



Results of a Comparison of Different Peoples' Poetry in Ancient and Modern Times¹ (1797)

Johann Gottfried Herder

The German philosopher, poet, and literary critic Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) was a key figure in the articulation of the idea of national language and culture, without which the study of national literatures and therefore of comparative literature would be inconceivable. Born in a poor household in eastern Prussia, Herder educated himself largely from his father's Bible and songbook. He managed to get a college education, studying philosophy while preparing for the ministry, before embarking on a career as a teacher and wide-ranging thinker; his later years were spent in Weimar, where his friend Goethe had secured him a government post. Deeply concerned with the philosophy of language and of history, Herder positioned himself in his literary work against the cultural predominance of models from classical antiquity on the one hand and the influence of French letters on the other. He argued for an organic connection between a people and a language and exhorted the Germans to return to the spontaneous utterance of the folk. Living in a Germany still divided into small principalities, Herder elaborated an idea of the nation founded not on the state but on the organic unity of a people, a unity expressed in a *Volksgeist*, or national spirit. Literature holds a privileged place in his thought as the most direct reflection and cultivation of national character.

In Herder's view, the greatness of any given literary expression is not to be judged according to a single universal standard; rather, each

language develops its own particular genius in its own particular context. As part of his advocacy for the return to common speech and popular language in poetry, he avidly collected folk expression, particularly song. Arguing against the divine provenance of language in his treatise *On the Origin of Language* (1772), Herder laid the grounds for the study of comparative philology. His most famous work, *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1784–91), was widely read at the time, particularly in Eastern Europe, where it inspired many national literary movements in places lacking the distinct political form of the nation-state. During the nineteenth century his ideas reverberated powerfully in the Americas and elsewhere, and his work became fundamental for the philosophy of Hegel and Nietzsche, among many others. In the 1797 essay given here, Herder mounts an argument for understanding German literature as an integral expression of German culture, to be valued on its own terms as highly as the productions of France, Italy, or ancient Greece and Rome. Poetry, he famously argues, is protean and must fully take on the form of each national spirit it expresses.

Poetry is a Proteus among the peoples; it changes form according to the peoples' language, customs, habits, according to their temperament, the climate, even according to their accent.

As nations migrate, as languages mingle and change, as new matters stir men, as their inclinations take another direction and their endeavours another aim, as new models influence their composition of images and concepts, even as the tongue, this little limb, moves differently and the ear gets used to different sounds: thus the art of poetry changes not only among different nations, but also within one people. Among the Greeks poetry was a different thing at Homer's time than at the time of Longinus,² even with respect to its very conception. The associations accompanying poetry were utterly different to the Romans and to the monk, to the Arab and the crusader, to the scholar recovering times long past, and to the poet and the people in different ages of different nations. Even the term itself is an abstract, ambiguous concept, which, unless it is clearly supported by distinct cases, vanishes like a phantom in the clouds. Thus the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns was very empty, as people hardly had anything specific in mind.³

It became the emptier because a mistaken standard of comparison—or none at all—was applied: for on what principles should the ranking be decided? The art of poetry considered as an *object*? How many minute diagnoses would be needed to ascertain the epitome of perfection—in each form and genre, considering space and time, ends and means—and to apply them unbiasedly to everything being compared! Or should the poet's art be considered with respect to the producer: to what extent one surpassed another in appropriating the fortunate gifts of nature or a more propitious situation of circumstances, in more diligently making use of what had been there before him and what was lying around him, in having a nobler goal, and in employing his powers more wisely in order to attain this goal? What another ocean of comparison! The more standards have been posited for the poets of one nation or of several peoples, the more vain effort has been expended. Everybody assesses and ranks poets according to his favorite notions, according to the fashion in which he got to know them, according to the impression that one or another has made on him. Along with their own ideal of perfection, educated people possess their individual standard of how to attain it, which they prefer not to swap with someone else's.

Thus we must not blame any nation for preferring their poets to all others and for not wanting to relinquish them in exchange for foreign ones; after all, they are *its* poets. They have thought in *its* language, have exercised their imaginations in *its* context; they have felt the needs of the nation within which they were raised and have answered them in turn. Why then should the nation not feel *with them*, too, since a bond of language, of thoughts, needs, and feelings firmly ties them together?

