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THE ORIGINS OF CULTURAL HISTORY

1 Two Notions of the History of Culture *The German versus the French Tradition*

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THE ORIGINS OF CULTURAL HISTORY

1 Two Notions of the History of Culture

The German versus the French Tradition

This is a lightly edited transcript of a tape-recording of the first of three Gauss Seminars given by Berlin at Princeton on 19–22 February 1973. No attempt has been made to bring it to a fully publishable form, but this version is posted here for the convenience of scholars.

HANS AARSLEFF On behalf of Professor Franks and the Gauss Seminar Committee I am very happy to introduce our speaker. Sir Isaiah Berlin has often been a visitor in this University, where he has lectured and taught on several occasions, and we are most happy to see him here again. His accomplishments, activities and achievements are so plentiful that I shall not try your patience with a list of them but merely suggest their variety. They include service as First Secretary in the British Embassy in Washington during the war, membership of the Board of Directors of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, and since 1966 the Presidency of Wolfson College, Oxford. His life began on the eastern shores of the Baltic in the locale of Herder and Hamann, while his education and career belongs chiefly to England and Oxford University, where he became Fellow of All Souls in the 1930s and later Chichele Professor of Social and Political Philosophy [correctly ‘Thought’]. He was knighted in 1957, and received the Order of Merit two years ago [1971]. He has often worked in universities in this country, best known perhaps as Professor of Humanities in the City University of New York from 1966 until last year. Sir Isaiah’s scholarly interests and writings have been directed chiefly toward the problems and intellectual tradition of social philosophy in the widest sense of that term, joining the past and the present in that remarkable combination of which he is a master, informed by unusual insight and illumination over a wide range of authors in many languages. It is to these problems that the present Gauss Seminar is devoted, under the title ‘The Origins of Cultural History’. Sir Isaiah will speak tonight [19 February 1973], tomorrow night [20 February], and again on Thursday night [22 February] this week. The topic for tonight is ‘Two Notions of the History of Culture: The German versus the French Tradition’; followed tomorrow night by ‘*Geisteswissenschaft* and the Natural Sciences: Vico versus Descartes’; and finally, on Thursday, ‘The Origins of the Conflict: Political Lawyers, Classical Scholars, Narrative Historians’. After each lecture the meetings will adjourn to the Nassau Street School, Room No 127, for questions and discussion, for those who wish to participate.

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It was the late Richard Blackmore[?] who shaped the Gauss Seminars as we know them. He always introduced the speaker in an admirable fashion which I have already violated at length. It would, however, have been entirely appropriate with a speaker so distinguished, and I may say loved, as Sir Isaiah Berlin. Richard Blackmore's introduction was brief and took this form: 'Our speakers are so well known that they need no introduction.' I immediately give the word to Sir Isaiah Berlin.

ISAIAH BERLIN Thank you very much, Professor Aarsleff, for these kind words. I am afraid what you have said about my career makes it quite plain that I am not really qualified to speak about this subject at all. I think anyone who persists in staying for the third of these three lectures will become personally convinced of this truth, as probably shall I.

Let me begin by explaining that what I propose to talk about are indeed the origins of the idea of the history of culture – when the very notion of culture as a possible subject for history arose – and in order to do that something must be said about the notion of culture itself. The word 'culture' has never been used as frequently as it is in our own time. No country, no association, no body of persons, no nation, no group but has its own culture which in some sense its members feel they must disseminate among others. Not only are there national cultures, not only are there racial cultures, there is black culture and white culture, there is youth culture and presumably the culture of middle age and old age in contrast. There are the cultures of the West, and there is the culture of the East. There is drug culture, there is anti-drug culture. All these things have become almost a kind of trade mark. The number of associations for the purpose of promoting culture, paying for culture, defending culture is very great – attacking culture perhaps too, for all I know.

What I wish to say is that this is a new phenomenon, which attracts attention to the question why it should be that this word is used in this connection. In this sense of the word, 'culture' simply means some kind of mode of living, some kind of general pattern of existence or life which a particular body of persons suppose themselves to possess, to which they attach a certain value, and which they feel that they express in their lives, in their actions, in their thoughts, in their feelings. Any form, any texture, any kind of

communal or associated life would in that sense possess culture. It is a sense which comes from social anthropologists. This is not the sense of 'culture' in which, for example, people such as Matthew Arnold were concerned about culture. The sense of 'culture' which I have just described is one which is presumably to be distinguished from disorganised life, individual existence, absence of a social pattern which unites all social activities in a centralised way which gives them some kind of single quality, some particular pattern quality which distinguishes them from the rest. The sense in which people such as Coleridge, or Arnold – in a certain sense, I suppose, too, even in our own time perhaps, people such as Eliot, or Curtius, even F. R. Leavis – are concerned with culture is the sense in which it is to be distinguished from barbarism, from philistinism, from some kind of shallow view of life, culture in the sense of *haute culture*, culture as principally concerned with what might be called the expressions of the spirit in the realm of art, in the realm of thought, perhaps in the realm of the sciences as well.

These are not the same sense of the word. And yet to some extent, of course, you cannot draw a sharp distinction between them. What they have in common is that they are both distinguishable from raw, untutored nature. The word comes from *cultura*; it is a perfectly good Latin word, meaning cultivation – *cultura animi* is the phrase used by Cicero. There is a sense in which Sophocles talks about it under another name: *paideia* in Greek refers to roughly the same kind of thing. What it means is cultivation of some kind of raw material. When Bacon talked about culture as the *Georgics* of the mind, or Holbach talked about education as the agriculture of the mind, these were perhaps not very delicate or very evocative expressions; nevertheless one knows what they mean. They mean that there is some raw material presented which is then to be improved in some way, to be tended, to be made something of. That is the original use of the word 'culture' – of 'cultus', 'paideia', 'humanitas', 'urbanitas', all these various words which are used for it in various ages.

