it to be. Being historically situated, reason is always conditioned by a set of prejudices and assumptions which it cannot scrutinize *in toto*. Through its dialogical interaction with texts and expressions of the past, reason may well expand its horizon, but this, in Gadamer's view, is an ongoing process, not the final outcome of spirit's journey through history. A point of full self-understanding is not within the reach of final reason, not even reason as it develops towards the phases of late modernity.

At this point, Herder offers a third possibility[61]. A modern hermeneutics, he suggests, cannot be grounded in the idea of a continuous, all-embracing tradition. Indeed, in his view, such an idea would

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[59] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Engl. transl. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, New York, Continuum, 1994, pp. 277-85.

[60] Thus Gadamer, although basically Hegelian in his orientation, sets out "to restore to a place of honor what Hegel had termed 'bad infinity' [*schlechte Unendlichkeit*]", reformulated in terms of the (Platonic) idea of the "unending dialogue of the soul with itself", Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Reflections on My Philosophical Journey", Engl. transl. by Richard E. Palmer, in *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lewis E. Hahn, Chicago, Open Court, 1997, p. 37. See also Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 369.

[61] Indeed, throughout the early 1940s, Gadamer discusses Herder's potential for a contemporary hermeneutics, but, importantly, he does not turn to the young Herder's hermeneutics but to the later Herder's attempt to rescue the notion of *Volk* from its democratic interpretation. Herder, he claims, was the visionary of a new fundamental force in the public sphere; this is the life of the folk. He perceives the reality first in the voice of the people in songs; he recognizes the supportive and nurturing power of the mother tongue, he traces in this the imprinting force of history that fuses with the natural conditions of blood, climate, landscape and so on. Thus, through him, the word "folk [Volk]" achieves in Germany a new depth and a new power entirely remote from that political catchword, a world apart from the political slogans of "democracy". Quoted from Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1987, p. 71. See also Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Volk und Geschichte in Denken Herders*, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1942, pp. 22ff.

not really live up to the challenges of a self-responsive reason. Like Gadamer, Herder is cautious to stress the limitations of historical reason, but unlike Gadamer he finds this incompatible with the idea of an all-encompassing, continuous tradition. History, Herder emphasizes, is marked by "leaps and gaps and sudden transitions"[62]. Within this field, "every *general image*, every *general concept*, is only an *abstraction*"[63]. Hence, what is needed is not an all-encompassing synthesis-formation (in the form of a speculative logic or a continuous *Wirkungsgeschichte* [effective history]) but the willingness to approach historical works on their own terms. Self-authentication, on this model, is precisely not to act on the notion of an unbroken tradition, be it in the Hegelian or the Gadamerian version, but to realize that the historicity of reason compels us to reflect on our own limitations in the encounter with culturally distant life-forms[64].

Admittedly, it would not be right to claim that such an insight is completely absent in the work of Hegel and Gadamer. Still, as I have been trying to show, the concern for the alterity of past cultures, even the cultures of our own tradition, is given a different twist, a much clearer emphasis, in Herder's writings on art and history, and in particular in his work on Shakespeare. According to Herder, however, the limitations of historical reason do not imply that we are boxed within our own culture, but beg the kind of intellectual cosmopolitanism that comes only from the study of other cultures. Hence, what makes Herder's hermeneutics, as it develops throughout his early years, genuinely modern, is the suggestion, to be developed further in works such as *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784-91), that the historian should not strive towards grand historical syntheses, but rather, taking differences, leaps, and discontinuities into account, plead for tolerance and cultural understanding. This – the idea that a modern hermeneutic mind is in this sense responsible for its own interpretative endeavors – is the hermeneutic challenge that opens up in the wake of Herder's engagement with early modern literature and thinking.

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62 Johann Gottfried Herder, "Ossian and the Songs of Ancient Peoples", in *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism*, p. 160.

63 Herder, "This Too a Philosophy of History", p. 293.

64 As John H. Zammito puts it, "[t]he crucial innovation in Herder's hermeneutics is recognizing the openness of the subject, not simply of the object, of interpretation", *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology*, p. 339.