

THE ASSAULT ON THE
FRENCH ENLIGHTENMENT

1 *Herder and Historical Criticism*

This is a lightly edited transcript of a text of a lecture in Isaiah Berlin's papers. No attempt has been made to bring it to a fully publishable form, but this version is posted here for the convenience of scholars.

I REGARD MYSELF as a friend of the Enlightenment. Nevertheless, my subject is an assault upon the Enlightenment by certain harsh critics of it who, it seems to me, have made a tremendous difference to the way in which we think, and who, if they have not actually destroyed the Enlightenment, have at any rate left it in a somewhat damaged form. The friends of the Enlightenment can learn a great deal more from its enemies than they would from mere praise. There is no better source of illumination than people who attack and show up weaknesses in a movement which, on the whole, one wishes to support.

The movement which I shall discuss seems to me to be of crucial importance – I hate to use the word ‘relevance’, but I am afraid it is in place – of crucial importance to the history of ideas in the last century and in this one. It is one of those big shifts of opinion which has affected both thought and action. In fact, I should like to defend the position that it is the biggest single shift in what might be called general intellectual thought, or thought about many subjects, that has occurred until the present day, including Marx, including Freud, including anything else you please. I should like to maintain also that this enormous change occurred in the second third of the eighteenth century, principally in Germany.

There are certain thinkers who are men of genius and show it by answering questions which have been asked before, but in a manner which is more satisfactory. Newton, say, or Archimedes, answered questions in mathematics or in physics which had indeed

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been asked, but to which nobody had given so brilliant and so powerful or influential an answer before. That, however, is rather different from thinkers who do not simply answer questions which already exist, but who somehow transform the perspective from which questions are asked. They do not so much answer the questions as alter the nature of the questions themselves – shift the entire context in which the questions are asked – in such a way that questions of an earlier age are made to seem irrelevant or obsolete.

Such shifts have not occurred very frequently in human history. When Pythagoras appeared on the scene, and mathematics was for the first time applied to the external world, this must have made an enormous difference in outlook to people who had previously been brought up on some Homeric world-picture in which things were due to chance or the intervention of individual divinities. Something of the sort must have occurred when the notion of creation was introduced. When the Jews and Christians introduced the notion of creation out of nothing, by God, this was genuinely alien to the then classical world: there was no real notion of creation among the Greeks. Even the demiurge in Plato's *Timaeus*, who creates a world, creates it according to a plan which is from eternity, which he does not himself invent. The idea of inventing something absolutely new and creating something out of nothing – the whole notion of creativity – obviously burst like a bombshell upon the then classical world and produced a definite shift of consciousness. Every category, every concept was somewhat affected by it. The same can be said of the seventeenth century, when the notion of teleology was succeeded by that of mechanism. A man who lives in a world in which everything has a purpose – every stone, every plant, every human institution is in some ways striving towards fulfilling itself, towards realising some sort of inbuilt goal – and who can therefore explain everything in terms, say, of instruments in an orchestra, all of which are playing according to some preconceived plan, preconceived either by a personal god or by a personal nature – a man who lives in a world like that, in which everything strives to complete itself, strives to fulfil some kind of inner purpose, is quite different from the man for whom there are just things lying about, just one event after another, where stones are stones, plants are plants, with no particular purposes, where the only purposes there are, are the purposes which men have given to things. Clocks have purposes

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because men have made them for a purpose. Stones have no purposes, because they are just brute facts, created by nobody and nothing, and simply lying about, whose laws of behaviour – what is next door to what, what is later than what, what is simultaneous to what – it is the business of the scientist to establish. Such ideas really do create a total change of categories, of perspective, and it is with a change of this magnitude that I am concerned.

I begin with a generalisation. It would not be altogether false to say – I will not go further than that – that the central doctrine of what might be called Western thought, from the Greeks onwards, rests on three legs – it is a kind of tripod – or it can be reduced, perhaps by gross oversimplification, to three propositions. The first proposition is that to all real questions there must be at least one and only one true answer. A question is not a question unless there is an answer. If there is no one true answer, one and only one true answer, all the other answers being false, then the question is not a question. This has been asserted by positivists in our day, but it is certainly as old as Plato. The assumption is that to every question there must somewhere reside an answer, whether we know it or not.

The second proposition concerns questions of value – how we should live, what we should do, what is right, what is wrong – questions in moral philosophy about whether honour is to be preferred to love, whether patriotism is to be preferred to friendship, or whatever it may be. Serious questions in morals, like serious questions in politics – why we should obey anyone, why we should obey kings, governments, parliaments, majorities, minorities, élites, specialists – questions of this type are, like questions of fact, capable of one true answer, which must be discoverable somewhere. The only problem is to find the correct method, and the correct method must exist; otherwise the question is not a real question, but merely a set of words with a question mark after them, hiding some kind of confusion.

The third proposition is that all the answers to these questions, all the true answers, must be compatible. They may, in fact, entail each other, but they must at least be compatible, because one true proposition cannot be incompatible with any other true proposition.

These are very important propositions, all these three, and particularly the last one, because on the assumption that all these answers are compatible rests the proposition that you could

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formulate, in terms however general, some kind of notion of a perfect world, of a perfect form of life, which simply was the realisation in practice of all the true answers put together, like bits of a jigsaw puzzle. And that proposition underlies what might be called the whole of the central tradition of Western philosophy, whether Christian or pagan, whether rationalist or mystical.

There are, of course, vast differences. The differences occur, for example, between beliefs about where you are supposed to look for the answer, how you ought to find it. Some say the answer is to be found in sacred books, others in the revelation given to prophets or priests, or holy men, or mystics. Others say, on the contrary, that it is to be sought in some metaphysical insight given only to philosophers after a special period of training. Others favour not philosophers but scientists: the answer lies in the laboratory, in observation, in experiment. There are others who say that the answer is that of majorities, that democracies have the answer, or, on the contrary, minorities, some kind of group of qualified experts, élites; some say the Pope, some say shamans, some say neither of them, but that perhaps we should look in the breast of a simple, pure man, as Rousseau thought, in some innocent child's mind, or that of some untutored savage, not corrupted by the hideous sophistication of our cities. In other words, people differ about who has the answer, but everyone agrees that the answer must be capable of being found somewhere.