There are two approaches to this subject. One is what I have rather crudely called the French approach, simply because I wish to associate Voltaire with it. The official father of the history of culture is Voltaire. In every book on the subject you will find that he is the man who virtually invented the history of culture, as he is the man who virtually invented the philosophy of history. I should like to

question this somewhat. In order to explain what it is that Voltaire did, or what it is Voltaire is held to have done, at any rate, let me say something, about the general ideas prevalent during the Enlightenment, of which Voltaire was so great an ornament and propagandist.

The starting-point is the proposition that to all serious questions there is only one true answer, all the other answers being false, because it must be so: if the question is a serious question then presumably there can be only one true answer to it. A question of a descriptive nature, presumably, is exactly such, and at the heart of European philosophy, almost from Plato onwards, there does dwell this notion that all askable questions must have a solution somewhere. Where the solution is will of course differ according to the thinker, and according to the school of thought. Whether you think the answer is to be found in sacred books, or in the words of a particular school of interpreters, or in the inner vision of the metaphysicians, or in some kind of empirical investigation in the laboratory or otherwise, or in the pronouncements of common sense, or whatever it may be – about that there will be differences. What there will not be a difference about is the assumption that any serious question must be capable of a correct answer. If there is no correct answer possible in principle – and this is a dogma which is not at all confined to positivism – then there is something wrong with the question itself. This is certainly a proposition which the Enlightenment in general accepted.

If this is so, this is in line with the general view that nature, if it is properly tortured, properly probed, properly looked at, if the proper technique is adopted, will supply the answer. The technique which the Enlightenment regarded as most successful for the obtaining of answers to all questions, whether factual or normative, is the technique of the natural sciences. The natural sciences have, after all, cleansed the Augean stables of what had been a mixture of metaphysics and theology, which had become a kind of scandalous chaos towards the end of the sixteenth century, and there was no reason for supposing that, if the same technique was applied to moral, or aesthetic, or political, or religious questions as well, equally lucid, interconnected answers could not be found. Nature was a harmonious whole and it was understood as such: once the mind penetrated its interconnections it would see where everything fitted. This is certainly the kind of view which, for example, is to be found

in Spinoza, who supposes that nature in general makes for uniformity. Everything in nature is systematic, everything in nature ultimately belongs to a single unified systematic whole. The only difficulty is to discover what this whole is, and to do this you apply rational methods which will presumably supply you with a correct answer to your question.

In applying this approach to the past, Voltaire arrived at the proposition that human error was to be explained either by stupidity or by wickedness. That is to say, Voltaire's theory of the past was that there were a great many power-seeking knaves who managed to throw dust in the eyes of a great many fools, and ultimately threw dust in their own eyes too; so that the world is governed either by arrant nonsense, simply produced by human intellectual weakness and stupidity, or through the inventions of lying priests or lying kings, or other persons who seek to obtain command over innocent human beings, and that is why human history is so full of misery and vice and darkness. There are certain periods in human history where this is not so. One is classical Athens; another is imperial, and partly also republican, Rome; the third is Florence during the Renaissance; and the fourth and greatest is the century of Louis XIV. These are the only bright points of light so far as Europe, at any rate, is concerned in what is in general to be regarded as a great circumambient sea of darkness; and the important thing is to explain what it is about these periods which makes them particularly valuable. When Voltaire began writing his *Essai sur les mœurs*, on which his fame as a historian of culture rests, and indeed when he wrote his famous work on *Le Siècle de Louis Quatorze*, about the age into which he himself was born, after all – he was not altogether young even when the great king died – when he set forth to do these things the general programme was to try to illuminate what was so splendid about these ages and to contrast it with the fearful nonsense, the absurdities and the crimes from which these ages were among the few fortunate escapes on the part of mankind.

To say that he had a sense of history really would be an exaggeration. Voltaire is quite clear. He says the only thing which a historian need do is to write down those things which are likely to be useful for mankind. Now what is useful for mankind? Either that which makes people sane – which makes people saner, more rational, less liable to fanaticism, to intolerance, to nonsense – that is a good thing. Or that which gives people pleasure, for example,

by amusing them or by entertaining them. All the rest is of not the slightest importance, and he says: Why should we spend pages and pages on telling the stories of how one barbarian despot followed another barbarian despot? Why should we want to know whether Quancum succeeded Kincum, or whether Kicum succeeded Quancum? Why should we spend a great deal of research, a great deal of material, as the monks did (who were of course among his least favourite human beings) – why should we spend all this zeal and all this energy upon, for example, discovering the precise difference between the reign of Louis the Fat and Louis the Obstinate?

That is his view of medieval history. It is not very unlike the view, also, of Bertrand Russell, whose *History of Western Philosophy* is also founded upon somewhat similar principles. From the point of view of the reader it is an extremely gay approach, and does undoubtedly produce quite interesting results; but historically there is, at least in our enlightened day, something to be regretted about this, something missing in this picture. But that is certainly how Voltaire writes. And he says: We know perfectly well what is true and what is false; we know when these people produce their absurd inventions; myths are simply idiotic nonsense which a lot of fools have managed to contrive to persuade themselves to believe, which no sane man need have believed for a moment.

Voltaire is not the first or the last to have this view of history. If you read so sober and so serious and so utterly respectable a historian as, for example, Polybius, writing in the early second century BC, Polybius will also tell you that the misfortune of mankind was that priests happened to preside over his birth. If only philosophers of a wise and knowing and knowledgeable kind had been present at the birth of mankind, when man first began to emerge from the slime, instead of a lot of ambitious and mendacious priests, the history of mankind might have been saved all the horrors for which religion is largely responsible. This is exactly what Lucretius believed, it is what Epicurus believed, it is what a great many persons have believed ever since. It is a belief that the history of mankind is a kind of network, in part misfortune, in part conspiracies by a lot of wicked persons against a lot of gullible ones.

Voltaire knows how to establish the facts, particularly cultural facts. For example, he is quite clear that when people say there are shells on the tops of mountains, which people had begun to gather

and indeed to speculate on in a kind of proto-evolutionary way, he knows that this is false, because any sensible man knows that shells cannot be found on the tops of mountains. And if he is asked why they are found, in a half jocular way he says: No doubt they fell off the hats of pilgrims who went up there to watch the sunrise. He knows in advance that there cannot have been two kingdoms called Babylon and Assyria in the same tiny Mesopotamian territory. There cannot have been two large kingdoms so close together. This is obviously a malicious invention by a lot of conceited priests. He knows a great many facts of this kind. On the other hand he sees no reason for not supposing that satyrs existed, who are partly goats and partly human beings – he regards that as a perfectly possible form of miscegenation, which has indeed stopped historically, but which could occur again at any moment.

