

Johann Gottfried Herder

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Johann Gottfried Herder (Mohrungen, 25 August 1744 - Weimar, 18 December 1803) was a German philosopher, theologian and man of letters. He is considered the most important precursor to German historicism. His work, which is vast and often fragmentary, contains fundamental ideas that would greatly influence subsequent German and European culture: firstly, the idea of the 'people' (*Volk*) conceived as an 'organic unity' that develops historically following its own laws. Secondly, a conception of language, in which the latter is not only understood as an expression but also as a 'mode of development' of the human spirit: man creates and 'creates himself' historically through language (man is its 'creature and creator') – writes Herder in his essay *Treatise on the Origin of Language* (1772) – thereby laying the foundations of a tradition that leads from Humboldt to the linguistics of Romanticism.

According to Thomas H. Brobjer, it is probable that Nietzsche from his Pforta years onwards was already familiar with some of Herder's writings, such as the *Letters concerning the Progress of Humanity* (1792-93), since in his time it was considered required reading (Brobjer 1999 p.302f.). It is difficult, however, to establish when and how Nietzsche came to know the philosopher's work, and exactly which works he read, not only because Herder is completely absent from his library (Campioni et al. 2002) but also because he is very rarely mentioned in Nietzsche's work and if this is the case, almost always in a polemical way. The first occurrence of Herder's name goes back to a note of 1869-70, in which Herder is called "the ideal dilettante", as opposed to Lessing as "the ideal scholar" (NL 1868-70, 2[12]: KSA 7, p. 49, my transl.). As he writes two years later: "Goethe could tell fairy tales, Herder was a preacher" (NL 1872, 19[223]: KSA 7 p. 493 my transl.). And again: Herder is "pastoral" compared to Lessing and Goethe (NL 1973, 27[68]: KSA 7, p. 607). Herder, however, is not completely overlooked, as is shown by another note of 1872 in which Herder is mentioned among the representatives of "German aesthetics", together with Lessing, Winckelmann and Hamann (NL 1872, 19[286]: KSA 7, p. 509). Even the long aphorism in WS (the only one entirely devoted to Herder), though strongly polemical, is not without ambiguity. Herder is in fact

¹ This article has been funded by the European Union (BildungLearning, ERC project No. 101043433). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

described as an 'untimely' thinker, ahead of his own time. And yet – as Nietzsche writes – his intuitions and strong "sense of smell" are deceptive, because even if Herder "saw and grasped the first fruits of the season before anyone else", he did not know how to make them grow: "the restlessness of spring pushed him out, but he himself was not spring! [...] He did not sit at the table of those who really create" (WS § 118: KSA 2, p. 602, my transl.). Herder, this "ambitious priest" – as Nietzsche goes on – was in this sense a "restless guest, the pretaste of all the spiritual dishes that the Germans in half a century accumulated from all the kingdoms of the world and time", and from this inability derives his restlessness, his envy and hypocrisy (WS § 118, KSA 2, p. 602, my transl.). In this sense Herder can be counted as one of those 'spirits in chains' and as one of those men of 'resentment', incapable of original self-assertion or self-overcoming: "something bent and unfree stuck to him" (WS § 118: KSA 2, p. 602, my transl.).

It is difficult to establish from which sources Nietzsche draws in elaborating his critique. According to Andrea Christian Bertino, a certain affinity can be found with some passages of Schopenhauer's *Parerga und Paralipomena*, or of Jean Paul, who already described Herder as "not a star of the first or any other magnitude [...], but a league of stars, from which each then spells out any constellation." (Jean Paul 1959 p. 443, in: Bertino 2011 p.4, footnote 5). Yet the insistence on Herder's 'untimely' character is specifically Nietzschean and hinges on a broader critique of the 'classical German ideal', of which Herder and 'his contemporaries' would be the inventors (NL 11[312]: KSA 13, p. 132). Included among the 'five progenitors of German literature' (excluding Goethe, a 'supranational' author) Herder demonstrates in an exemplary way how there are no 'classics' that represent German culture out of time (Zittel 2011, p. 386): Herder's writings in fact "were always either new or outdated; for the finest and strongest minds (as for Lichtenberg), for example, even Herder's main work, his *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1784-1791) was something outdated as soon as it appeared" (WS, §125: KSA 2, p. 607 my transl.). From this point of view, the criticism of Herder is not without its ambiguity: by reformulating the concept of the 'classic' not as an 'origin' but as something developing in history ("the classics are not *planters* of intellectual and literary virtues, but *perfecters*" WS, §125: KSA 2, p. 607 my transl.) Nietzsche thus criticises Herder, but at the same time takes up the "discipline of history" that Herder himself taught (NL 1885-1886 2[188]: KSA 12 p. 160).