Who is the authority? Is it majorities or minorities, is it specialists, or is it any man with common sense? Or perhaps we cannot discover the answer at all – perhaps we are too sinful, perhaps we are too stupid, perhaps we are too lazy, perhaps our minds are not powerful enough. Then there are people who say that the answer was known once upon a time, in the Garden of Eden, but that after Man's fall the answer disappeared. Others place the Golden Age in the future: we do not know now, but one day we shall be omniscient, if we progress far enough. Others say we shall never be able to discover the answer – we are too feeble or we are too corrupt. Some say men do not know the answer in this life, but they will know it in the next; or men do not know it, but angels do; or angels do not know it, but at least God does – somebody must be capable of knowing the answer. Unless the answer is in principle knowable to somebody, the question is not a real question. That is the underlying assumption of the entire Western tradition.

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This is what underlies the great doctrine that virtue is knowledge. 'Virtue is knowledge' is not a self-evident proposition – why should the virtuous also be knowledgeable? The answer is quite plain: if, in fact, we have certain desires, we have certain inclinations, we have a certain kind of nature which strives in certain directions, then the only way in which we can satisfy it is by understanding ourselves and understanding the world and understanding our relation to it. Only if we understand will we go for the correct goal. All error, all vice, all crime is founded on misunderstanding, either of the means or of the ends. If a man knows that twice two is four, he does not think it is five and a half. If a man knows that what will make him happy is one kind of existence, the rational life, rather than an irrational one, then, according to this doctrine, he could not possibly go for an irrational life, knowing that it will make him miserable. This whole doctrine, from Plato onwards, says roughly that unless you understand reality and understand yourself, you will not be able to discover how to live or how to fulfil those purposes which you in fact have. If you make a mistake, if you misunderstand reality, if you think, for example, that crime pays or that it is possible to achieve your ends by ignorance or indolence or something else, then, by God, reality will get you in the end. That is the threat which is uttered by all the rationalist philosophers throughout history.

Therefore 'Virtue is knowledge' simply means that it is impossible both to know how to get what you want and not to go for it in that way. If you do that – if you know that means X will lead to end Y, which you want, and do not adopt means X – then there must be something lunatic about you, you must in some way be irrational. To take the wrong road to a goal to which he knows the right road is not, if it is his goal, something which a sane human being does. Hence virtue – that is to say, what makes you wise, happy, good, free, and brings you all the other blessings – is a matter of knowing. And the people who were admired during this period were those who knew – sages, people who get things right, successful persons – successful in some lofty sense, whether soldiers who conquer territories or profound philosophers who understand the truth – but admiration always goes to him who is successful, to him who knows.

Of course, bloody wars have been fought about who is right and who is wrong, between Moslems and Christians or Protestants

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and Catholics, because after all everything depends upon it. If salvation depends upon the correct route to the secret treasure, then nothing is too dear to be sacrificed for it. That is why it is quite natural there should be fearful struggles. But what both sides accept is that there is a road. The question is, 'Am I right, is he right, or are we both wrong?' – but there is a road, there must be a road, otherwise what are we doing, how could we even ask the question?

In particular, of course, during the period of which I speak in the seventeenth century and at the beginning of the eighteenth, the enormous success of the physical sciences, the vast triumphs of Galileo and Newton quite naturally dazzled the minds of a great many intelligent persons. If Newton was able, with a very few simple propositions, to produce a set of truths from which he could deduce the position and movement of every particle of matter, and in this way stopped a lot of wild medieval speculation in astronomy and physics which had no empirical or scientific basis, then why can this approach not be applied to those regions where obscurity and confusion and chaos still exist, namely the regions of values, ethics, politics and the like? Here, too, by applying rigidly the methods which were so triumphant in the realm of nature, we shall be able to clear up this scandalous mess, these hundreds of answers which have been given throughout history, none of them able to prove themselves, none of them able to be demonstrated; but once we apply the great machine, here too the Augean stables will be cleansed, and at last we shall discover what the ends of man are, what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong, what the proper way of government is, what the right life to be lived by a rational sane human being must be. That is the hope of the eighteenth century, influenced by the great success of physics.

How is this to be done? The French Encyclopaedists thought it must be done by education and by legislation. Why has mankind suffered for so long? Why all this vice, this misery, this suffering and frustration? A favourite view, particularly propagated by Voltaire, was that this was due to a great many knaves who took in a great many fools. The whole thing is a kind of conspiracy: there are always groups of people grasping after power who throw dust in people's eyes and teach them all kinds of nonsense simply in order to retain power in their hands. Sometimes these are individuals, sometimes classes, sometimes whole countries. If you

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can expose these charlatans, if you can show them up for what they are, then at last a new age might dawn for mankind. This can be done by establishing proper principles of research – public, intersubjective, capable of being tracked by any intelligent man coming to the problem – and not a cult confined to the breasts of a special set of persons, such as lamas or priests, who simply claim a monopoly over these things, the better to enslave the rest and make them do the will of the dominant majority, of the kings, the conquerors, the generals, the priests, who are regarded simply as malefactors, persons who enslave mankind for their own advantage. Again this is a very simplified account, but this is certainly the kind of indignation which broke out in the eighteenth century against the vast accumulation of religious and metaphysical nonsense which has beclouded the eyes of men and prevented them from attaining the truth.

This new rational method must now be applied. Therefore, ultimately, legislation must be introduced to eliminate the cheats and the charlatans and put lucid-minded, honest scientists in charge. Education is not enough, because people might not be willing to be educated in that way – tradition is too strong, prejudices die too hard, there is too great a vested interest on the part of all kinds of corrupt groups. Something stronger is needed; example and precept are not enough. Mankind has had enough of them, said Helvétius. We need something stronger: we need laws, we need something which will stop people from propagating nonsense and planting misery where health might be, and regarding disease, particularly spiritual disease, as a normal condition of mankind. We must stop monks, say, from flagellating themselves, because they cause themselves pain; the fact that it is they who cause themselves pain is of no relevance – anyone who multiplies pain in the world is a criminal. Therefore monks, priests and the like should be incarcerated. Whether they cause pain to other people or themselves makes no difference. We are engaged simply in multiplying and increasing human happiness. Men have no right to be miserable, and anyone who makes himself miserable, quite apart from his neighbours, is not serving the best interests of mankind. This was the extreme position of what might be called the rationalist Encyclopaedists in the middle of the eighteenth century.

