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AFTER HERDER

*Philosophy of Language
in the German Tradition*

MICHAEL
FORSTER

After Herder

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German Tradition*

Michael N. Forster

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To the memory of Michael Frede (1940–2007)

Acknowledgments

This volume and its companion volume *German Philosophy of Language from Schlegel to Hegel and Beyond* are dedicated to the memory of Michael Frede, who, shortly after retiring from the Chair in the History of Philosophy at Oxford University in 2005, died tragically while swimming in the sea near Delphi in the summer of 2007. Together with Raymond Geuss, he supervised my doctoral dissertation on Hegel's reception of ancient skepticism at Princeton University in the early 1980s. He was an intellectually inspiring and generous teacher, and remained a constant source of inspiration and generosity throughout the rest of his life. Michael is known, among many other things, for having helped to expand the horizons of ancient philosophers beyond the staple thinkers, Plato and Aristotle, to include in addition the riches of Hellenistic philosophy. This volume and its companion volume attempt to do something similar for work on German philosophy: to expand its horizons beyond such staple figures as Kant and Hegel in order to include in addition a group of less-well-known philosophers from the same period who shared a profound concern with language. I hope that Michael would have liked this project. There could be no surer criterion of its success.

This project also owes much to many other individuals and institutions. In a way it began its life at Oxford University in the late 1970s, where I was an undergraduate and had the good fortune to learn about German philosophy from the tutorials, lectures, and publications of Patrick Gardiner, Peter Hacker, Alan Ryan, Peter Strawson, Charles Taylor, and Ralph Walker. The project's second home was Princeton University in the early 1980s, where I benefited greatly from the teaching and publications of Michael Frede, Raymond Geuss, Saul Kripke, and the late Richard Rorty. Together with Michael Frede, Raymond Geuss deserves special mention in this connection. He inspired and nurtured my work on German philosophy when I was a doctoral student, and has continued to do so ever since. Another important early source of inspiration was a year I spent at Heidelberg University in 1984–5, where I especially benefited from the generous hospitality and erudition of Hans Friedrich Fulda. Subsequently, visits to the Friedrich-Schiller University in Jena—the original home of some of the intellectual developments discussed in this project—have been another invaluable source of intellectual stimulation. In this connection, I would especially like to thank Klaus Vieweg and Wolfgang Welsch for their warm hospitality and their rich learning. This book also owes a huge debt to the

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I would also like to thank Oxford University Press and its Philosophy editor Peter Momtchiloff for bringing this project to fruition. Peter's support and advice during the project's development were extremely valuable. In particular, it was he who encouraged me to expand it from a rather haphazard collection

of essays into the much more organized and comprehensive treatment that it now is.

About half of the essays in the present volume have been published before in some form. I would therefore like to thank the original publishers of the following essays for allowing me to re-publish them here: “Johann Gottfried von Herder” and “Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*;¹ “Herder’s Philosophy of Language, Interpretation, and Translation: Three Fundamental Principles,” *The Review of Metaphysics*; “Gods, Animals, and Artists: Some Problem Cases in Herder’s Philosophy of Language,” *Inquiry* (by Taylor and Francis); “Herder’s Importance as a Philosopher,” *Von der Logik zur Sprache*, ed. R. Bubner and G. Hindrichs (Klett-Cotta, 2007); “The Liberal Temper in Classical German Philosophy: Freedom of Thought and Expression,” *Internationales Jahrbuch des Deutschen Idealismus/International Yearbook of German Idealism*; “Schleiermacher’s Hermeneutics: Some Problems and Solutions,” *The Harvard Review of Philosophy*.

Last but not least I would like to thank my family for their love, support, and patience, especially my wife Noha, my daughter Alya, and my parents Michael and the late Kathleen Forster.

Notes

1. These articles are available online at <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/herder/>> and <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/schleiermacher/>> respectively.