All this is said with great seriousness, but in the end Voltaire's history of culture is very disappointing, if you actually read the *Essai sur les mœurs*, if you actually read *Le Siècle de Louis Quatorze*, in spite of the fact that they are extremely gay and amusing. (Particularly amusing are his biographies: his Life of Charles XII of Sweden, his Life of Peter the Great of Russia are really brilliantly well written. As a storyteller, as a raconteur, he has no equal. Voltaire is difficult to describe: he is a kind of half tourist, half moralist throughout his work, who picked up all kinds of unconsidered trifles and turned them to all kinds of profit, and is one of the gayest, most delightful and most fascinating storytellers, I think, whom humanity has ever known. You can call him a journalist if you like, but it is an apotheosis of this particular art.) If you look for actual hard nuggets of what might be called cultural history you will be bitterly disappointed. He enunciates a programme by which all the persons who have praised him for being the father of this subject have been to some extent taken in. He says: We do not wish to know about the behaviour of kings and courts; we do not want to know about commanders; we do not want to know, as I say, about whether Quancum succeeded Kincum or Kicum succeeded Quancum; that is not the proper subject of history. Who cares about this? What we want to know is how men live, how they eat, how they sleep, how they dress, how they walk, how they make war. Very well, this is a perfectly honourable programme, and he does say that we ought to know about people's clothes, we ought to know about imports and exports, we ought to know about canals, we ought to know about

economic life in general, we ought to know about democracy, we ought to know about the rise and fall of populations – these are the things to attend to. But if you actually look at his writings, from time to time he does give you a few fragmentary bits of information on these topics, but it is unsystematic; he is plainly bored with the subject himself. The least amusing parts are the parts where he forces himself into giving a certain amount of official information according to this programme, and the whole thing is really an exceedingly pathetic affair, if you compare it, certainly with Montesquieu, but even with some of the writers on this kind of topic in France in the sixteenth century, of whom I propose to say more later.

Voltaire's notion of culture is this: there is a perfectly clear criterion for what is good and what is bad. That is what I mean by saying that to all true questions there is one correct answer, if you have the criterion for obtaining it. If you ask what is worthy of existing and what is not, what kind of life is worth living and what kind of life is not, what is beautiful and what is ugly, what is good and what is bad, what is noble and what is ignoble, any intelligent person living at the beginning of the eighteenth century is armed with weapons which can establish this with complete dogmatic certainty. Voltaire knows the answers, and his story of culture, so far as it is a story, is a kind of *musée imaginaire*, rather in Malraux's sense of simply stringing together the few bits, the few happy moments when humanity came of age, as in Rome, in Florence, and in France during the Sun King's reign. You string these together and you think that that is when beautiful pictures were painted, beautiful poems were written, splendid works of thought were achieved: these were proud hours in the history of mankind. All the rest is darkness, ignorance, idleness and shame.

Quite apart from his judgement, the point is that the criteria for Athens and for Rome are identical with the criteria for Florence and France in the seventeenth century. There is no sense of continuity, there is no genetic sense, there is no sense of why these things happen as they do. These things are strung out on a string in a perfectly timeless fashion, and exactly the same thing is repeated in the eighteenth century. Voltaire knows what is good and what is bad, he knows without very much argument that Dante is bizarre, that Shakespeare is no good, that Milton is no good, that Addison is much better. He knows this. He knows a great many facts of this

kind. He knows that Racine and Molière are very good playwrights, and he knows that the Bible is simply a collection of ghastly stories about a fanatical sect, the consequences of whose acts are to have brought endless miseries upon the heads of mankind. His two most unfavourite groups among human beings are the Jews and the Jesuits, and almost every crime that can be imputed to them is imputed to them by him.

This is certainly no greater caricature of Voltaire than his caricatures of other people. His writings show that it is not altogether unjust. And this attitude is not only Voltaire's, it is also that of the eighteenth-century writers who followed him. If you look at what Holbach says, if you look at what Helvétius says, if you look at what even the honourable, serious, extremely responsible Condorcet says on these subjects, you will find a repetition of exactly the same programme. Condorcet's famous *Esquisse* on the progress of the human mind is simply a story of efforts on the part of human beings, against most terrible odds, to construct a rational picture of nature and themselves by means of a growing, progressive natural science, with which he more or less identifies the only kind of philosophy worth having. It is an extremely moving work, but he ignores anything which is not a contribution to the gradual growth in rationality of mankind. The arts, religion, attitudes to life in general – everything covered, as I say, by the word 'culture' in the sense in which we use it now, in which it stands for practically any form of collective manifestation of life which people choose to put forward – in that sense culture does not exist for these thinkers. And this is a tradition – I call it the French tradition rather crudely, because of course there have been important French writers from Guizot onwards who have not accepted this view at all – which, nevertheless, progresses; it goes from Voltaire into the eighteenth century, from the eighteenth century – it certainly animated some of the leaders of the French Revolution – it goes through Condorcet to Saint-Simon, from Saint-Simon it goes to someone such as Buckle, for example – his history of civilisation in England is an absolute model of the sort of thing I mean. He says: Aesthetic taste varies, moral taste varies, the number of good men and bad men, the number of noble and ignoble in any age is probably the same, we do not know very much about the motives which moved men in previous ages to the exhibition of the particular kind of aesthetic or moral or religious attitudes they had. In any case these things are

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soon forgotten. What is not forgotten is the only thing which persists for ever, and that is invention and discovery. What Archimedes has done stands up, what Newton has done stands up; what others have done – moralists of the past world, Aristotle's view of ethics or Pascal's view of ethics – this will pass, this is of no great interest. These are simply the subjective views of people, no doubt of great sensibility and imagination, but ultimately some kind of private lucubration on the part of individuals, which has no positive basis; there is no means of establishing any kind of irrefutable truth in these matters. These are ultimately simply expressions of some kind of emotional attitude, and therefore will be winnowed away, will blow away together with the circumstances which made them seem plausible when they did. And the only things which stand up in the end are inventions and discoveries. Exactly the same will be said by his successors in the nineteenth century up to and including thinkers such as Shaw, or Wells, or the late Professor Bernal and so on, to whom the march of culture is simply the cumulative control of nature by man, by rational, that is to say scientific, means.