The view comes to this: that all questions are ultimately technical – that ends are given by nature, and that if you study men,

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you will discover what men truly want. You will study them by means of sociology and psychology, you will propagate mathematics, chemistry and physics – all the rational sciences will be established on a sound basis. Once you have discovered what men are like, and what they need, and what will make them free and good and wise and happy, the next problem is to provide them with it; and with enough technology, enough wisdom, enough disinterestedness, enough public spirit, by God this can be done. All problems ultimately are technical problems, because the ends are given. They are given in exactly the same way in which they are given to animals or to stones. You know what a bee wants, you know what a beaver wants by observing them – entomologists know, zoologists know. What we need is a zoologist of human nature. We need scientists who attend to human beings exactly as these other scientists attend to creatures in nature. That is the programme of Condorcet, for example.

There were always certain persons who cast a certain amount of doubt upon this entire programme. Even in ancient Greece there were persons called Sophists who said, according to Aristotle – or one of them at least said – ‘Fire burns both here and in Persia, but what is thought just changes under our very eyes.’¹ There were other persons later on, certainly various *libertins*[], various sceptics in France in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, who echoed these sentiments. Montesquieu pointed out that things which are good for Parisians are not necessarily good for Persians, that climate makes a difference, geography makes a difference, tradition makes a difference, people’s tastes and needs and habits vary. It is no use wearing fur coats in southern Arabia; it is no use wearing Arab garments in the snows of St Petersburg. The idea that there must be propositions which would answer everybody’s questions everywhere – *quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*, universal answers true of all men at all times and in all places – cannot be quite right, because men differ, because circumstances differ. All this is true. But Montesquieu, as well as saying these things, said something even more sinister. When Montezuma said to Cortes, ‘Your religion, the Christian religion, may be all very well for Spaniards, but the Aztec religion suits my people best,’ what he said, says Montesquieu, was not absurd. When Montesquieu said that, he was fallen upon by both sides – obviously by the

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1134^b26.

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Christians, by the Roman Church, for if the truths of Christianity are true then obviously Montezuma's subjects believed in a lot of soul-destroying nonsense. Equally, the Encyclopaedists and the atheists believed that if what Christianity preached was false, it was mistaken to say it was all right for the Spaniards and equally wrong to say that the religion of the Aztecs would suit Montezuma's subjects. Either it is true or it is false: the idea that something which is true here may be false there, or something which is true here may be useful there, something which is useless here may be useful there, struck both sides as a remark of a corrosive and destructive cynicism.

But even Montesquieu, even the sceptical, doubting man who for the first time really spelled out the notion that different things are believed in different places – the whole, now familiar, notion of the relativity of values – even he was not really as subversive as all that. All this really comes to is that different means are used in different circumstances. Even he did not deny that all men wanted peace rather than war, warmth rather than cold, food rather than starvation, sexual procreation rather than total celibacy, and the like. They all needed something or other, but the means toward it in the Russian steppes are different those in from the hills of Greece, the means toward it in Iceland are different from those in Peru. The goals of men are not all that different. Even Hume, who is regarded as having blown up a great many of the presuppositions of the Enlightenment by pointing out, that values are not logically connected with facts and facts not logically connected with logical[?]² statements – even Hume simply translated statements of value, which were regarded as metaphysical and in some way binding on everyone, into semi-sociological statements of what people preferred or what people approved. He simply translated the truths of metaphysics into those of psychology. But even he would say that a scientist could discover what various people did approve of and how far they could be given it and how far a compromise could be struck between what A wanted and what B wanted. In short, even he supposed that science would be useful, indeed the most useful of all things, by simply discovering what it was that men felt like, what the objects and desires of men were, how they were to be satisfied – about this he did not dissent

² ['nomological'? 'theological?']

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all that much from the programme of even the most rigorous Encyclopaedists.

The people I shall discuss were a great deal more subversive than that. They blew up, or tried to blow up, the entire affair – all the three propositions – and after them they never looked the same. Let me start with a preview of the kind of situation which these men were responsible for – and by ‘these men’ I mean Herder, Kant and Fichte in particular, and to some extent the poet and dramatist Schiller, who was a very faithful disciple of Kant and a very competent philosopher.

In the middle of the eighteenth century people still believed that what was wanted was wisdom, knowledge, success in human endeavours – achievement – and they admired the great men, whether of thought or of action, who had somehow managed to get what they wanted, or managed, anyhow, to answer the most agonising questions of mankind. Supposing, however, you had wandered through German universities round about 1810 – to take as an example that year in the nineteenth century. You would have discovered that this was not at all the ideal of every romantically inclined student in the place. They did not care for success. They were not interested in learning. At least, when I say ‘they’ I mean that famous dominant minority which sets the tone – 80 per cent, normally speaking, go in the steps of their fathers, but there are always 20 per cent who are in some way upsetting. These 20 per cent, these subversive and revolutionary-minded persons, both among the students and among the teachers, believed by this time that what was wanted was not knowledge, not skills, not clarity of thought, not security, not happy family life, not pleasure, above all not happiness – these things they despised. They believed in defiance of conventions, originality of temperament, martyrdom, fighting against established values at whatever cost; they thought that failure was nobler than success, which was ultimately vulgar, and that defiance showed a greater degree of moral strength and moral passion than mere succumbing to what might be called the ordinary, conventional wisdom of their generation. They admired the bold opponents of the regime, even the Satanic, rather sinister heroes of the Gothic novels or of Byron’s works. Above all, however, they prized sincerity, they prized integrity, they prized dedication to an ideal.

Consider, for example, the meaning of the word ‘idealism’, not in the philosophical sense, but in the ordinary sense. This is not a

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word which was used much before the nineteenth century. Idealism means that you admire people who are prepared to sacrifice life, riches, success, career to serving some kind of ideal in which they truly believe. What the ideal may be is comparatively irrelevant. The point is that they are prepared to die for it. The dying is more important than the correctness of the ideal itself. The martyrdom is more important than the validity of the thing for which the martyrs are martyrs.