Contents

<i>Abbreviations</i>	xi
Introduction	I
Part I: Herder	
1. Johann Gottfried Herder	9
2. Herder's Philosophy of Language, Interpretation, and Translation: Three Fundamental Principles	55
3. Gods, Animals, and Artists: Some Problem Cases in Herder's Philosophy of Language	91
4. Herder's Importance as a Philosopher	131
5. Herder on Genre	163
6. Herder and the Birth of Modern Anthropology	199
7. The Liberal Temper in Classical German Philosophy: Freedom of Thought and Expression	244
Part II: Hamann	
8. Johann Georg Hamann	283
9. Hamann's Seminal Importance for the Philosophy of Language?	301
Part III: Schleiermacher	
10. Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher	323
11. Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics: Some Problems and Solutions	362
12. Herder, Schleiermacher, and the Birth of Foreignizing Translation	391
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	469
<i>Index</i>	477

The present volume will be followed by a companion volume *German Philosophy of Language from Schlegel to Hegel and Beyond*, whose contents will be as follows:

Introduction

Part I: Schlegel

1. Friedrich Schlegel
2. Friedrich Schlegel's Hermeneutics

Part II: Humboldt

3. Wilhelm von Humboldt
4. Herder, Schlegel, Humboldt, and the Birth of Modern Linguistics

Part III: Hegel

5. Hegel on Language
6. Hegel and Some (Near-)Contemporaries: Narrow or Broad Expressivism?
7. Hegel and Hermeneutics

Part IV: And Beyond

8. Philosophy of Language in the Nineteenth Century
9. Hermeneutics

Select Bibliography

Abbreviations

- FSSW *Friedrich Schleiermacher's sämtliche Werke* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1835–), references to division, volume, and page
- G *Johann Gottfried Herder Werke*, ed. U. Gaier et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985–)
- S *Johann Gottfried Herder Sämtliche Werke*, ed. B. Suphan et al. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1877–)
- WHGS *Wilhelm von Humboldts Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. A. Leitzmann et al. (Berlin: B. Behr, 1903–)

All references are to volume and page unless otherwise stated.

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Introduction

Herder famously (or: as should be famous) stands at the beginning of classical German philosophy of language not only chronologically; he is at the same time the “main source,” so to speak, and the constant, even if only implicit, reference point of the philosophy of language. Fichte, Friedrich and A.W. Schlegel, Schleiermacher and Schelling, Hegel and Humboldt all take over, directly or indirectly, explicitly or tacitly, ideas of Herder’s. That many of these ideas often appear in these authors much more elaborated and better proven than in Herder himself should not be allowed to obscure the fact that they are already to be found in Herder at least in a seminal form and that Herder in many respects simply made the beginning.

E. Coseriu¹

In the Anglophone philosophical tradition the philosophy of language has for quite a long time now enjoyed something like the status of “first philosophy,” having displaced in that central position such previous occupants as metaphysics and epistemology. But where did the philosophy of language begin? Michael Dummett claims that Frege is “the father of ‘linguistic philosophy,’ ”² and Anthony Kenny similarly maintains that “Frege gave philosophy its current linguistic turn.”³ Assuming, as seems reasonable, that the expressions “linguistic philosophy” and “[philosophy’s] linguistic turn” here refer mainly to the two doctrines that (1) thought is essentially dependent on and bounded by language, and (2) meaning consists in the use of words, then these historical claims are false. Long before Frege, a series of important German thinkers, including Herder, Hamann, Schleiermacher, Friedrich Schlegel, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and Hegel, had already espoused versions of these doctrines. And far from introducing them, Frege actually reacted *against* them—backing off

the bold claim that thought is *essentially* dependent on and bounded by language and substituting for it the weaker claim that the dependence in question is only a contingent feature of the thought of human beings, as well as rejecting any equation of meaning with the use of words in favor of a Platonism about meaning (or “sense”).⁴ This volume and its companion volume *German Philosophy of Language from Schlegel to Hegel and Beyond* are concerned with the *real* beginnings of modern philosophy of language, in Herder and his tradition. One of their aims is thus to fill a major lacuna in Anglophone philosophy of language’s knowledge of its own origins, and hence in its self-understanding.