There is nothing to be said against that as an attitude, but it is one which eliminates the whole dimension of what might be called historical-mindedness, the whole genetic aspect of why human beings were as they were when they were, what their particular values were, what sort of attitudes they had, and why they had these attitudes, and how these attitudes affected their lives, or placed them in the frame of mind in which certain things appeared to them right or wrong, in which they lived the kind of lives they did or produced the kind of works of art they did. There is also the question of the kind of circumstances in which scientific inventions and discoveries were produced, of what function they played in the lives of these societies, and how they arose. To explore these questions is, I should have thought, one of the proper functions of historians, whether cultural historians, or other kinds.

That is one tradition. It is quite a powerful tradition: an injustice is done to the memory of those who truly founded this subject by supposing that Voltaire, in particular, is its founder, when in fact, as I say, all that Voltaire is – in Meinecke's quite happy phrase – is simply the banker of the Enlightenment, by which Meinecke means that he is the man who accumulates everything which is valuable from the point of view of the Enlightenment, assuming that the standards of the Enlightenment are eternal standards and are quite

incapable of altering, assuming that it really is possible to establish what is right, what is good, what is beautiful, what is ugly, what is worth preserving, worth commemorating, worth discussing, and what is not. Even Montesquieu, who is regarded as the father of relativism, and who is supposed, in contrast with dogmatic positivists such as Voltaire, to have been sensitive to the differences of culture, to the differences between how things are done in Persia as against the way in which things are done in Paris, to the differences of institutions and outlooks under the influence of different geographical and climatic and other natural differences – even Montesquieu, when you look at his journals, turns out to make judgements, for example about paintings, exactly as rigorous, as unanswerable, as firm as Voltaire's. He knows which painters are beautiful and which painters are ugly. He knows who are the good sculptors and who are the bad sculptors, and he knows that there is a method for discovering this which nobody will ever upset: just as he knows that this is so in the case of mathematics, just as he knows that this is so in the case of law, so he knows this in the case of aesthetics as well.

If you now turn to the eminent cultural historians of the nineteenth century, who after all gave this subject its good name (such good name as it possesses), if you look at Burckhardt in his famous book on the history of civilisation in Italy during the Renaissance, if you look at Heidegger, if you look even at Schürer, who produced an excellent history of the culture or civilisation of the Jews, a sort of *Kulturgeschichte*, during the period just before and just after the birth of Christ¹ – if you look at such books, this is not their attitude and not their conception of the subject at all. They appeared to stem from some quite different tradition. Let me quote a famous passage from Eric Auerbach, who was an extremely distinguished exponent of this subject, which will indicate the kind of difference that I mean.

When people realise that epochs and societies are not to be judged in terms of a pattern concept of what is desirable absolutely speaking but rather in every case in terms of their own premisses; when people reckon among such premisses not only natural factors like climate and soil but also the intellectual and historical factors; when, in other words, they come to

¹ Emil Schürer, *Lehrbuch der neutestamentlichen Zeitgeschichte* (Leipzig, 1874) and later editions entitled *Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes im Zeitalter Jesu Christi*.

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develop a sense of historical dynamics, of the incomparability of historical phenomena [...] so that each epoch appears as a whole whose character is reflected in each of its manifestations; when, finally, they accept the conviction that the meaning of events cannot be grasped in abstract and general forms of cognition and that the material needed to understand it must not be sought exclusively in the upper strata of society and in major political events but also in art, economy, material and intellectual culture, in the depths of the workaday world and its men and women, because it is only there that one can grasp what is unique, what is animated by inner forces, and what, in both a more concrete and a more profound sense, is universally valid [...].²

If you think of this as, it seems to me, a perfectly good statement of what cultural history is about, you will see that this is altogether at variance with the tradition which I have just tried to describe. And the question is, where does this stem from?

Take the greatest exponent of it in the nineteenth century, namely Burckhardt. Where did Burckhardt obtain his education? He obtained it the hands of the great Boeckh, a great professor of Greek in Berlin, whose lectures Burckhardt attended. Boeckh was not only a great classical scholar, but wrote about Greece as a manifestation, as he himself thought it, of its (to use a terrible, notorious word) – of its *Volksgeist*, of the whole spirit of the Greek people, which he regarded as, in some way, infusing and informing its sculpture, its painting, its tragedies, its philosophy, its historical prose and everything which we associate with what we now call Greek civilisation. And Boeckh in turn, towards the end of his life, began writing a book called *The Hellene*, ‘The Greek’, which was going to be the great synthetic representation of what the Greeks were, what they meant to him, what he regarded Greek culture as being, what he regarded as its contribution to the world, what he regarded as the Greek outlook, how the world looked to the Greeks, what they made of it, and what the inheritance is – the sort of subject with which Greek scholars of this culture-interested kind, people such as Gilbert Murray and Wilamowitz in the twentieth century, largely dealt for the rest of their lives. Boeckh himself got it from his teachers – Wolff, for example, a great Homeric scholar – and this goes back to the eighteenth century. This is certainly how Savigny

² *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946), trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, 1953), 443–4.

saw history; that is to say, the whole historical school of law certainly conceived of culture as some kind of stream in which all the manifestations of the life of a given community could be regarded as interconnected – if not flowing from a common centre, at any rate reflecting each other in some identifiable fashion. So that it was more important to establish what it was that a particular community was trying to express, or trying to be, than to condemn it, to judge it, to say whether it was good or bad, or whether its history would or would not be profitable for the particular audience to which it was directed, in the somewhat utilitarian, melioristic spirit of Voltaire.