Martyrdom was always prized by Christians, but that is because you died for the truth. If you died for a falsehood, it was merely pathetic, not heroic. If you take, for example, the Crusades – take Christians and Moslems – you will not find in these great battles a Christian saying about a Moslem, ‘It is true that what he believes is damnable heresy, terrible nonsense, but one has to hand it to him, he believes with utter sincerity, with utter integrity. The heroism and the splendour of the quality of his belief transcend the fact that I happen to think the content of his belief to be inaccurate and not to lead to salvation.’ On the contrary, people who really believe with passion, people who really believe with total self-surrender these abominable truths, are all the more dangerous and therefore deserve all the more to die, because they are far more likely to poison society. No Catholic in the seventeenth century congratulated a Protestant upon the sincerity and purity of his beliefs. The purer the belief, the more dangerous, the more mad. If you were a gentleman, you did not spit on your enemy’s grave; but that is about all it came to. You certainly did not congratulate him on the intensity, on the dedication, on the marvellous sincerity with which he held on to his ridiculous or dangerous views.

By the nineteenth century this was not so. By the nineteenth century there begins to be a worship of sincerity and integrity as such. If I think one thing very strongly, and you believe the exact opposite, we fight a duel, in the course of which I may kill you, or you may kill me, or we may kill each other. But any of these things are preferable to the one intolerable solution which is that we should compromise, that we should not kill each other at all; because that means that you have betrayed the inner light within you, and decided, for the sake of the miserable desire to continue to be, to sacrifice that for the sake of which you are living. You have extinguished your light.

The hero of the romantic generation – of the 1820s, for example – is some man like Beethoven, who sits in a garret, who is

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personally dirty, unkempt, rude and ignorant, but who serves an ideal with passion, integrity and absolute devotion. It is all the better, no doubt, that his music happens to be the music of genius. But even if it were not, he would still be admirable for the absolute devotion, passion and purity of heart with which he served the flame within him. Haydn and Mozart would have been extremely astonished to be told that they were sacred vessels who testified to some deep, inner vision which they had to bind upon the souls of mankind. They were simply craftsmen, working, producing objects which they hoped the public would find beautiful. If a great many members of the public found them beautiful, they would earn a great deal of money; if not, not. But they were simply purveyors who did their best, and if they were geniuses, the objects were marvels. They certainly did not see themselves as artists did in the nineteenth century, as specially selected, sacred beings, with a kind of mandate to suffer, to be agonised – above all, not to sell out. The great sin was selling out – adapting yourself or conforming. This is the movement which has come to rich fruition in our own day.

Take, for example, Balzac's story 'The Unknown Masterpiece' – 'Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu'. You find there a painter who is mad and who keeps on painting, putting more and more colours on to his easel, until what began by being a picture becomes an absolute chaos of unrelated daubs, bits of colour and so on, not intelligible to anyone at all. Well, this is not a masterpiece, and the painter will not be famous, but it is preferable that a man should do this, even though he may be rather off his head, rather mad, than that he should produce picture postcards for commercial purposes, because that is obviously selling out to society, selling to the market, betraying the light that is within you, no longer being authentic, no longer doing your thing.

Doing your thing is the heart of the romantic doctrine of the early nineteenth century, and it is in sharp contrast with the most advanced and luminous and rational thought of the mid-eighteenth: something happened in between, which led to all sorts of political consequences. Nationalism comes from it, and extreme heroic individualism, anarchism, the cult of violence, the cult of eccentricity, elements of Fascism, elements of existentialism – all these things, which are so contemporary, spring from this particular shift of mood, which has set its seal upon the individual and the public life of our time from the mid-nineteenth century

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onwards, never more than today. It is with the rise of this new outlook, and with how the paradigm of the Enlightenment, particularly in the eighteenth century, came, if not to be broken, at any rate to be severely damaged, that I wish to deal.

One of the persons who is most responsible for this change is the German historical philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder. Herder was born in East Prussia; he was a poor boy and suffered all his life from a peculiar hatred of what might be called the 'smarter culture' of the French West. Let me say something about Germany at this point. Naturally, ideas do not breed ideas in a vacuum. They have some connection with the lives that men lead – economic lives, social lives, however you wish to interpret them. They arise as factors in a larger world which does not consist simply of the ideas of intellectual persons, but of the lives of the society into which they are born. In some ways they are causes, but they are also symptoms, and they are heavily bound up with the social history of their times. It is not Marx alone who thought of this truth, but he certainly emphasised it.

There is something peculiar about the whole German position since the Renaissance. Germany can really not be said to have had a proper Renaissance, in the normal sense of the world. If you had travelled across Europe in, say, 1500, you would have found that German culture was no whit inferior to, was of the same sort as, that of the other countries through which you passed – the cultures of Burgundy, of France, of Italy and of other countries. If you had done exactly the same thing in 1600, you would have found Germany to be somewhat provincial in character. The age of Dürer, the age of Grünewald, the age of Reuchlin – if you were asked to mention a single great German name, the name of someone who has contributed to human culture, between say 1570 and 1670 – before the Thirty Years War – it is very difficult to find someone. There was Kepler, no doubt, who was a kind of eccentric astrologer near Munich. There was [?], who was a respectable thinker but not exactly of the front rank. There are other names one can use: if you were asked what your views are about [?] or [?], you would not be expected to answer immediately. These are persons who occur in respectable histories of German literature. There are indeed German names: the Germans were not uncivilised by any means – the general level of education was very high. But there are no outstanding persons, and if you compare what might be called the cultural contribution of Germany during

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this period, apart from Luther and theology, to that of France, which is going through one of its brilliant periods, to that of Italy, even during the late Renaissance, to that of Holland (about which I need not speak, with the rise on an unexampled scale of its science and painting), to that of England, even to that of Sweden in that particular period, you will find that Germany is something of a backwater. And the feeling that somehow they are inferior, that somehow the real things are going on elsewhere – that it is really in Paris, in Venice, in London, in Amsterdam that real progress is made and people are excited, that new truths are being discovered, that money is being made, that pictures are being painted, that life is being lived in some intense high fashion, that a larger richer culture is developing – this begins to oppress the Germans at quite an early stage.

Until the advent of Leibniz and the thinkers and musicians of the eighteenth century, Germany feels itself to be in an inferior position vis-à-vis the West. This leads, quite naturally, to a profound sense of humiliation, particularly vis-à-vis the French, who were on top of the world, who were militarily and scientifically, culturally and linguistically and in every possible respect a kind of cultural[?] population, and looked with infinite contempt upon these provincial clodhoppers, these beer-drinkers and pipe-smokers in Germany, which at best produced clergymen and grammarians of a most unimportant kind. This is the attitude toward the Germans, around 1630 or 1640, during the period of the Thirty Years War, quite apart from the massacres which were going on in that period. This includes portions of the Empire as well; it includes Vienna. Apart from architects, it is very difficult to think of any first-rate personalities.