Beyond from these ambiguities, Nietzsche's judgement of Herder remains highly critical, particularly where he deals with *the* question of the origin of language. As Tilman Borsche shows (1994 p. 116), already in the preparatory notes for his lectures on Latin grammar (1869-70) Nietzsche mentions Herder as one of the authors "who still lack the correct knowledge" on the

essence and origin of language, "diffused only since Kant" (KGW II/2 p. 186). Nietzsche wrote in his notes: "A hundred years ago in Germany, the Berlin Academy held a prize competition on the theme 'On the Origin of Language'. In 1770, Herder's paper was awarded the prize. Man is said to have been born for language. 'The genesis of language is thus an impulse as intimate as the impulse of the embryo to be born when its development has reached maturity'. But he shares with his predecessors the idea that language is internalised from sounds that are emitted: the interjection as the mother of language: whereas it is rather its negation." (KGW II/2 p. 186 my transl.).

The passage that Nietzsche quotes here is to be found in the first pages of the second part of the *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, in which Herder answers the following question posed by the Berlin Academy: "In what way the human being was most suitably able and obliged to invent language for himself" (cf. Herder 2004, p. 127). Herder's answer revolves around the particular notion of *Besonnenheit* ('awareness') introduced already in the first part of the treatise (Herder 2004 p.84). It is a particular "disposition" for reflection that Herder considers as the *differentia specifica* of human being. Unlike animals, which are guided by instincts for the accomplishment of specific tasks (like the bee in building its honey cell, Herder 2004 p. 82), man, according to Herder, is not bound to the physiological dimension of instincts, and for this very reason possesses "*a larger prospect*": "each thought is not an immediate work of nature, but precisely because of this it can become his own work" (Herder 2004 p. 82). According to Herder, this ability to free oneself from 'nature' and to know, will and act freely (cf. Herder 2004 p. 82f) , is possible because of that bundle of all human forces (sensibility and instinct, fantasy and reason) that he leads back to a "single spiritual force" that he calls *Besonnenheit*. Although closely linked to the instinctual dimension, *Besonnenheit* is in fact at the same time independent from the latter: it is the 'disposition for reflection', associated with a certain physiological organisation, that allows man to freely manage and direct his sensory and cognitive nature. Thus, unlike the bee – whose instinct is bound to a function – man can "he has free space to practice in many things, and hence to improve himself constantly" (Herder 2004 p.82). To return to the question posed by the Berlin Academy ("by what means will men arrive at invention of language"), Herder points to the concept of *Besonnenheit* as a possible answer: it is in fact the 'disposition for reflection' that leads man to the invention of language. "If now it has been proved that not even the slightest action of his understanding could occur without a characteristic word, then the first moment of taking-awareness [*Besinnung*] was also the moment for the inward emergence of language." (Herder 2004 p. 128). "All conditions of awareness in him [the human being] become linguistic; his chain of thoughts becomes a chain of

words" (Herder 2004 p. 131); in this sense, *Besonnenheit* is the "the necessary genetic basis for the arising of a language for" (Herder 2004 p. 82),