This again, I think, springs from two different traditions. Let me once again return to a dichotomy which, like all dichotomies, is over-general, over-dogmatic, and if taken too seriously will certainly distort the facts, but which nevertheless is perhaps in a limited way useful. The dichotomy is this. If we take simply the realm of aesthetic theory, there is aesthetic theory as it was practised, for example, by aesthetic theorists in France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and in some cases in the nineteenth century as well, whereby the idea of a work of art or indeed of any product of a human being – that is to say, the idea of thought or art, or anything else that human beings put forward as something which they regard as worthy of survival, something which they put their personality into in some way, their creative force – is that these works of art are in some sense objects of which the maker is the purveyor, so that their value lies in the works themselves, in the book of history, in the statue, in the symphony itself, whereas the identity and character of the artist or the creator, the historian, the maker, is comparatively irrelevant, and you simply do not ask any questions about him at all: it is impertinent to ask whether the creator created in order to make money, or in order to spite some other creator, or out of some kind of idealistic motive. It is impertinent to ask whether a painter or a composer was also a good father, or a patriot, or an atheist, or whatever it might be. This is irrelevant. Look at the work, that is all there is, the idea of a human being behind it may in a sense be true, but it is not relevant. If you wanted a table, you would not ask about the carpenter's political or aesthetic beliefs, you would simply judge the table by whether it would function properly as a table. Well, a symphony is no different, it is what the public wants. If it is beautiful, it will sell well and Mozart and Haydn will make money.

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If it is not beautiful it will sell less well. The ultimate judges are the clients, the people for whose benefit it is made. The business of the artist is to create the best work of art possible, the business of the goldsmith is to make the best golden box which he can make.

That is one view of art, and it is the view which the aesthetic theorists of the eighteenth century, broadly speaking, agreed about. They may have disagreed about the role of reason versus emotion, or reason versus sense, or whether you imitated nature or, on the contrary, whether by some kind of leap of genius you were allowed to make something over and above nature, something independent. There were a great many conflicts between these positions in the eighteenth century which are still quite interesting, above all between Diderot and Rousseau. But what they are all agreed about is that the artefact is an artefact, the object is an object, and a culture is to be judged as Voltaire judged it. Is what is said true? Is what has been made beautiful? Is the thing good or bad? Does it arouse these emotions in me, or does it not?

Then there is the other approach, which is the view that the artist is fundamentally not a purveyor but a voice speaking, and the business of the artist, what the artist seeks to do – and not only the artist, but man in general – is to communicate; and if what a man seeks to do is to communicate, then of course the success or failure of what he is doing is to be judged by whether he is understood, and works of art are attempts to convey something to someone, and are therefore a form of communication between human beings, as Tolstoy was later to put it. This is a very different view, and springs from very different soil. The soil that it springs from is not French soil at all, but German soil; and this brings me to the contrast which I wish to draw between Voltaire and the German thinker and literary critic and historian Gottfried Herder, who is the exact antithesis to Voltaire, at any rate in the way in which I have tried to depict him.

Herder is I suppose the greatest influence upon the notion of the history of culture even in the present day. Let me first say something about the general political and social and economic conditions of the Germany in which he lived, because it is not entirely irrelevant. There is no doubt that Herder represents the highest and most eloquent and most influential moment of the rebellion against the formal Enlightenment ideal of the eighteenth century. This crucial episode in European history ultimately led to a civil war in the nineteenth century, and in the twentieth too, which has not yet been

won by either side. The battle continues, and continues in a most fascinating and remarkable fashion. If you say ‘Why? What about Herder? How did this arise?’ I think something must be said about the conditions in which Herder grew up, and in which Germany found itself in the eighteenth century; otherwise it is a little odd that this figure should suddenly have arisen out of nothing at all and denounced the French for no particular reason, just because he was a German, which, you will find, is sometimes stated in histories of aesthetics.

I am no historian, and therefore what I am about to suggest is offered with a great deal of diffidence. But let me begin as follows. There are certain peculiarities about German history during this period which I think have to be noted. The first, and perhaps the most controversial, statement I have to make is that Germany did not have a Renaissance in any true sense of the word, and this made a difference to its whole national consciousness, if you believe in such a thing. If you took a journey in Europe from, let us say, Bordeaux to anywhere you wished in the east, to Warsaw, in the year 1500, I think you would have found that the general cultural conditions of various parts of Europe were not inordinately different from each other; that is to say, culturally there was not a sharp break of any kind. What you found in Southern France, or indeed in Eastern France, and what you found in the corresponding parts of Bavaria was not all that different, though inferior in certain respects to the magnificent relics[?] of the Italian Renaissance by that time: the Italian Renaissance was then at its full height. But of course Germany had Dürer, Germany had Holbein, Germany had Grünewald, it had splendid scholars, it had Reuchlin, it had a great many other people whose scholarship and whose imagination were second to none. It was one of the most civilised parts of Europe and vied successfully with even the great Italian scene.

If you undertook the same journey in, say, 1600, I think you would find a very different scene. Italy had of course by this time in some ways culturally, if not gone down in the world, altered somewhat. Painting, for example, was perhaps not quite at the great original height of the higher Renaissance. But Italian natural science and Italian writing were still at a very great height, and anyone who was civilised at all travelled to Italy. Spain was going through one of its great creative literary periods, in fact its highest and unmatched literary period, with Calderón and Cervantes and everyone else.

England was during its Elizabethan age. The Low Countries were in a state of efflorescence, and were producing paintings of unexampled splendour, or were beginning to, at any rate, after Van Eyck, and would continue to do so until the latish seventeenth century. Even Sweden was beginning to stir. France was in the Parnassian period of the Pléiade, a glory to France and to the rest of the world, and its scholars were perhaps the greatest scholars in Europe; certainly its classical scholars by that time had outdistanced the Italians.