When this kind of thing happens – and in particular when political impotence is very strong, as it was in Germany, where there were three hundred principalities and a mass of petty towns, and total subjection, encouraged by the Lutheran Church, to the temporal authority – the natural reaction is a retreat into oneself. Since one cannot have the fruits which the world offers one begins to teach oneself not to desire them. The Stoics, at the time of the collapse of the city-state, were precisely in this frame of mind. A kind of, I do not say escapism, but retreat in depth into a sort of inner citadel begins. I am poor: the only way in which I can console myself about being poor is by saying that riches are unimportant. The tyrant oppresses me: very well, political liberty

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does not matter. The tyrant is going to destroy my house: houses are of no importance. The tyrant is going to kill my family: personal ties are not the most important thing in the world.

What, then, is important? My inner soul is important – that which nobody can take away from me. A kind of contraction occurs: people try to contract the vulnerable area, they try to preserve that at which nobody can get. This is before the age of psychological penetration, before the age when people began to brainwash other people: you really thought that your inner life was somewhat protected from the behaviour of your enemies, of the tyrant, of people who had oppressed you, whether foreigners or people who were part of your own nation. And so you get, as with the Stoics, a protection of the inner citadel. The idea is this: if I cannot have something, I must teach myself not to want it. If I cannot have what I want, I must teach myself to want only what I can have. And if this is very little, then I contract myself into the smallest possible space. My inner life nobody can take away. My music nobody can take away. My thoughts nobody can take away. Anything which needs money, anything which needs political liberty, grandeur, power, I cannot do. Very well then, these things are nothing. My religion teaches me to despise these things. If I cannot have them, then I refuse even to consider them; I make myself free of them by not being tied to them. A kind of Buddhist process begins of trying to detach myself from things which might enslave me.

This is particularly strong in the most derelict, the most abandoned parts of Germany, the poorest and the most old-fashioned – East Prussia, where the culture of the West had hardly penetrated by the end of the seventeenth century. It was only beginning to do that. And it is there that two of my thinkers will be found – namely Kant and Herder – both East Prussians. One lived in Königsberg, the other ultimately travelled to the West, but began his life, at any rate, in East Prussia, in Königsberg also, or near it, in [?]. These are the people who in some sense feel themselves parts of a most abandoned society, where the love of material goods has been suppressed by an intensive inner process of attending only to the spiritual life. That is what the pietist movement was about: intense self-purification, belief only in personal value, your conscience and your direct relationship to God. Away with priests, away with magnificence, pomp, ritual – all these things are for the rich and the grand or someone else – away

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with art, away with political power and large forms of self-expression. It is a kind of glorified provincialism. Frederick the Great had brought his French officials to East Prussia in order to put it in order; and the humiliation of having to face these French officials, with their obstinate French language and their extreme contempt for the 'primitive' Prussians, is one of the causes of the extreme resentment of Parisian values on the part of my thinkers.

These are the circumstances in which Herder grew. He started as a literary critic, that is, a critic of language and of literature, and it is from this that his whole doctrine begins to develop. The doctrine of the French Enlightenment was, of course, that there were certain truths in aesthetics, as in everything else. Even Montesquieu, who is such a relativist in politics, knows very well, when he goes around the museums in Italy, which pictures are good and which pictures are bad, because there are certain rules which we apply quite mechanically to them. These rules are eternal, universal and easily learned. Sir Joshua Reynolds, when he delivers his lectures in London, is quite clear that there is a thing called the 'Great Style'. The Great Style means that there are certain original prototypes of all artistic experience which every painter should seek to reproduce. For example, he says that if you should wish to paint David, it may be that in life David was a mean little fellow with a harelip; nevertheless, if you are to paint him you must paint him as a royal personage, and a royal personage is not small, is not mean, and does not have a harelip. Therefore you must paint David as a king, and the notion of a king is something which is eternal. There is a universal prototype of what it is to be a sea, a river, a house – this is the Great Style. You do your best to copy these great immutable Platonic originals which, like mathematical figures, are untouched by change and time. If you have a special eye, if you are a genius, if you have learned the laws of perspective, if you understand the rules of art, then you will try to reproduce these things in some medium or other. Above all, and this is the theory of mimesis, of imitation, do not copy directly from nature: nature may not come up to expectation, nature may not reveal what is really behind nature, which is a magnificent series of perfect examples of that which you wish to paint, upon which your true eye should be directed.

And what is a work of art? A work of art is something which is beautiful and which those who have eyes to see will recognise to be beautiful because it obeys the laws which make things beautiful,

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the rules which are just as universal, just as objective, just as open to any man at any time in any place as the rules of ethics, the rules of politics, the rules of chemistry, the rules of physics, the rules of anything whatever. That is the eighteenth-century doctrine.

The same applies to poetry. Augustan verse is preferable to the rough hexameters of some early, pre-Virgilian poets. We know that there is progress: they were crude and primitive, we are civilised and nearer perfection. The ideal is the same for everyone: some are further from it, some are nearer. History may not develop in a straight line – there may be moments of progress and moments of retrogression – but in both, the ideal to which men of sense and with eyes to see are tending is one and the same.

This is the proposition that Herder found quite improbable, for the following reason. To the critics of the eighteenth century a work of art is simply what it is – the intentions and the motives of the artist are on the whole irrelevant. You want a painting, I will produce it – I, the painter. What my private opinions are, why I produce it, is perfectly irrelevant to you. You want a table: I am a carpenter, I produce a table. You have no business to ask me if I am a pious Christian, if I am a good father, if I am a respectable citizen, or what I was doing yesterday morning – this has nothing to do with it. You want a table? Here it is. What you admire is the object; the man who produced it is not relevant to the object, the object itself is what is admired – it lives in its own incandescence. The biography of the maker and his intentions are not relevant to whatever it may be. That is the theory of a work of art as an object independent of the creator. It is the view of a scientific theory as something independent of its inventor. It is the general theory that things are what they are and can be judged to be what they are, evaluated as they are, in terms of certain unaltering, relevant rules.