The Italians, the French, and the English, being biased, think highly of their poets while tending unjustly to deplore other peoples' poets; only the German has let himself be seduced into excessively exaggerating the merit of foreign peoples, particularly that of the English and the French, thereby losing sight of himself. Certainly, to Young (for nothing is said here about Shakespeare, Milton, Thomson, Fielding, Goldsmith, Sterne) I do not begrudge his perhaps overblown adoration among us after he was introduced through Ebert's translation;⁴ a translation that does not merely possess all the qualities of an original, but that—by creating a musical prose and through the rich moral annotations from other nations—at once corrects and softens the exaggerations of the English original. But yet the Germans will always have to meet the reproach of an indecisive lukewarmness toward the purest poets of their own language, who are generally forgotten

and ignored to a degree unheard of in any neighboring nation. How shall our taste, our way of writing be formed? How shall our language be determined and regulated, if not through the best writers of our nation? How shall we acquire patriotism and love of our fatherland, if not through its language, through the most excellent thoughts and sensations, expressed in it like a stored-up treasure? Assuredly, we would not still be erring, after a thousand years of constant writing in our language, through many a dubious linguistic construction, if we only knew, from youth onwards, our best writers and elected them as guides.

On the other hand, no love of our nation should prevent us from recognizing *everywhere* the good that could only be increasingly produced in the great progression of times and peoples. That sultan of old rejoiced over the many religions that were worshipping God in his kingdom, every one of them in their specific manner; it seemed to him like a pretty, colorful meadow, in which all sorts of flowers blossomed. The same holds for the poetry of peoples and eras on our globe; in every era it has been the embodiment of a given nation's faults and perfections, a mirror of its dispositions, the expression of its highest ideal (*oratio sensitiva anima perfecta*).⁶ Juxtaposing these pictures (ideals more and less accomplished, true and false) yields an informative pleasure. In this gallery of various ways of thinking, inclinations, and wishes we are sure to get to know eras and nations more deeply than we would by treading the deceiving, desolate path of their political and military history. In the latter we rarely learn more of a people than how it was governed and destroyed; in the former we learn about its way of thinking, what it wished and what it wanted, how it rejoiced and how it was guided by its teachers or inclinations. Admittedly, we still lack many resources for achieving this overview into the souls of the peoples. Aside from the Greeks and Romans, dark clouds are still hanging above the Middle Ages, from which everything sprang for us Europeans. Meinhard's weak *Essay on the Italian Poets* does not even get as far as Tasso,⁷ let alone that anything similar could have been accomplished for other nations. An *Essay on the Spanish Poets* has died along with the erudite connoisseur of this literature, Dieze, editor of Velázquez.⁸

There are three paths by which one can achieve an outlook over this flowery and fructiferous field of human thought, and all of them have been trodden.

In accordance with his theory, Eschenburg's popular collection of examples⁹ takes the path of *genres and forms*; an instructive pathway for young students, if they are guided by an adroit teacher: for they can be led astray by a term that is applied to widely different things. The works of Homer,

Virgil, Ariosto, Milton and Klopstock all go by the name of epic, and yet they are very distinct productions according to their inherent conceptions of art, to say nothing of the spirit that animates them. As writers of tragedies, Sophocles, Corneille and Shakespeare have nothing in common but the term; the genius of their artistry is utterly different. The same is true for all genres of literature, all the way down to the epigram.

Others have classified the poets according to *sentiments*, on which Schiller in particular has expressed himself very subtly and admirably.¹⁰ If only the sentiments did not tend to blur together so much! What poet stays true to one kind of sentiment, so that it could define his character, especially in different works? Often, he strikes a chord composed of many or even all notes, which enhance each other through dissonance. The world of sensations is a realm of ghosts, often of atoms; only the hand of the creator may shape forms from it.

What I would call the third natural method is to leave every flower in place and to scrutinize it there just as it is, according to era and form, from the root to the crown. The most humble genius hates ranking and comparison, and would rather rank first in the village than second behind Caesar. Lichen, moss, fern and the richest spice plant: each flourishes in its own position in the divine order.

Poetry has been classified *subjectively* and *objectively*, according to the objects it describes and according to the sentiments with which it portrays objects; a true and useful viewpoint that seems justified for the characterization of specific poets, such as Homer and Ossian, Thomson and Kleist et al.¹¹ For Homer tells the stories of a prehistoric world without palpable personal involvement on his part; Ossian sings them from his wounded heart, from his bittersweet memories; Thomson describes the seasons as nature gives them; Kleist sings his spring as a rhapsody of views inspired by sentiment, often branching out into thoughts about himself and his friends. And even this distinction is but a weak measure of the poets and eras of poetry: for Homer, too, does take an interest in his objects, as a Greek, as a narrator, like the balladeers and writers of fabliaux in the Middle Ages, and like Ariosto, Spenser, Cervantes and Wieland in more recent times. To have done more would have been outside his calling and would have disrupted his narrative. And yet as far as the arrangement and depiction of his characters is concerned, Homer too sings most humanly; where it appears to be otherwise, the difference lies in the ways of thinking of different times and is easily explained. I am confident that I could discover among the Greeks every single human attitude and disposition, perhaps in the most beautiful degree and expression—only everything in relation to its time and

place. Aristotle's *Poetics* unsurpassably categorizes plot, characters, passions and attitudes.