If, however, you went to Germany, you would find a somewhat different picture. If one were asked to mention one great *Kulturträger*, one great contributor to culture, among the Germans, it would be not impossible to say Kepler, but Kepler was an obscure astrologer who ultimately died of hunger in Bavaria somewhere, and was not very well known in his lifetime. At the beginning of the seventeenth century Jakob Böhme was just an unknown cobbler thinking his thoughts – these were of a powerful and influential kind, but again he was a somewhat obscure and marginal figure. If I ask whether the poetry of Moscherosch was superior to the poetry of Gryphius, no doubt specialists in German literature might be able to answer that question. But for the great majority the question would not make a very great deal of sense. I wish to convey that although of course literary life went on, and the general level of education was extremely high, and the Germans were among the most civilised peoples of Europe, nevertheless it does seem that the Reformation had made a certain difference, in that it somehow pushed general interest in the arts and the sciences to the side, so that this became a somewhat provincial affair. If you ask what Vienna contributed at that particular stage, apart from entertaining various foreign scientists, artists and so on who were attracted to the Court of the Holy Roman Empire, the contribution, apart from architecture, where it is considerable, is exceedingly small. It is not non-existent, but it is exceedingly small. That is one fact. And ever since then there has been a certain, I will not say resentment, but a certain feeling on the part of German lands, certainly until the late seventeenth century, or at least until the third decade of the seventeenth century, when Leibniz restored Germany's intellectual fortunes; and after that, of course, the eighteenth century was a period of great efflorescence in Germany as well. But until then it remained a somewhat forgotten part of Europe, and although the

Thirty Years War did not exactly improve the situation, the terrible devastation of the Thirty Years War for Germany's comparative cultural backwardness is chronologically at variance with the facts: the situation in 1580 was not much better. That is the first thing.

Of course there was always a certain anti-rationalism in the very development of the Lutheran Church. Luther himself spoke of reason as a dangerous whore who had to be avoided at all costs because it was capable of undermining the foundations of faith. And so a certain anti-rationalism was there from the beginning in the very Lutheran revolt against the corruption and sophistication of the Roman Church, which were identified with some kind of dangerous rationalism. Moreover, as the eighteenth century wore on, the sheer magnificence of France, and the obvious contempt which the French showed towards her eastern neighbours, was itself not a very helpful factor in raising the cultural morale of the Germans. The French were obviously the dominant leaders in the world altogether: they were certainly militarily the most powerful people; their literature was dominant in the world, so were their arts; science and philosophy were at their height in France during the reign of Louis XIV and after, and there was no doubt that the French looked upon Germans as a collection of fairly dim provincials. Nobody could be expected to receive this entirely well, and the fact that there should have been a certain accumulated resentment, a sort of backlash against this attitude, was inevitable. Therefore there began to grow up in Germany an attitude typical of persons who are in some way humiliated or insulted.

One of two things happens in such cases. Some begin imitating the successful power in the hope of reaching some such level themselves, but not very successfully, and this then becomes a rather feeble form of aping or parroting, which earns more contempt than it does admiration. Others retreat into themselves and take up the kind of wounded attitude of those who say: Let them vaunt their qualities; no doubt the French have a magnificent reputation in the visual arts, in the musical arts, in the art of warfare, in the art of politics, in all these things. What do these things matter? These are mere dross, these things are mere material, superficial achievements, when all that matters is the inner life of man; the relationship of man to God, the relationship of man's immortal soul to its ultimate salvation, this is what matters. The rest is totally immaterial. Let these bewigged aristocrats crack their jokes in their worthless salons.

Let these smooth abbés go on with their little handbooks of aesthetics. This has nothing to do with the true life of mankind, which is within, and which we alone – because we have been protected against Satan in this respect, because we have been saved by the Reformation, because we have not been subjected to the temptation of this fearful cheapening of the human spirit – have truly preserved.

This might be called a very natural and perhaps perfectly intelligible and rather sympathetic, but nevertheless blatant, form of sour grapes. This is a very normal reaction on the part of those who have been left out, who then say: What have they got that we have not got? We cannot be as bad as they think us to be, there is something about us which must be superior. And then they try to look for qualities in themselves, and they say: We have the depth of the spirit, we have the immemorial wisdom of the peasant, we have something which they have not got. This is very much the attitude of the pietists in Germany at the beginning of the eighteenth century, who are a genuinely, profoundly spiritual religious sect who think that only self-*approfondissement*, only looking within oneself matters, because after all the spirit alone counts for anything, and the rest is mere material worthlessness. This is the attitude of the pietists, and it is in this atmosphere that the people of whom I speak were brought up.

This is added to by the fact that Frederick the Great, who was the master of the most successful German kingdom, namely Prussia, displayed open contempt for everything that was German, spoke French deliberately, and imported a large number of French officials to organise and improve and modernise, that is to say, oppress, humiliate and insult, his German subjects. At least that is how they saw it; and they saw it most in the most backward part of his kingdom, namely East Prussia, Königsberg, where the importation of these arrogant French officials inflicted the deepest possible social and personal wounds. This is where the turbulent revolt began – there and in Switzerland.

It is true that in other countries the doctrines of the Enlightenment were not entirely well received. In England, already, a certain amount of stirring had begun against the Voltairean thesis that the primitive and the barbarous were not worth investigating. Blackwell's investigation of the Homeric poems had had a certain effect, so that there was a man called Robert Wood who sailed the

Aegean sea in order to inspire himself with the spirit of the *Odyssey*, and managed to write about Homer in a very vivid and what nowadays would be called a highly romantic fashion. Lowth had begun the investigation of the Hebrew language of the Bible, and he elaborated the theory that all literature began with religious explanations, with hymns, with invocations to God, of which Hebrew literature formed an extremely vivid and extremely magnificent example. Percy began investigating the relics of the border ballads. Ossian was a typical phenomenon – a forged Celtic poem which went back to the non-Roman, non-classical beginnings of the alleged Celts in England. And there were other phenomena. Mallet had written a history of Denmark in which he celebrated the great Viking remains, the ancient Scandinavian literature as against the officially approved-of literature of Greece and Rome, and so forth.