For Herder this was a terrible blasphemy. Art for him – he was the first one to say it fully, and this was quite a revolutionary moment – is, above all, a voice speaking. It is communication between one human being and another. It is not the production of an object, it is not producing something which lives in its own light. Art is simply the function of the total personality of a man. A man speaks, a man walks, eats, drinks, he worships, he takes a journey, creates works of art, dances, sings – all these are expressions of the total human personality which you cannot divide up into ‘This I do *qua* artist, and this I do *qua* man.’ If a man says, ‘As an artist I say this, but as a citizen I say that,’ he is lying,

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because he is doing what is now called role-playing. Man is one and undivided. Art is a natural human activity, as walking and eating and worshipping and any other human activity must be. It is simply the inner feeling which bursts forth and which you wish to put into some concrete shape.

Early art is meant to inspire hunters, or lovers, or soldiers, or fathers of families. It is not simply a golden box or a silver statuette to be admired by connoisseurs – this is a much later development. Art is originally a form of self-expression, in other words. And if it is a form of self-expression, then it is a form of the total personality seeking to be understood by other personalities. This seeking to be understood means that the only way in which I can understand a work of art is by understanding what the man is trying to do. When I hear a man use words, the first thing I ask myself is what he is saying, what he means; and I understand what he means by his face, by his gestures, by the kind of man he is, by the kind of clothes he wears, by what I know about his past. The more I know about him, the more fully I realise what it is he is trying to say to me. The same is true of a man who paints a picture, a man who dances a dance, or a man who tries to worship his god. It is a total expression of a human being which can be understood by other human beings only by coming into some kind of acquaintanceship with him.

The same applies to the art of the past. If I am to read Homer, I can really understand him only if I understand what it was like to be an early Greek of his period. If I wish to understand the Bible, says Herder – and he was particularly interested in Hebrew because he was a Hebrew scholar, among other things – then I must not look at it as a timeless document which means exactly the same to every generation, in every country, in every clime. This is the religious outpouring of primitive Judaic shepherds, and if I can get to the mountains of Judaea and somehow translate myself into the primitive life of these shepherds, these words will have quite a different meaning for me from what they will have if they are translated into our own sophisticated language, from which the quality and the flavour and the intention very likely evaporate. That is why all translations, in a sense, are bad.

Someone once said that poetry is what is lost in translation. Herder would have applauded the sentiment because what he wanted was some kind of direct communication between human beings. He tells us that on his journey from Riga on the Baltic

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coast to the north he went through a fearful storm off the Swedish coast. Only then, he says, could he understand, when he saw these grim sailors battling the waves with the iron discipline which they have to display and the fearful odds they were against, only then did he begin to understand the language of the early Scandinavian skalds or the Eddas or various types of Nordic epics, which was conceived in relation to the particular kind of grim and brutal nature which these men were forced to encounter, and could be understood only in the same terms.

Herder, then, was the first person to articulate the theory that art is expression. It is not the creation of objects – it is a form of communication and creation. Creation and communication are the same thing. This is true of every province of human activity, whether it is dance or words or whatever it may be. The next idea, therefore, is that the Parisians must be wrong, for it is not the case that there are certain universal, static rules in terms of which human products can be judged. The art of the skalds must be understood from the point of view of the skalds and what they were trying to do. The Bible must be understood from the point of view of the shepherds on the mountain. Homer must be understood from the point of view of the Greeks of his generation. Aeschylus can be understood only by someone who understands about ancient Greece and Athens, and who has studied not only the literature of Athens, but all of its institutions, its geography, its history, its laws – wherever he can find fragments of its habits. In other words Herder is one of the earliest thinkers to conceive of something called a culture, where every element reflects and reacts against all the other elements and where, from any given bit, you should be able, by a species of imaginative sympathy or empathy, or whatever you want to call it, to reproduce the whole – not by logical means, not by induction, not by the scientific means recommended by the French, but by some species of feeling akin to that by which you understand the thoughts of a friend, by which you understand the expression on a human face.

Herder begins to explain what symbolism means. Symbolism is what cannot be expressed by words – the waving of a flag, the singing of an anthem, the particular kind of bold and defiant clothes which you wear in order to shock your neighbours, as the German students were allowed to do in the 1780s when they danced around liberty trees and grew special beards in order to

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shock the shaven, bewigged, conventional persons by whom they were taught. This kind of thing is something which cannot be conveyed in words at all, because if you ask yourself what a Gothic cathedral actually says you cannot answer: but it certainly conveys, it certainly stands as an emblem or symbol of, an attitude to life which is quite different from that of the ancient Greeks or that of the ancient Arabians. The emotion which one feels when a particular kind of symbol is waved at you – a flag, a handwriting, anything you wish – is something unique, and this reaction towards something unique is totally different from what other people in a different position would react to in other circumstances.

What do the French understand about this? For Herder, these scientists, these Encyclopaedists, these illuminated persons were simply a mass – some of them, at least, for there were some he respected – of superficial, dry little abbés in salons, superficial, brilliant, witty, amusing, but who did not understand the depths of the human soul and that which really made men tick. Whereas the Germans, oppressed, miserable, poor, despised, lower-class and so forth, were, possibly because of their tragic condition, driven in on themselves and understood what it was that made men men. That is the original sermon. The first attack therefore is on the universality of values and, above all, on the applicability of rules.

The second concept which should be credited to Herder is the concept of belonging. Herder was the first person who really explained in vivid language what it is to belong to a group. He said that among basic human needs is not only that for food and for drink and for liberty of thought – which he recognised – and for procreation and for shelter and for protection: there is also a basic need to be amongst your own. If you ask yourself what it is to be a German, it is difficult to express it in words. It certainly has nothing to do merely with living upon a certain soil or owing allegiance to the same king or serving in the same army. There is a way in which Germans eat, drink, pass legislation, sit down, get up, do their hair, write poetry, dance – all these various activities, although they resemble the activities of other people who also do these things, have something in common which is impalpable, unanalysable, and German in character. The way in which the Portuguese eat and drink and dance, the way in which they produce their laws, study their history, the way they look, the way they get up and sit down, the kind of moral and political beliefs

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which they hold – these things have more in common with each other than they have with the corresponding behaviour on the part of the Germans. That is to say, the way in which the Portuguese do their hair is more like the way in which the Portuguese speak or move or think or feel than it is like the way the Germans do *their* hair. There is something in common, no doubt, to the ways in which the Portuguese and the Germans eat, or the ways in which they walk, but there is something which is also not common; and if you take a German away from a society in which people communicate with him – not merely by explicit words, but by facial expressions, by the thousand impalpable, imprescriptible and unanalysable gestures and methods by which people can understand each other – if you take a German out of his milieu and place him among the Portuguese, he will feel a stranger, an outcast, an outsider, a misfit. This sense of being a misfit is basic, and people want to avoid it. That is why the Germans want to be Germans, why the Portuguese want to be Portuguese, why Icelanders who come to Denmark do not flourish, why the Hessian soldiers who were sent to the United States withered away, why people cannot live a satisfactory life outside the particular milieu to which they are used. And this is what he called ‘to belong’.