These volumes do not purport to provide a full history of the tradition in question. Rather, they consist of essays on selected thinkers and topics within it. The essays make a number of ambitious and controversial historical claims in addition to the one just mentioned. One of these claims lies in a detailed vindication of Coseriu’s rather isolated aperçu that it was *Herder* who played the most fundamental role within this tradition. A central part of the vindication, developed in the present volume, goes roughly as follows. Towards the end of the eighteenth century three striking revolutions occurred in the philosophy of language (here understood in the narrow sense of a set of fundamental issues concerning thought, meaning, and language, rather than in the broader sense used in these volumes’ titles), the theory of interpretation (or “hermeneutics”), and the theory of translation. The revolution in the philosophy of language consisted in the development of three principles: (1) that thought is essentially dependent on and bounded by language, (2) that meaning consists in word-usage, and (3) a quasi-empiricist principle that meaning essentially depends on corresponding perceptual or affective sensations (though with two qualifications allowing for a converse dependence as well, and for the possibility of metaphorical extensions of the meanings that are directly anchored in sensations—hence the “quasi”). The revolution in hermeneutics largely consisted in grounding the methodology of interpretation in the three principles just mentioned along the following lines: due to principle (1), there is in fact no need for the interpreter to worry about the commonly assumed possibility that an author may have had thoughts which either altogether transcended or were only very imperfectly reflected in his capacity for linguistic expression; due to principle (2), the interpreter’s primary task is one of determining an author’s pattern of word-usage, and thereby his meaning; and due to principle (3), the interpreter must also somehow imaginatively recapture an author’s semantically relevant sensations. The revolution in the theory of translation consisted in the development of what has recently been called a “foreignizing” approach to translation. This approach addresses the challenging task of reproducing the distinctive meanings

of an author (especially an author from a remote historical period or culture) in translation by “bending” the usage of words in the target language in order thereby to approximate the usage of words and hence the meanings in the source language (this method rests on principle (2)), and also by imitating the musical aspects of the source text, such as meter, rhyme, assonance, and alliteration, as faithfully as possible (this method largely rests on principle (3), the thought being that the musical aspects of a text express fine nuances of an author’s sensations, which, in light of principle (3), are internal to his meanings, so that reproducing a text’s musical aspects in translation is important not only for other reasons but also for semantic ones). To the extent that these three revolutions have been noticed by the secondary literature at all, they have been noticed in isolation from each other, and the credit for them has been distributed among several people: the revolution in philosophy of language has commonly been credited to Hamann, the revolutions in hermeneutics and translation-theory to Schleiermacher.⁵ I argue, to the contrary, that these revolutions are intimately interconnected (namely, in the ways just indicated), that the credit for them mainly belongs to a single individual, and that this individual was not Hamann or Schleiermacher but *Herder*. Moreover, I argue that Herder deserves the main credit here not only in the sense that he developed the relevant ideas first (despite the fact that Hamann was the older man) but also in the sense that for the most part his versions of them are philosophically superior to Hamann’s and Schleiermacher’s versions.⁶

Another ambitious and controversial historical claim developed in these volumes is that, besides laying the foundations for modern philosophy of language, hermeneutics, and translation-theory in the way just sketched, Herder also laid the foundations for such entirely new (closely related) disciplines as cultural anthropology and linguistics.⁷

These are some of the project’s more dramatic historical claims. However, the project’s purpose is not *only* historical, but also to a considerable extent systematic. The purpose is not only to set the historical record straight, but also to rescue and champion a tradition of thought about language which, in my opinion, gets many important things right that more recent philosophers concerned with language have tended to get badly wrong.

What do I find so admirable in this tradition as compared with more recent philosophy? Part of its achievement lies in the sheer philosophical *depth* of its ideas concerning language, including its ideas in the philosophy of language (in the narrow sense), hermeneutics, and translation-theory. These ideas often proleptically correct or improve on ideas which subsequently came to dominate both German and Anglophone philosophy in the twentieth century. Several of the essays in these volumes make a detailed case for such depth, so I shall not

steal their thunder here by saying more about what it consists in than I already have. But one very general observation may be worth making here at the outset: This depth is not altogether surprising on reflection, for the following reason. To put it a little pointedly, compared with most recent philosophers, including most recent philosophers of language, the thinkers in this tradition *knew a lot* about language. In particular, they all had an impressive knowledge, not only of their native German and other modern European languages, but also of ancient languages (for example, they all had good Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, and several of them also knew Sanskrit), and in certain cases culturally distant living languages as well (for example, Humboldt knew several of these including the Kawi language of Java). Moreover, they were all deeply engaged in, and strikingly skilled at, the tasks of interpreting and translating texts, including not only texts from other modern European languages but also ones from historically-culturally distant languages. This intimate, skilled acquaintance with a broad range of languages and linguistic tasks could hardly but lend depth to their theoretical ideas about language.