The hypothesis of a non-instinctual but cognitive (and therefore private) dimension as the origin of language is precisely the element from which Nietzsche distances himself in the notes for his lectures on Latin grammar. Indeed, some paragraphs of Nietzsche's notes appear as a direct reply to the quoted passages from Herder: "It remains only possible to consider language as a product of instinct, as in bees - ants etc. Instinct, however, *is not* conscious reflection, not the simple consequence of bodily organisation, not the result of a mechanism in the brain, not the effect of a mechanism which comes to the spirit from outside and which is foreign to its nature, but it is the most proper performance of the individual or of a mass originating in character" (KGW II/2 p. 186 my transl.). In these notes, Nietzsche contrasts Herder's theses with a theological conception of instinct (a "goal-oriented instinct without consciousness", that Kant was the first to recognise). However, this conception is in fact abandoned soon hereafter, as the reflections on language in WL show.

According to most interpreters (e.g. Fürst 1988 p. 287f., Borsche 1994 p. 121, Bertino 2011 p. 6) Nietzsche's strong criticism of Herder's philosophy of language cannot conceal the intellectual proximity between the two authors. Firstly, although Herder points to a non-instinctive but reflexive origin of language, he does not deny the influence of the physiological dimension on the production and articulation of linguistic signs: the very choice of the term *Besonnenheit* in fact indicates how the reflexive act is connected with sensuality (with the *Sinne*, (the 'senses') and thus the attempt – that also Nietzsche shares – to overcome the dualism between the instinctive-physiological dimension and the conscious-reflexive dimension. From this point of view, it can be stated, as Bertino does (2011 p.8), that both Herder and Nietzsche reject a traditional view of language as a mere instrument for the communication of thought, capable of adequately representing external reality, in favour of with a 'constructive-metaphorical' one: language – through its metaphorical transfers – as something responsible for the development of conscious thought. Indeed, from the moment that Nietzsche, at the end of the 1860s, begins to speculate on the linguistic (grammatical) origin of our knowledge, he is not far from Herder who, in an extremely original way, had already reflected on the metaphorical transfers of language ("*Metaschematisieren*": Herder 2006 p. 358) that structure all constructions of the mind. According to Michael N. Forster, Nietzsche in WL reproduces "this whole Herderian line of argument almost exactly, [...] pointing out that, besides more obvious ways in which metaphors play important roles in language, they also do so in grammatical gender, as well as in language's pervasive involvement of a creative and imaginative

transfer between incommensurable media when we pass from object to sensory stimulus to sensory image to idea and language." (Forster 2018 p.68 f.). As Bertino suggests, a possible mediator between Nietzsche and Herder could also be represented by Gustav Gerber who in his work *Die Sprache als Kunst* (1871) quotes Herder's *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* to support the thesis of a critique of human knowledge as a critique of its linguistic forms (Bertino 2011 p. 7). From this point of view, it is possible not only to hypothesise an indirect influence of Herder on Nietzsche through the reading of Gerber. As Borsche points out (1994 p.129) the very few mentions of Herder (that are all, as we have seen, particularly polemical) render a philologically grounded reconstruction of Herder's (direct or indirect) influence on Nietzsche's work very difficult. Nevertheless, the "intellectual affinity" between the two authors appears evident (Borsche 1994 p. 112f). The conception of the constructive-metaphorical (and not representative) function of language in fact leads both authors to reflect on the anthropomorphic nature of everything that is considered "natural" or purely "spiritual": insofar as it is already linguistic, it is recognised as physiologically conditioned and the result of a historical process. The particular path undertaken by Herder and Nietzsche starting from the 'myth of the origin of language' thus meets with the shared attempt to show – through the role of language – the profound link between natural history and cultural history (cf. Bertino 2011). From this point of view, although a direct or indirect influence of Herder on Nietzsche cannot be fully demonstrated, the profound affinities between the two authors require – as many scholars have suggested (e.g. Jung 1966 p.51, Albrecht 1979 p. 243, Borsche 1994 p. 129, Bertino 2011 p.16f.) – to move beyond a purely philological research. In more general terms, the challenge seems to consist in placing Nietzsche's theory of language in the same tradition as Herder, Gerber and Humboldt, one that understand language as the cornerstone of the analysis of man and human culture.

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