Belonging has nothing to do with race. It has certainly nothing to do with blood. But it has a great deal to do with language. Language for Herder is one of the intimate links which bind people, because people are brought up in a language, and their past, their traditions and their feelings, their whole sense of what they are and where they are and who their friends and enemies are, is conveyed by the nuances of a language, which are not translatable into any other language or any other medium. Hence the importance of the German language for the preservation of what might be called the German outlook. And the idea is that there is a German outlook, and there is a Portuguese outlook, and a Chinese outlook, and these things are different. And to say that there are values common to them – that if some wiseacre in Paris invents, say, a theory of life, that democracy is best, that monarchy is best, that enlightened despotism is best, or anarchy is best, then these things, because they have been proved by some syllogistic method or by some other logical method, would equally suit the Portuguese and the Chinese – is untrue, not only for the reasons given by Montesquieu – because their climate is different, their

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environment, their geography – but because they are themselves different and they cling together. There is such a thing as to belong and there is such a thing as to be an outsider, and the most valuable of all pains, he says, is homesickness, nostalgia – a feeling very native to men.

He does not think in terms of States. He is against the State because the State is a great coiled monster, as Nietzsche calls it, which suppresses these little local communities to a large extent; it is an artificial political entity. The real entity is some kind of neighbourhood: a group of people using the same language, brought up in the same culture, holding similar beliefs, who feel at home and cosy with each other.

This notion of belonging, and of the desire to belong, and of the fact that people who do not belong do not feel well, is native to Herder. He really did, in a certain sense, invent it. And having invented it, he denounced the cosmopolitanism, the internationalism of the French tradition. He said that a savage in his hut who loves his wife and children is much more likely to understand the feelings of a stranger and be nice to him, whereas in the empty heart of a cosmopolitan there is room for nobody.

This is, of course, the beginning of a certain kind of nationalism. In later days it fed all sorts of nationalist and chauvinist fires, and gradually evolved into the most hideous forms of pathological nationalism in the nineteenth century. But in Herder's case it was perfectly amiable. He thought of it entirely as a local affair, something which grouped human beings – and not in very large groups, either – where they had something in common. Perhaps they spoke the same language, or had lived on the same soil together, or were related to each other, or had some kind of common ideals. He did not believe in emigration, because once you emigrate you lose something infinitely valuable – assimilation always robs you of something. What he hates most of all are conquerors, assimilators – it does not matter what kind. Julius Caesar is a villain because he crushed the Cappadocians, and now we will never know what they were trying to tell us. We will never know what the Carthaginians had to tell us, because Rome snuffed them out. Charlemagne is a villain, Louis XIV is a villain – all these great conquerors are villains. Even the British missionaries in India are villains because, although what they do is in the interest of religion, they suppress native Indian customs, they assimilate the Indians, they remove their native colour and impose all kinds of

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foreign dresses, foreign customs, foreign habits upon them, and in this way the native, unique, unanalysable, impalpable, deep Indianness of the Indians evaporates. For a Christian clergyman, which is what Herder theoretically was – he was head of the church in [?] – to complain that the trouble with missionaries is they cannot see anything which is of Indian origin is really going quite far. But he did go that way, just as he complains that Klopstock's great German poem, *Messias*, which after all celebrates the value in the central event in the entire Christian outlook, is not German enough.

This is Herder. The important thing, though, is the notion that people can be understood only in their own context, in their own time, by some kind of direct communication. Therefore the universality of what might be called the traditional position cannot be true. It is not true that the same values pertain. Herder goes on from there to say that every nation has its own centre of gravity, and that is where its happiness lies. The Greeks were happy in one way, and the Romans in another. Germans in the Middle Ages were happy in one way and now in another. It is no use going back. To try to be Greek is absurd. To say we should return to Aristotle is ridiculous: Aristotle was a great thinker, but he was a Greek, whereas Leibniz is ours. Homer is a great writer, who put enormous effort into the clothes[?] of the Greeks; but he is theirs – only Shakespeare is ours. You must understand your own time and you must try to be as authentic as you can. Do that which the spirit impels you to do: do not go whoring after something in the past or something far away. If you do that, if you simply express yourself right, act, be a politician in some native fashion, then maybe posterity will recognise you as a classic; otherwise you certainly have no chance.

Above all, use your own means. If you are a German, speak German; if you are a Frenchman, speak French. Herder's nationalism is of an extremely tolerant and harmonious kind, somewhat like that of the Russian populists in the nineteenth century, who did not overstress the importance of being a Russian. Russian critics of the late nineteenth century with a populist bent adored every phenomenon which could be regarded as quaint, unique, its own – they liked the Finns to be Finns, they adored Georgians to be Georgians, they studied Jewish antiquities, they studied Mongol antiquities with loving care. Herder is not at all the father of exclusive nationalism; for him there is no favourite nation, there

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are no good nations and bad nations, or important nations and unimportant nations, or top nations and bottom nations – everyone is equal. He is the father of the whole school of ethnic study, both ridiculous and serious, both of serious ethnology, serious understanding of foreign peoples, sympathetic understanding of customs not at all our own, on the one hand, and of all those old ladies and antiquarians who want the natives to be quaint, to preserve their own customs, who hate the thought of extraneous influences being introduced into some native village. In a sense Herder is the father of all that, of what might be called a rather loose desire for variety, for quaintness, for national colour, for uniqueness, for difference, above all for no assimilation, no flatness, no uniformity.

The desire for multiformity is a late desire. The whole of antiquity would not have understood the notion that monotony was bad; for antiquity, broadly speaking, one is good and many is bad. But by the eighteenth century, that is to say, by the time the enormous monopolistic attitude of the French Enlightenment has arisen, together with a kind of crashing superiority on the part of the men who live in Paris in politics, in ethics, in art and everything else, there is a longing on the part of the humiliated Germans for variety, for what is their own, for uniqueness, for doing things their own way. That is where all this is born.