In addition to sheer depth, though, another striking virtue of this tradition's ideas about language is their *breadth*—which contrasts sharply with the narrowness of most recent Anglophone philosophy of language. For example, besides such foundational questions in the philosophy of language as those concerning the relation between thought and language and the nature of meaning, these thinkers were also deeply interested in such further questions as the following: the extent of linguistic-conceptual variation across historical periods and cultures; the nature of interpretation, and how to accomplish it; the nature of translation, and how to accomplish it;⁸ the nature of animal language and cognition; the nature of expression in such non-linguistic arts as sculpture, painting, and music; the role of genre in both linguistic and non-linguistic art; a broad range of ethico-political questions concerning language, including ones about the relation of alternative strategies of interpretation and translation to the contest between nationalistic and cosmopolitan ideals and ones about the importance of freedom of expression; and many further fascinating questions as well.

One sometimes hears Anglophone philosophers today sounding the death-knell of philosophy of language as the central core of the discipline of philosophy. This is not too surprising given the largely misguided and severely impoverished stock of ideas that currently constitute philosophy of language in the Anglophone world. One of my more ambitious hopes for this project is that it may help to revive philosophy of language in the Anglophone world by re-injecting into it some of the depth and the breadth of the Herderian tradition.

The essays in these volumes were for the most part originally written as discrete pieces rather than as parts of a whole, and I have attempted to preserve rather than to erase their original autonomy in putting them together here. Consequently, they do not form a continuous narrative, and they sometimes overlap. Nonetheless, by arranging them in a certain order and interspersing introductory encyclopedia-style essays on each of the main thinkers covered, I have endeavored to produce something that does at least approximate a whole with a continuous narrative. An energetic reader might therefore want to read through the essays of the two volumes in sequence from beginning to end. Alternatively, since each essay has sufficient autonomy to be read by itself, he or she might choose to “dip” selectively according to interest.

The essays in these volumes cannot claim to exhaust the wealth of the tradition they explore. However, it is my plan to complement them with further essays in the future, and my hope that they may also encourage other philosophers to venture into this extraordinarily rich and underdeveloped territory.

Notes

1. E. Coseriu, “Zu Hegels Semantik,” *Kwartalnik neofilologiczny*, 24 (1977), p. 185 n. 8.
2. M. Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 683.
3. A. Kenny, *Frege* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. viii.
4. This is not to deny that Frege made important contributions to the philosophy of language. He did—for example, his clear sense/referent distinction.
5. The secondary literature in question here saliently includes the following: for the philosophy of language, I. Berlin, *Vico and Herder* (New York: Viking Press, 1976) and *The Magus of the North* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1993); for hermeneutics, M. Frank, *Das individuelle Allgemeine* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985) and *Das Sagbare und das Unsagbare* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990); and for translation-theory, A. Berman, *L'Épreuve de l'étranger* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984).
6. See esp. Essay 4.
7. See Essay 6 and *German Philosophy of Language*, Essay 4.

8. Anglophone philosophy of language has indeed invented pale substitutes for these inquiries into interpretation and translation, in particular Davidson's reflections on the nature of "radical interpretation" and Quine's on the "indeterminacy of translation." But these substitutes are highly abstract and largely misguided, so that they in the end have little to tell us about the real nature of interpretation or translation. Indeed, far from constituting or encouraging a serious treatment of these vitally important subjects by Anglophone philosophy, they have merely tended to displace it.

PART I
Herder

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1

Johann Gottfried Herder

Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) is a philosopher of the first importance.¹ This judgment depends heavily on the intrinsic quality of his ideas (of which this essay will try to give an impression). But another aspect of it is his intellectual influence. This has been immense both within philosophy and beyond it (much greater than is usually realized). For example, Hegel's philosophy turns out to be largely an elaborate systematic development of Herder's ideas (especially concerning the mind, history, and God); so too does Schleiermacher's (concerning language, interpretation, translation, the mind, art, and God); Nietzsche is deeply influenced by Herder as well (concerning the mind, history, and values); so too is Dilthey (especially concerning history); even John Stuart Mill has important debts to Herder (in political philosophy); and beyond philosophy, Goethe was transformed from being merely a clever but rather conventional poet into a great artist largely through the early impact on him of Herder's ideas.