Man has been the same at all times; yet he has always expressed himself according to the conditions wherein he lived. Greek and Roman poetry is so varied in its wishes and laments, in its descriptions filled with joy and delight! The same holds for the poetry of the monks, of the Arabs, of the moderns. No new category caused the great difference that has arisen between the Orient and the Occident, between the Greeks and us, but rather the mingling of peoples, of religions and languages, eventually the progress of customs, of innovations, of knowledge and experience—a difference hard to subsume beneath one word. When I used the expression “poet of reflection” for some moderns, this was imperfect as well: for a poet of *mere reflection* is actually no poet.

Imagination and *temperament*, the *realm of the soul*, are poetry's ground and soil. By using words and characters poetry evokes an ideal of bliss, of beauty and dignity, slumbering in your heart; it is the most perfect expression of language, senses, and the temperament. No poet can escape the inherent law of poetry; it shows what he does and what he does not possess.

Nor can one separate the eye and the ear. Poetry is no mere painting or sculpture, which might objectively present pictures as they are; poetry is *speech* and has *purpose*. It affects the inner sense, not the artist's eye; and with anybody who is educated or being educated this inner sense comprises *temperament* and *moral nature*, and hence among poets a *reasonable* and *humane* purpose. Speech has something *infinite* to it; it makes deep impressions, which are in turn enhanced by the harmonic art of poetry. Thus a poet could never want to be merely a painter. He is an artist by virtue of impressive speech that paints the depicted object onto a *spiritual*, *moral*, that is *infinite* ground, into the *personality*, into the *soul*.

Should not some kind of *progress* be inevitable here as well, just as with all successions of the developing effects of nature? I do not doubt this at all (progress being understood properly). In language and customs we will never become Greeks and Romans; we do not want to become them, either. Does not the spirit of poetry, through all the oscillations and eccentricities in which it has so far bestirred itself among nations and times, increasingly strive to abandon all false ornament, all rudeness of sensation, and to look for the center of all human endeavour, namely the *true*, *whole*, *moral nature of humanity*, the *philosophy of life*? The comparison of eras makes this very plausible to me. Even in ages of the greatest crudity of taste

we may hold fast to the great rule of nature *tendimus in Arcadiam, tendimus*¹²
Our path leads toward the land of innocence, truth and morality.

Notes

1. From Herder's *Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität* (Letters for the Advancement of Humanity, 1797). In his *Sämmliche Werke*, ed. Bernhard Suphan (Berlin: Weibmannsche Buchhandlung, 1883), 18:134–40. Translated by Jan Kueveler.
2. Dionysius Longinus was the supposed author of the important first-century Greek treatise *On the Sublime*.
3. The “Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes” was a literary and cultural dispute that arose in late-seventeenth-century France between classicists who argued for the unsurpassable greatness of Greek and Roman writers versus proponents of Enlightenment values and new modes of expression.
4. Edward Young’s poem *Night Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality* (1742–45) was translated into German by J. A. Ebert in 1751 and was extremely popular in Germany, though Young was a minor figure in comparison to writers like Shakespeare and Milton.
5. Referring to the sixteenth-century Ottoman sultan Suleiman the Magnificent.
6. “Speech that is sensitive to the soul’s perfections.”
7. Herder is referring to Johann Nicolaus Meinhard’s book *Versuche über den Charakter und die Werke der besten italienischen Dichter* (1763–64). Torquato Tasso had lived two centuries before Meinhard’s time.
8. J. A. Dieze published an extensively annotated German translation of Luis José Velázquez de Velasco’s *Orígenes de la poesía castellana* in 1769.
9. Johann Joachim Eschenburg had compiled a massive collection entitled *Beispieldsammlung zur Theorie und Literatur der Schönen Wissenschaften* (Collection of examples of the theory and literature of the aesthetic sciences; 8 vols., 1788–95).
10. Schiller’s influential aesthetic treatise *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* (1794–95) contrasted the “naïve,” instinctive artistry of poets like Homer and Goethe with the “sentimental,” reflective writing of poets such as Ariosto and himself.
11. James Thomson’s *The Seasons* (1726–30) depicted a balanced, harmonious nature; Ewald Christian von Kleist (1715–59) was known for his poem “Der Frühling,” a passionate celebration of spring.
12. “Let us make our way to Arcadia”—the home of pastoral simplicity in ancient Greece.