This had begun, but it had not yet swelled into anything which might be called an actual wave of propaganda of any kind. It began as a mild reaction against the dominant eighteenth-century French attitude that only that was good which Voltaire and the abbé Dubos and the abbé Batteux, and the great mandarins of taste in Paris, thought was good. In Switzerland people such as von Muralt, and after him Bodmer, began to praise exactly what Voltaire had so much detested. Von Muralt thought that English literature was superior to French, which in 1715 was a very heretical thing to say. He thought Shakespeare a magnificent dramatist – this was an original remark for its age. He celebrated Shakespeare, he celebrated Homer, and he celebrated Milton. This was a direct challenge to what might be called the taste of the Enlightenment. Bodmer also began investigating early German verse, unearthed the Niebelungs, unearthed Parsifal, began the whole tradition of trying to revive ancient Teutonic epics and so forth, which then became an immense industry. And he began celebrating the wild Swiss beginnings of this unconquered territory, not ruled over by some smooth tyrant such as Louis XIV, but able in each of its little free communes to develop a free and aggressive spirit of wild liberty, which was far more vivid, far more magnificent and far more creative and imaginative than the smooth platitudes practised in the drawing-rooms and the Court of Paris.

This begins in Switzerland. And at the opposite end, in Königsberg, exactly the same movement begins, up to a point even

with Kant, although I do not wish to bring him into this story at this moment. But certainly in the case of Hamann and his contemporaries there began a half-religious, half-aesthetic revolt against the French Enlightenment, against its generalising tendencies, against the supposition that science replies to all our questions, and that the life of man can be illuminated by large scientific generalisations and not by some kind of direct inspection of the human character and human activities on the part of people who truly understood other human beings. The key to human understanding is not through physics, said Hamann, but through language. Through language we understand books, and in books voices speak to us. God speaks to us from the Bible and other human beings speak to us through their books, and by understanding their language we understand what it is they say, and we penetrate into their souls as friends penetrate, not as analysts do. In other words, the proper way of understanding life is to understand other human beings, and to understand other human beings you need the gift of some kind of artistic empathy, some kind of sympathetic insight into the emotional, intellectual and other movements of the human spirit, rather than the capacity for calm, rational analysis characteristic of the way in which physicists, mathematicians and chemists are wont to use their talents. That is the doctrine.

These are the factors, I think, which provided the background against which Herder was born. Take the forgotten figure of Justus Möser, in the little city of Osnabrück in Westphalia. Möser takes up the challenge of Voltaire. Voltaire mocked at the fact that one law was true in one village in Westphalia, and quite a different law in the next one. Möser said that this showed exquisite fidelity to the differences of tradition in one village as opposed to the other. Instead of some fearful crushing general law which wiped out the idiosyncratic differences in a village which might have its own exquisite traditions, which it preserved with the greatest affection, with the greatest love – instead of that, each of these little German villages, each of the three hundred little principalities, grew up in its own idiosyncratic, peculiar way. And there was much poetry in this too. If you looked inside German history, he said, you would find that, instead of some large flat political scene, as you would find in France, where there were no human beings at all, only legal persons – where the legal personality had completely extruded the

human being – you would find in German history the rich variety, the immense asymmetry, the marvellous meandering paths incapable of being straightened out by any ruler, by any geometrical instruments, of the teeming variety and richness of true human life. In this way Möser became the first eloquent German reactionary, by defending every little tittle, every little jot of German law, whether it was just or unjust. He simply said: Anything which our ancestors loved, anything which is true of the history of this particular village, must be preserved with the most loving care. If you let this go, you will simply become one of these faceless subjects of some remote king, as in France, people who have totally lost their personality, who have no relation to God, no relation to men, who are simply faceless subjects of an all-levelling force. This is the kind of atmosphere which begins to get going in the 1760s. And this is repeated in somewhat more moderate language by Burke in England, who had certainly had not read any of these people.

Herder was brought up in this atmosphere, and genuinely started from the proposition that art, in which he was interested, but particularly language, and particularly poetry, was in some sense a voice speaking, and because it was a voice speaking, what you needed were not the gifts which were needed by a genuine scientist, namely the capacity to generalise, the capacity to create abstract models for the purpose of comparing the jagged, uneven surface of life against these idealised models; not the capacity for generalising or for formulating hypotheses which could be verified or falsified in experience, or creating great codes of law which would have some kind of intelligible central logical structure, so that every law could be read off from the general network of laws by means of some kind of clear and precise rules which any competent person who had studied them could easily apply. These were not the ways in which human life could be properly understood, even if they had their uses in other contexts. What you needed was not knowledge, above all, which is what the Enlightenment had praised – not knowledge of facts, but a quality called understanding. If you are reading a book, and wish to understand what it is the author is telling you, if you are looking at a picture, and wish to know what the painter is trying to convey to you, you do not need factual information. It may help, but that is not what you need above all. What you need is some capacity for entering into the purposes, the motives, the outlook which the painter, the writer, the architect, whoever it might be, is

in some way, either consciously or unconsciously, attempting to convey; the picture of the world which he is trying to embalm in his work, immortalise, give some kind of concrete embodiment to; and the capacity for understanding which he is the first to elaborate. This famous *Einfühlung*, which he invented as a word – the idea of empathy, the idea of insight, which is not an intellectual faculty at all, of course – is the faculty which we need for the purpose, at any rate, of understanding what might be called the emotional or the spiritual life of mankind.

It is here that we find the division, which then becomes more and more patent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, between the fields in which we demand truth and the fields in which we appear not to demand truth, if I may put it in this very bold fashion. In fields such as mathematics, or physics, or even common sense to a large extent, or history for that matter, we really demand verification of some sort. We demand some kind of argument for supposing things to be as we say they are, either, in the deductive sciences, by the application of proper rules, or, in the case of the non-deductive sciences, by whatever the methods are for establishing that events were indeed such as we claim them to have been, and that human beings were as they are described as being, and the like. These are the fields of what might be called descriptive knowledge, and here there may be great argument as to what kind of knowledge this is, what induction is, what deduction is, what hypothetical deduction may be, or about the methods of ascertaining the truth, whether it can ever be verified or probabilified, what is meant by confirming or disconfirming hypotheses, and so on. This is the philosophy of science, and to some extent the philosophy of common sense too. But then there are fields – aesthetic, religious, moral to some extent, political, what is nowadays called ‘ideology’ in a general way, not used perhaps as Marx used the word, but what we normally mean by ideological – where the demand is not, except on the part of fanatical followers of parties, for demonstrable truth, and where the whole sermon about toleration works. You say: We really must be able to formulate a great many opinions. One must not burn people alive because they hold religious or ethical or aesthetic views different from your own.