There is one large implication of what Herder says that is of crucial importance. One of the original propositions I mentioned was that, according to the Enlightenment, there is only one true answer to each question, and all these true answers are compatible with one another. Therefore, if you say that perfection is the putting together of all the true answers into one jigsaw puzzle, then we know what the perfect life would be; maybe we cannot attain to it, because we are too weak or selfish, but at least we know what perfection is, otherwise what do we mean by saying that we are imperfect? When we say we are imperfect, we mean there is a falling short of this idea of perfection. But if we do not know what perfection is, even, what is the point of saying there is progress, there is a goal, we are imperfect, we have not got there yet?

Herder is right: there is something wrong with this. Each nation, each group, each *Volksseele*, as he calls it – the national soul, the popular spirit – has its own ideals. (He invented the word ‘nationalism’, although he was not a nationalist – *Nationalismus* for

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Herder meant the peculiar qualities of a particular group, living on a particular soil and using a common language and having kinship amongst themselves.) For Herder, if it was marvellous for the Greeks to be Greeks, and for the Hebrews to be Hebrews – although the Hebrews were quite different from the Greeks – if it is wonderful for the Indians to be Indians, for the Georgians to be Georgians, for the Russians to be Russians – all of which he believed – and a great crime to try to lump them together, to assimilate them, to find some lurid common denominator and try to assimilate them all and lump them into the same basket, then what is the point in talking about perfection? These ideals are incompatible with each other. To be a successful Hebrew is to have values quite different from those of a successful ancient Greek – there is no marriage between Aristotle and the prophet Amos. There is no marriage between the ideals of Aemilius [?] in the German woods in Roman times and the ideals of some German bourgeois in Vienna. There is nothing common to the Gallo-Romans of the fourth century and some physicist or chemist or mathematician in Paris in 1770. And yet each is perfectly entitled to strive after his own ideals, because every group has its own centre of gravity within it, because the happiness of the Hebrews is attained in quite a different way from the happiness of the Swedes, because each people strives towards its own ideals and none is superior to others – no period is an anteroom to another period. Voltaire is, for Herder, utterly wrong when he thinks, for example, of the Middle Ages as a peculiarly horrible corridor to the Renaissance. Herder did not care for the Middle Ages because they were too anti-scientific, too repressive, too blind; nevertheless, the Middle Ages had their charm, had their value, had their outlook, which is different from that of the Renaissance. The Greeks are not a step toward the Romans, the Hebrews are not a step toward the Christians, the Renaissance is not a step toward Louis XIV or anything else – each of these things has its own intrinsic value.

Similarly Wyndham Lewis, in his book *On the Demon of Progress in the Arts*, says that it is not true that the later something is, the more developed it is. It is no good saying that Roman painting must be superior to Greek sculpture because it is later, or that medieval cathedrals must represent some advance on Greek sculpture, or that Picasso must represent some advance upon Michelangelo. It does not make sense: each of these artistic expressions (which is

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what Herder was mainly thinking about) has its own intrinsic value, not comparable to and not commensurable with the rest.

If this is so, I cannot be both a perfect Hebrew and a perfect Greek, I cannot be a perfect Frenchman and a perfect German. How are we to create a universe according to the Encyclopaedists – as Condorcet would say, by finding out what men want, by giving them what they want, because all men have fundamentally the same nature, the same wants, the same strivings, and think they do not only because of the false doctrines propagated among them by a lot of lying priests or a lot of self-interested rulers? If what Herder says is true, then the very idea of *the* perfect life is an absurdity. It is an absurdity because the perfect life of the ancient Greek would be wholly incompatible with the perfect life of the ancient Hebrew or the modern Italian. Because Aristotle is not ours but theirs, because Shakespeare is ours and Homer is theirs, it is no use saying which is superior, which we should follow: we must not follow anything – we must simply do our thing, we must express ourselves as well as we can in the terms that we have.

That is Herder's outlook. In essence, he is the father of three things: first, of art as communication and not as the making of silver boxes; of art as not having a set of rules, but as being a direct expression on the part of human beings seeking to convey everything about themselves – their social selves, therefore, and their society, the whole of the human nature and the tradition which lives in them, the whole of their human values and of their interrelationship with others, which every one of their gestures in some way encapsulates and conveys. Secondly, he understands what is meant by saying that we need to 'belong to', and that men cannot belong to more than one group at once – they belong where they belong and there alone can realise all their hidden potentialities. It is not irrelevant to a man who it is with whom he associates: he must be among friends, he must be among people with whom there are instinctive and not official bonds. All immigrants suffer, to some degree. Thirdly, there is his notion of each group having its own centre of gravity, its own purpose, its own ideal; and these ideals are not commensurable with each other, still less combinable, and the very notion of the perfect man, the perfect society, the perfect sage is unintelligible. This is quite different from saying that we shall never attain perfection because we have not got the means, or because of original sin, or because we are not perfect, or saying, as Rousseau and others have said,

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that every gain entails some loss, you cannot have everything. It does not mean that you cannot have everything, but that the idea of putting these things together produces contradiction, because they are not compatible with each other.

All this Herder said in speculation. He himself believed in a garden of many flowers, all of which lived in peace with each other. He was not only a nationalist, he was a horticultural nationalist. He hated all forms of authority. He thought the State crushed human originality. He loathed armies, he loathed war, assimilation, every form of interference. But from the doctrines that I belong to my people and convey their point of view, not somebody else's, did of course spring that nationalism which, whether in the romantic form of Michelet and Mazzini, or in the far more brutal form of the chauvinism of the early German nationalists – people like Jahn and Arndt – and ultimately in what developed into all kinds of pathological nationalism and Fascist doctrines, can be attributed to the seeds so innocently planted by Herder.

This, then, is the first attack upon the universality and the cosmopolitanism, and what Herder regarded as the dehumanising, depersonalising, excessively abstract, excessively general tendency, of French thinkers who did not understand what it was to wish to express the inner life, because they had no inner life, because they were entirely involved in what he regarded as superficial, external facts, capable of scientific generalisation. Nothing which is genuine, nothing which is human, nothing which means something to another individual or a group can be conveyed in general propositions which apply equally to groups or individuals who have grown up in a different atmosphere, who speak a different language, and who wish to convey different values.

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