Indeed, Herder can claim to have virtually established whole *disciplines* which we now take for granted. For example, it was mainly Herder (not, as has often been claimed, Hamann) who established fundamental ideas concerning an intimate dependence of thought on language which underpin modern philosophy of language. It was Herder who, through those same ideas, his recognition of deep variations in language and thought across historical periods and cultures, his broad empirical approach to languages, and in other ways, inspired Friedrich Schlegel and Wilhelm von Humboldt to found modern linguistics. It was Herder who developed modern interpretation-theory, or "hermeneutics," in ways that would subsequently be taken over by Schleiermacher and then more systematically formulated by the latter's pupil Boeckh. It was Herder who, by doing so, also contributed to establishing the methodological foundations of nineteenth-century German classical scholarship (which rested on the Schleiermacher-Boeckh methodology), and hence of modern classical scholarship generally. It was Herder who did more than anyone else to establish the general conception and the interpretive methodology

of our modern discipline of anthropology. Finally, Herder also made vital contributions to the progress of modern biblical scholarship.

1. Life and Works
2. Philosophical Style
3. General Program in Philosophy
4. Philosophy of Language, Interpretation, and Translation
5. Role in the Birth of Linguistics and Anthropology
6. Philosophy of Mind
7. Aesthetics
8. Philosophy of History
9. Political Philosophy
10. Philosophy of Religion

1. Life and Works

Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) was born in Mohrungen in East Prussia. His father was a schoolteacher and he grew up in humble circumstances. In 1762 he enrolled at the University of Königsberg, where he studied with Kant, who accorded him special privileges because of his unusual intellectual abilities. At this period he also began a lifelong friendship with the irrationalist philosopher Hamann. In 1764 he left Königsberg to take up a school-teaching position in Riga. There he wrote the programmatic essay *How Philosophy Can Become More Universal and Useful for the Benefit of the People* (1765); published his first major work, concerning the philosophy of language and literature, the *Fragments on Recent German Literature* (1767–8); and also published an important work in aesthetics, the *Critical Forests* (1769). In 1769 he resigned his position and travelled—first to France, and then to Strasbourg, where he met, and had a powerful impact on, the young Goethe. In 1771 he won a prize from the Berlin Academy for his best-known work in the philosophy of language, the *Treatise on the Origin of Language* (published 1772). From 1771 to 1776 he served as court preacher to the ruling house in Bückeburg. The most important work from this period is his first major essay on the philosophy of history, *This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity* (1774). In 1776, partly thanks to Goethe's influence, he was appointed General Superintendent of the Lutheran clergy in Weimar, a post he kept for the rest of his life. During this period he published an important essay in the philosophy of mind, *On the Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul* (1778); a seminal work concerning the Old Testament, *On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* (1782–3); his well-known

longer work on the philosophy of history, the *Ideas for the Philosophy of History of Humanity* (1784–91); an influential essay on the philosophy of religion, *God: Some Conversations* (1787); a work largely on political philosophy, written in response to the French Revolution, the *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity* (1793–7); a series of *Christian Writings* (1794–8) concerned with the New Testament; and two works opposing Kant’s critical philosophy, *A Metacritique on the Critique of Pure Reason* (1799) (directed against the theoretical philosophy of the *Critique of Pure Reason*) and the *Calligone* (1800) (directed against the aesthetics of the *Critique of Judgment*). In addition to the works just mentioned, Herder also wrote many others during his career.

Herder’s earlier works are often his best. He himself wrote in *On the Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul* that “the first uninhibited work of an author is . . . usually his best; his bloom is unfolding, his soul still dawn.” Whether or not that is *generally* true, it does arguably apply to Herder himself.

2. Philosophical Style

In certain ways Herder’s philosophical texts are easier to read than others from the period. For example, he avoids technical jargon, writes in a manner that is lively and rich in examples rather than dry and abstract, and has no large, complex system for the reader to keep track of. But his texts also have certain peculiarities which can impede a proper understanding and appreciation of his thought, and it is important to be alerted to these.

To begin with, Herder’s writing often seems emotional and grammatically undisciplined in ways that might perhaps be expected in casual speech but not in philosophical texts. This is intentional. Indeed, Herder sometimes deliberately “roughed up” material in this direction between drafts. When writing this way he is often in fact using grammatical-rhetorical figures which can easily look like mere carelessness to an untutored eye but which receive high literary sanction from classical sources and are employed by him artfully (e.g. anacoluthon). Moreover, he has serious philosophical reasons for writing in such a way rather than in the manner of conventional academic prose, including the following: (1) This promises to make his writing more broadly accessible and interesting to people—a decidedly non-trivial goal for him, since he believes it to be an essential part of philosophy’s vocation to have a broad social impact. (2) One of his central theses in the philosophy of mind holds that thought is not and should not be separate from volition, or affect, that types of thinking which aspire to exclude affect are inherently distorting

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