In the nineteenth century August Comte, outraged by this, said: If we do not allow free thought in mathematics and in logic, why on earth should we allow it in politics and ethics? – which was a very

proper, challenging question. It is true that on the whole we do not like schoolmasters who, perhaps without giving adequate reasons, which we do not think they will be able to give, teach our boys and girls that twice two sometimes makes four and sometimes seven-and-a-half. We do not want to have physicists who produce what we regard as absurd statements in physics, which contradict the established conclusions of the sciences, established by the methods which are regarded as reputable by people who practise these subjects. But there are certain realms in which we do demand tolerance, and we demand it to a large extent because, whatever the quality is that we are looking for, it is not quite truth in the sense in which we demand it in these other more positive fields. What it is to be called I do not know – acceptability, plausibility. We speak of ideologies as being profound or shallow, wide or narrow, convincing or unconvincing – all kinds of words are used. But in liberal societies at least it is regarded as proper not to persecute differences of view in these fields, because it is regarded as proper, and indeed perhaps even as desirable, even as better than not, even as a very good thing, that there should be a variety of views, that there should be a wide spectrum, that there should be a lively interchange, a lively argument in this great field, without very much hope that a consensus, a permanent consensus, in the way in which in certain scientific subjects, about fundamentals at least, it can be said to have been obtained, at least for periods – without the hope that such a consensus will in our day be possible.

This division between what might be called the field of the descriptive sciences proper, and the mathematical sciences too, that is to say, both the deductive and the inductive sciences, to give it a general name, on the one hand, and what might be called the vaguer, more confused, ideological field with its much more blurred outlines, with its far greater degree of emotion and of what might be called cosmic attitudes, for example optimism and pessimism – a field into which general attitudes to the world enter much more deeply – this division enters into human thought at just about this time, in the second third of the eighteenth century, and it is upon this that Herder built his entire notion of culture, of the history of culture, and of what specialists in this subject ought to be concerned with.

The four fundamental questions to which he addressed himself are these. The first was his belief that man was one and not

compartmentalised, and that therefore anything a human being did, he did with the whole of his character and nature, so that his entire activities could be regarded as in some way interrelated. A man's life as a man will have some relevance to his painting as a painter, to his politics as a politician, to his sailing the sea as a sailor, to his construction of a building as an architect; and therefore, since human beings are in fact single natures, the division of human beings – specialisation, for example, or division of labour, or what happens every time that a man says: Speaking as a father I say this, but speaking as a citizen I say that; speaking as a poet of course I approve, although speaking as a Catholic I am not sure – this kind of talk is some kind of self-falsification, some sort of self-mutilation. There is not such a thing as 'speaking as'; you are what you are, and what you believe you must believe, and you must defend it with the whole of your nature. The idea that you have a duty to speak with one voice as a member of this or that profession, what is nowadays called role-playing, and with another voice as something else, is some form of de-humanisation or atomisation of yourself as a personality.

The second question to which Herder addressed himself was the notion, which I have already mentioned, that human activity as such is principally and essentially a form of communication, expression; that you express your personality, you are not simply making a vase, you are not simply contributing a truth, you are not simply making something which is independent of yourself. You accept responsibility for whatever you do, because it is yourself speaking. You are imposing your personality upon the raw material, and for this you must accept responsibility; and therefore in judging such a product you must understand who does it, why he does it, in what circumstances he does it, who told him to do it. Was he paid for it? Did he do it under coercion? Of what society was he a member? Did he have a patron? Did the patron force him to do this or that? To what class did he belong? The whole of the spectrum which is nowadays regarded as social criticism, by which you place people in their proper social context and examine their motives, not only from the individual but from the social point of view as well, stems from him.

Thirdly, he was the first person, perhaps, to discover the concept of what it is to belong to a group or to be a member of an association. The whole notion of what it is to be a German, what it

is to be a Portuguese, why it is that there are such things as the impersonal creations of a large number of anonymous persons, so that you can see [*12 seconds blank in tape*] [?]geist, *Nationalgeist*, and all the other *Geister* in which Herder dealt very generously – this notion too belongs to him.

Finally, one has to understand that all this was directed in the first place towards attacking, attempting to discredit and destroy the eighteenth-century Enlightenment attitude of the, to him, hated French masters. He did not at all deny the usefulness and importance of science, except that he regarded biological science as being more relevant to the national culture than physical science. But he did think that the application of scientific criteria, that is to say, the analytic method, to ideological or cultural phenomena led to totally disastrous consequences. God, for him – in the words of Hamann – was not a physicist, he was not a chemist, he was not a mathematician, he was an artist. And in order to understand the world, you must understand it as if it were the creation of some kind of artistic process where some kind of single personality was imprinted upon it. For him the single personality was of course the collective personality of a particular group; he did not believe in blood, he did not believe in soil, he believed in language as the uniting factor.

What these beliefs combine into, how they were sharpened and to some extent distorted into the much more dogmatic and far less plausible doctrines of later German philosophers, particularly the philosophy of Hegel, upon which a somewhat excessive, it seems to me, but nevertheless perfectly intelligible attack was delivered by Ernst Gombrich³ – to this I turn next. I propose to ask what Herder's specific contribution is to the notion of the history of culture, and of what culture in general is, as against other prevailing notions; and of course to discuss the enormous influence which his ideas had upon the whole of Central Europe, and indeed upon large portions of Western Europe as well, particularly as they were carried into France by Madame de Staël and into England by the works of Sir Walter Scott. Then I shall turn to Herder's predecessors in the seventeenth century, in particular Giambattista Vico; and finally I propose to examine the roots of Vico himself in the very improbable

³ E. H. Gombrich, 'In Search of Cultural History' (1967), in *Ideals and Idols* (Oxford, 1979).

THE ORIGINS OF CULTURAL HISTORY

discussions of almost entirely politically motivated French grammarians and jurists.

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